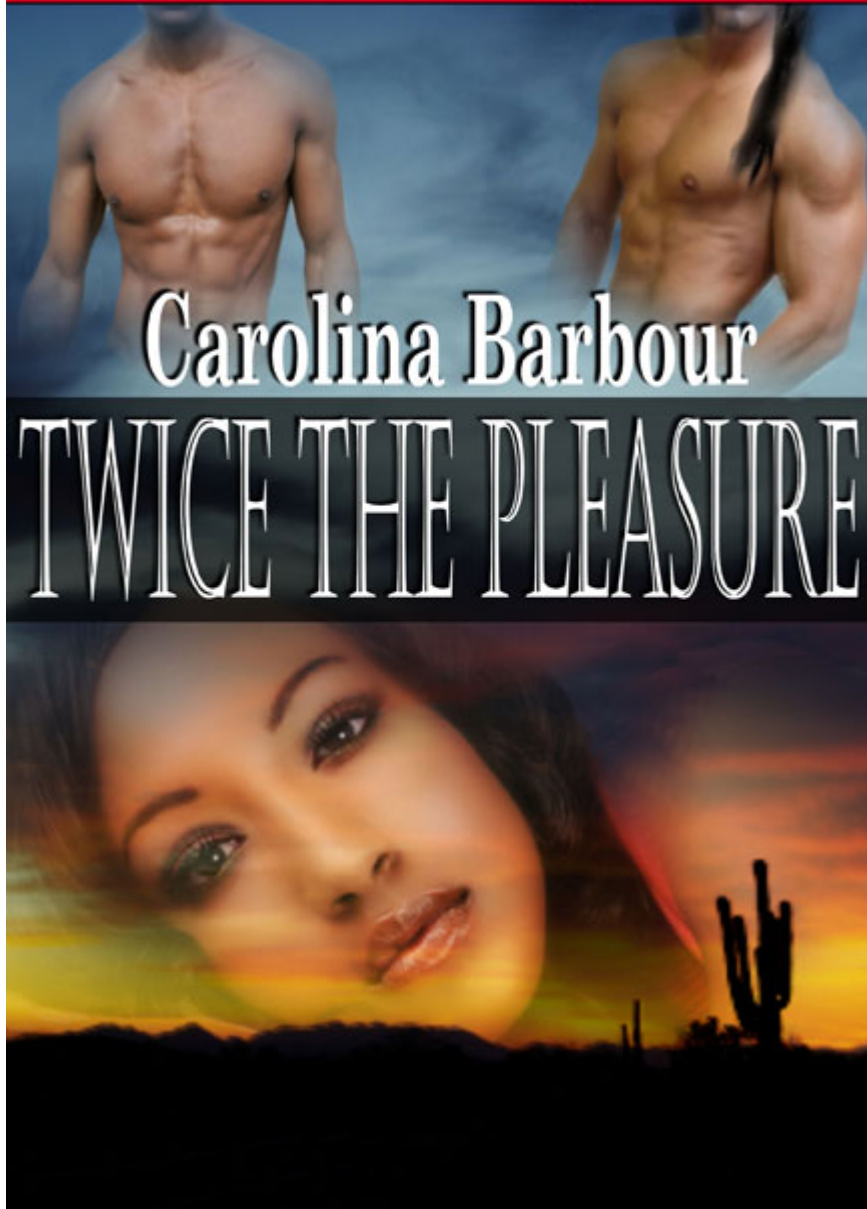


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Carolina Barbour

TWICE THE PLEASURE

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TWICE THE PLEASURE

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DEDICATION

My undying gratitude goes to my husband, family, and friends who are my sole support to continuously write, and desire to bring readers one erotic thriller after another. After my first release, *Pure Distraction*, I was overwhelmed with the unconditional praise and acceptance and wonderful reviews from the people in my life.

You all have given me inner strength to continue to fulfill my dreams, and for that, I thank you. I appreciate you. Your compliments and congratulations made me believe in the unbelievable—you all are the cornerstones of the strength that keep me writing.

To my readers; I dedicate *Twice the Pleasure* for your enjoyment, and thank you for your support.

TWICE THE PLEASURE

CAROLINA BARBOUR

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Chapter 1

Nowhere, Texas

The smoke from hand-rolled tobacco and cigars lingered, the ghostly haze floating upward toward the ceiling, leaving a swirl of fog hovering above the occupants in the room. A combination of odors--cheap whiskey, sweat and leather, musk, and lavender--permeated the nostrils of every occupant at the card table. Raucous, boisterous laughter, followed by girlish giggles, filtered upward rising from the main hall of the saloon below stairs. The pianist pounded the chords of the piano in an upbeat tempo, as a female bellowed an offbeat snazzy tune.

The door to the room suddenly swung open, banging against the wall, causing all the players at the poker table to look at the slender ferret looking man who entered, before returning to their cards.

Jayce kept an eye on the table, and another on the ferret, noting the worried expression on his face. The bushy eyebrows were slanted downward and hung over his eyes like tufts of fur. He scurried into the room, shuffling, balancing a tray of whiskey and beer on one arm, and a stained towel in the other.

Ferret, the owner of the establishment, a two-bit saloon and brothel in the middle of Nowhere, Texas, gave one of the occupants in

the room a weary glance before hurrying over to set the tray on a nearby table.

A round of drinks went to each player. Jayce waited to be served last. The Ferret slammed down a glass, spilling some of the contents. Jayce moved fast, and saved the new crisp shirt from being stained beyond repair. Jayce shot a glance of contempt at the owner, but otherwise kept focus on the table.

It wasn't as if The Ferret tried to hide his disdain for Jayce's presence, any more than the other occupants in the room. His refusal was vehement as he objected to admitting Jayce to the high-stake poker game, but like the others in the room when a gambler had cash to lose greed overrode any objections. That didn't mean Jayce received a warm and fuzzy welcome, and that suited Jayce just fine--it was time to make money, not friends.

One of the men in the room moved, and Jayce caught the subtle action using peripheral vision. Eyes followed the man briefly, and then returned to the cards. The smirks on the gunslinger's face were evident, but ignored as inconsequential. For appearance sake, Jayce needed to remain calm and cool. That didn't mean the hired-gun with the dark hair, and equally black attire--all black clothing, including the scarf around his pale neck, with the exception of the silver belt buckle and gun that look as shiny as a new penny--wasn't a vision of trouble, and worth keeping an eye on.

Jayce's nose wrinkled, the gunslinger's personal hygiene left something to be desired, too. Every time the man moved, a putrid stench burned through the nostrils. He was filthy, offensive, and a direct contrast to the man who hired him to watch his back. Eyes shifted to Brewster sitting across the table. Immaculate buffed nails, polished boots, clean white shirt beneath the snug vest that stretched over the extended belt, all said 'old money'. It wasn't uncommon for a wealthy man to have a gunslinger at his back, but the difference between the men made Jayce wonder why they'd partnered up.

Brewster's rail-thin nose remained buried in his cards. Beady eyes shifted back and forth, and then concentrated on the hand again. Occasionally, he poked the wire rim spectacles with a sausage finger, shoving the frame back up the bridge of his nose. Then he'd lean back in the chair that hardly held his large butt, and stare at the cards in puzzlement, as if the hand made absolutely no sense. Jayce had used the trick a time or two. Brewster wasn't new to poker, and anybody believing differently was a fool.

Another man at the table was obviously that fool. Jayce smirked, as the fool played right into Brewster's hands by getting all edgy--too eager for a win.

"You goin' to play them cards, Brewster, or watch 'em all night?"

Jayce glanced at the fool, but kept a sharp eye on the gunslinger, because something about the man's presence stunk to high heavens.

Brewster looked up, poked at his spectacles, and then tossed a few coins into the pot raising the stakes.

"I think yer bluffing," the fool said eyeing Brewster, dubiously.

"Perhaps. Perhaps," Brewster mumbled.

The fool cut his eyes at Jayce. "In fact, I think yer both been bluffing all night."

Jayce's voice was even, low-key. "If that's what you think, mister, make your next play." It was a clear taunt, prodding the man.

The fool's nose twitched, and then lifted in disdain.

The left corner of Jayce's mouth curved in a grin.

For a brief moment, every breath in the room held stagnant, waiting.

The fool groaned, muttered curses, and then tossed his cards into the discarded pile.

Brewster looked at Jayce with a triumphant glint in his eyes. "It seems it's just the two of us." He grinned, a lecherous smile that ran Jayce cold. That, and the way Brewster kept glancing at the gunslinger.

The hired-hand's movement was slight, but Jayce saw the nod.

Slender fingers curled around the pistol resting on Jayce's lap. The gun hidden beneath the table top was cocked, ready, and pointed in the gunslinger's direction. *Just in case.*

All of a sudden, the door to the room burst open, and The Ferret shouted. "Another round?" Making Jayce wonder why the man felt the need to holler at the top of his lungs with the tight interior of the room. Nobody was hard of hearing.

Jayce narrowed her eyes at The Ferret, and then ignored the proprietor.

The temperament in the room spiked.

Brewster preened like a peacock, as if he had already won the pot. Too damn comfortable.

The gunslinger kept massaging the hilt of that fancy gun.

Everyone in attendance except Jayce turned when the door to the room opened again, and a woman sashayed in, swaying amble hips that strained the crimson satin gown she wore. Her bosom was bubbling, threatening to spillover the bodice, and all Jayce could do was have mercy for the material that was stretched too thin.

Too much powder made the woman look pale. Ruby-red lips painted too bright and cheap perfume completed the has-been whore who sided up to Brewster and perched on a thigh.

It took everything Jayce had not to gag when the whore leaned over and gave Brewster a sloppy kiss, leaving a smear of red on his mouth.

"How's it going, sweet--art?"

Brewster gave the has-been a pinch on the nipple, and then pushed her from his lap. He gave the woman a slap on the butt, and rubbed meaty hands together gleefully, before picking up his cards.

"In about a second I'm going to be in your bed riding you like a stallion on a mare," he said grinning, looking at Jayce. "As soon as I collect my winnings, sweet-face."

The man was too cocksure. Overly confident when all the cards weren't on the table, and Jayce didn't like it one bit.

The pulse in the room raised a degree.

Something is foul, Jayce thought.

"It's your play, isn't it?" Brewster said, amusement dancing on pinched lips. "You come to play or," he said, letting his voice trail off a second for the effect, "get fucked?" He sneered.

The men in the room exploded with laughter. Jayce let the explicit sexual slurs roll off like oil-covered pelt as the males gave a good ribbing.

Jayce stared through Brewster for the affect. "I don't mind getting fucked, but you're not my type." The cards Jayce was holding spread over the table for all to see. "Full house, Brewster. Who fucked who, now?"

"Humph, impressive," Brewster said, and then leaned forward and laid his cards out. "Straight flush, ace high," he gloated.

Jayce's back stiffened.

Brewster moved forward, leaned over the table, and started to rake in the cash, but Jayce wasn't having it.

The tone of Jayce's voice sounded low, lethal. "Call me suspicious, but I think we have a little problem here. You dirty, Brewster. There is no way you can have a straight flush, ace high when we all know the ace of that suit has already been played." Jayce motioned to the tart at Brewster's side. "What, your woman feeding you cards?"

"What?! I never been accused of cheating in my life!" Brewster's woman objected, as boisterous as possible, and overly dramatic.

Brewster raised his hand to silence sweet-face. Then he turned his attention back to Jayce, and the easygoing nonchalance he wore all during the game turned frigid.

"You are accusing me of cheating?"

Jayce stared Brewster down, but kept the gun beneath the table aimed at the gunslinger, who had moved to the cheater's side.

The Ferret-owner edged up beside Brewster, and that solidified in Jayce's mind one thing--the entire game was a setup, and the saloon owner was involved up to his scrawny neck.

Like a fool, Jayce had ignored intuition, and allowed greed to override common sense by insisting on joining the game. Now, things had gotten out of hand, and if the feeling inside Jayce--the shit is hitting the fan--was true the hindsight thought didn't matter.

Slow and easy-like, Jayce moved another gun into position beneath the table. This one aimed on The Ferret. If he batted an eye, twitched, or moved a muscle he could kiss his balls goodbye.

The other occupants in the room scattered, falling backward, giving Jayce and Brewster's standoff a wide perimeter and full ring.

"No, I'm not accusing you of cheating, Brewster," Jayce said, and then got ready for the explosion. "I don't make accusations when I know the truth. You are a cheating bastard..."

The Ferret twitched.

Jayce fired. The eruption of gunfire pop-popped through the room.

The Ferret howled in pain, and then crumpled to boney knees before toppling over.

The gunslinger moved fast; damn quick with lightening speed to dizzy the eyes. He drew on Jayce and fired, stood there grinning like a loon, and then grunted, disbelief crossing the man's expression when he looked down at the dime-size hole in his chest. Blood trickled between fingers, and then he fell over trapping Brewster's gut against the table. With his flat wide butt in the air, squirming about, and the pink flush to his floppy jowls, Brewster looked like a wallowing pig in a fancy suit.

"Get him off! Get him off me, you imbeciles!" Brewster shouted to no one in particular. Everybody stood back, staring, not sure what to do. Jayce secretly thought nobody cared to free Brewster.

Jayce pointed the barrel of the gun against Brewster's forehead. "Move and I will splatter your cheating brains all over the table."

Hurriedly, the money was gathered, and then shoved into a leather pouch.

“You won't get away with this,” Brewster snarled.

Jayce glanced over the other occupants in the room, as if asking if anyone of them contradicted the decision made to stop Brewster at his own game.

Not one person moved. Jayce didn't think it had anything to do with them having her back. But, all seemed momentarily stunned at seeing the fastest gun they'd ever witness handled by a woman or man for that matter.

The door to the room opened. Jayce raised her gun, pointing it at the man who stepped over the threshold.

Sheriff Watkins walked into the room, and stood in the entrance. His eyes shifted lazily over the scene, as if he wasn't concerned in the least to see two bodies lying on the floor. He lifted his eyebrows, and then switched a toothpick between lips, back and forth. Large, strong fingers wrinkled by the sun tilted the hat back from his forehead. Then, the sheriff settled his hands at the waist, hooking his fingers in the belt loops of the denims. He rocked back and forth on the heels of his boots.

“Somebody said you are up here starting trouble, Jayce. And,” his silver eyes with laugh lines in creases looked over the bodies, “from the look of things...maybe what I heard is right.”

Jayce relaxed, dropped the gun trained on the sheriff, smiled prettily, and then said. “I don't start trouble, Sheriff, but end things when it comes my way.”

“Humph?” the sheriff mumbled, chewing on the toothpick.

“You going to let that crazy bitch get away with this, Sheriff?” Brewster shouted in rage, causing his heavy jowls to jiggle like Ole' Crank, the hound that sat outside the jailhouse.

The barrel of Jayce's gun dug into Brewster's head. “You finally got caught at your own cheating game. Shut your mouth,” she said, and then looked at the sheriff. Her eyes softened, a beguiling smile

curved on full lips. "You with me on this or not, Sheriff? Brewster is a cheater, and his gunslinger and the saloon proprietor is in on the scheme."

Sheriff Watkins stood a moment, and then removed a hat and raked his fingers through the dark damp brunette curls that fell over his forehead. Sloe-eye baby browns softened, an easy grin surfaced that turned to worry.

The sheriff moved forward, his tone concerned. "They going to come after you, Jayce."

"I know that, Hugh. I will be ready."

"You're as pretty as you are stubborn. Always has been," Hugh said.

"I can handle myself."

Hugh nodded. "I will keep Brewster's henchmen from coming after you for a few hours, but after that I can't guarantee anything."

Jayce gave Hugh a hard nod. "That's all I can ask."

"You're dead bitch!" Brewster growled.

Jayce raised the butt of the gun, and slammed the pistol down on Brewster's head knocking him out cold.

* * * *

Sheriff Watkins was a handsome devil, and he knew it. Not because of arrogance, but because every available and not so available female this side of Texas pined after him in hopes of marriage. He'd kept a safe distance, though. One reason was he intended to pass through Nowhere, and didn't desire to get hitch to anyone, because it wasn't his way. He had the Mexico border in sight, where he would relax, and try to put a tainted past behind him. Too many killings made the sheriff yearn for a simpler life. Therefore, staying in Nowhere this long surprised Hugh, but he accepted things as they were. The notoriety of a fast gun got him easily appointed as sheriff. The love he felt for Jayce made it easier to swallow the fact he might

remain in Nowhere for the rest of his life. And that was fine by Hugh, as long as Jayce was by his side.

Of course, Jayce had been elusive to the his attention, making it clear settling down seem a far-fetched idea, but Hugh didn't give up hope, not until now.

Standing face to face with Jayce, Hugh held slender hips between his fingers. He relished in the firm breasts pressed against a solid chest. Gingerly, fingertips caressed the dewy cheek before leaning forward for a kiss. Their lips met sweetly, brushing, as Hugh melded with the tempting mouth a second before the attention turned hot, heat-searing. Then Hugh step back from Jayce.

"You want me to come with you?"

"No, Hugh. And even if I did, you can't and you know it. Not with your history. Besides, I'm a loner, remember?"

"The gunslinger you killed is Brewster's son. He isn't going to let this go. I can keep the idiot behind bars for a few days until he simmers down, but eventually Brewster will be free. The man is going to be on you like Ole' Crank on a scent."

"I know, but I will deal with it."

"Where will you go? What are you going to do? Even I know you can't keep running from town to town gambling. That's not a life for a lady."

Jayce gave a little laugh, and Hugh thought it was the prettiest thing since sunrise. "I'm no lady, Hugh. I have been making my way in this world playing cards since my fourteenth birthday. It's not the life I would have chosen for myself, but I don't cry over spilled milk. I have to go." She pulled free. Hugh reluctantly let Jayce go. She gave him a sassy smile, pat the firm chest assuredly, and then reached up on tiptoes. The kiss she gave was tender, sweet as pie.

Hugh helped Jayce mount her horse.

A devilish grin brightened Jayce's face. "You know, this is the first time I can honestly say I'm going to miss the sheriff of any town."

"I would insist on coming with you if I didn't think you'd put two holes in me. Take care of yourself, Jayce. Head for the border, and when you cross over, look up Dialgo. He owns the local cantina in Laredo. He's a good friend of mine. He will take care of you."

"Now, what exactly are you telling me, sheriff?"

"You can't stay on the run forever, Jayce. Dialgo and I go way back. He owes me. Tell him I sent you, and my compadre will see you get some money he's been holding for me."

Jayce look at Hugh, and then started shaking her head no. "No, Hugh. I can't--"

"Darn it, Jayce, don't go and get all stubborn on me. You're going to need money to get away from Brewster, and you know it. Don't let your stubbornness stop you from taking a little help. Besides," Hugh gave Jayce a wicked grin. "Don't think I won't find you one day, and demand payment back. Double."

"Double then," Jayce said, quietly.

Hugh saw the brilliant eyes turn dulcet. He knew she was feeling his thoughts; his past lifestyle was as shrouded as Jayce's soiled yesteryears. She never elaborated, though, and he knew better then to insist on answers. Besides, Jayce's business didn't need his judgment. Nor did Hugh offer it, and he believed that single-handedly help them to forge a decent relationship that made each one comfortable being around the other.

With Jayce no rules and obligations exist, or the need for either one to bear souls or anything so deep. Their relationship offered equal solace, a place to lay their heads, and moments to forget the bitterness of their past.

"I'm going to miss you, Jayce. Take care of yourself, you here? We will cross paths again. Count on it," Hugh said, winking.

Hugh felt like Jayce wanted to say something, but she didn't. She smiled warmly instead, and then turn and rode off.

There was nothing left to say.

Chapter 2

Dallas, Texas

Gavin reached the door first, but Zane came up beside his brother. Both men raised their legs simultaneously and slammed into the wooden frame.

The door creaked, and groaned in protest, holding.

The assault on the door continued, as their boots pounded the frame until it splintered, shuddered, and rocked on its hinges.

The narrow entryway only allowed one man to enter at a time. Gavin pushed passed Zane, and raced into the house with his brother close behind. Both men ignored the flaring flames, the licks of heat hot enough to singe their eyebrows, and the smoke. They bounded up the steps, taking them two at a time, and ran down the corridor.

“Mother!” Gavin shouted, waving his arms to ward off the effects of the fumes. He squinted, piercing through the haze trying to see into the bedroom.

“Fuck!” Zane heard Gavin curse. He followed his brother's voice, entering the room ablaze with fire.

Zane tried to reach Gavin's side. He shielded his eyes by folding an arm in front of his face. Ignoring the stinging, as debris from the smoke burned into his face, he moved toward his brother.

Gain shouted. “Over here! She's on the bed!”

Zane fought through the smoke, and found Gavin lifting their mother. After snatching the heavy quilt from the bed, and tossing it over Gavin and his mother, he started pushing both toward the door.

Gavin burst through the door first, sucked in air, and then ran a distance from the house before collapsing to his knees. Carefully, he laid the woman he had known all his life as mother, on the ground. He hovered over the body staring, unbelieving. The soot covering his face smeared, as Gavin wiped viciously at his face, trying to help clear a cloudy vision.

“Mother,” Gavin whispered, running his fingertips over the blackened cheeks wiping away as much residue as possible.

He felt Zane drop down beside him. Gavin didn't turn and face his brother when he spoke. “She's dead,” he said, unemotional even though the feelings inside his gut burned with fury.

Zane patted Gavin on the arm, and then stood up. He glanced at the body a final time before turning away to stare at the house that once stood as a glorious southern landscape, but was now only a glow of embers. The totality of it all left an empty void to the root of his bones.

The wood structure brightened as the flames devoured the building, paint peeled and bubbled, glass cracked, and then the entire frame caved to rubbles.

“The fucking bastard did it, Zane,” Gavin said, coming to stand beside his brother. “He killed mother. I just know it.”

Zane didn't respond for a long time, and then abruptly turned. Pushing past Gavin he kneeled on one knee, closed his mother's eyes, and then grabbed the blanket and tossed it over the body.

“The bastard actually did it!” Gavin shouted, unbelieving. He combust in fury. The last of his composure lost.

“I know, Gavin,” Zane said, ultra low.

Gavin watch the stiffness of his brother's back, as he stalked toward the barn.

Zane returned with two shovels, and started digging.

Their mother deserved a decent burial.

* * * *

Gavin lean forward, blinked, and then blinked again, staring at the sheriff as if the man suddenly fell off his rocker and knocked himself senseless. Finally, he turned to gauge Zane's reaction to the conversation. His brother merely sat there glaring at the sheriff. If looks could kill the sheriff would be in a pine box, toes cock up, and buried six feet under.

"What exactly are you trying to say, Sheriff Grimes?" Gavin asked, even though the accusations the sheriff freely tossed about made a clear statement. He was accusing Gavin and Zane of murder.

"Now, I don't want no trouble from you two boys, you hear? Your mother, God rest Stella's soul, was a good religion-fearing woman. We all liked that woman well enough. But, facts are facts, and I can't discount them. I have a witness who said they saw you and your brother at your mother's place minutes before it went up in flames. You tried to bury the evidence, too."

Gavin sighed exasperated.

"We did the decent thing, and buried our mother," Zane said between clenched teeth.

"Sonofabitch!" Gavin swore. "If that isn't the most asinine thing I have ever heard. Why in the hell would we kill our mother, and then waltz in here and tell you? For God's sake, Sheriff, we love that woman." He seethed, and then forced himself to throttle the fury frothing inside. "And I'm two seconds from ripping you apart for even insinuating such foolishness. Neither Zane nor I would ever harm a strand of hair on our mother's head, and you damn well know it. Your accusations are ludicrous, Sheriff Grimes. The likelihood of either one of us murdering our mother is as likely as you doing it."

"Now, see here, Gavin, don't go and get all ruffled. Dammit, what do you boys expect me to do. I have a witness," the sheriff said.

"Who is the witness?" Zane asked, quietly.

Sheriff Grimes shifted uncomfortably in the chair, and then finally met the oldest Banner brother's stare. "I'm not at liberty to say," he stammered.

Gavin could tell by the way the sheriff eyed Zane warily, what the man thought. Sheriff Grimes didn't like Zane. They had an unsavory history between them that went way back. The altercation happened a long time ago, but Gavin could tell the incident still left a sour taste in the sheriff's mouth.

Gavin was the youngest of the brothers, and thought to be the more diplomatic of the two. More reasonable than Zane with his quick temper and even faster gun that his brother didn't mind using. It wasn't as if Gavin's temper didn't flare on occasion, he was just more "diplomatic," as Zane was fond of telling him.

When people encountered them on the street, one look at Zane, and they scattered thinking his brother's mere look alone would kill them dead.

Gavin heard Zane called a savage more times than he could remember. It had nothing to do with his brother's mannerisms, but everything to do with the color of his skin.

Gavin could tell the sheriff's thoughts centered on such. He just hoped the man wasn't foolish enough to voice the opinion out loud.

Zane rarely, if ever, repeated himself, so it surprised Gavin when he did.

"Who is the witness?"

Sheriff Grimes tightened up, set his back straight, and tried to insight the fear of God in Zane. Gavin thought the show of bluster laughable. "I said I'm not at liberty to say. That's for the court--"

When Zane leaned forward and breathed down the sheriff's face, the man turned an odd hue of red.

"Unlike me, Sheriff Grimes, I'm afraid my brother doesn't have the patience to sit here and listen to you make false accusations that are unwarranted, and based solely on a witness you refuse to divulge."

“We have a right to know,” Zane said, making the sheriff shift nervously in reaction to the way his brother glared at the man.

Sheriff Grimes gulped, and Gavin imagined his mouth was feeling like the desert about now, he sucked so much spit down. Zane was staring through the sheriff.

Stuttering, and tripping over his words, the sheriff finally answered. “Foley,” he whispered, as if the walls had ears.

“For the love of God! That idiot!” Gavin protested. “Are you telling us you are actually listening to anything that man would say? Sheriff, it is common knowledge that bastard would say and do anything to get his hands on our father's wealth. That includes murdering our mother, and you damn well know it.”

Gavin noticed the sheriff glance nervously at Zane. He clutched the side arm of the chair intensely until his knuckles turned white. He set his teeth on edge. Clearly, the man rattled easily, and that was fine by Gavin.

Zane moved. An action Gavin thought was non-threatening, but obviously, Sheriff Grimes thought differently.

The sheriff put shaking fingers on the hilt of his gun. “Now, I don't have nothing against you boys, but the law is the law. Foley came to me free and clear, and told me he witnessed the two of you carrying out Stella's body and dumping it on the ground. You buried the evidence--”

“Our *mother*. Not evidence.” Zane corrected.

“Ah, you, ah buried Stella, and then stood by and watched that nice house she was right fond of burn to rubble.”

Zane became unhinged. “My God, are you an idiot? Did my brother not just tell you that?”

“Yeah, he did, but that was after Foley stepped up first, and three days ago. The way I figure it, you two realize there ain't no way out of this mess you got yourself into 'cept to come clean and hope the court goes easy on you.”

“Jesus, you *are* an idiot.” Zane snapped.

The sheriff's hand wavered over the gun again.

"If I were you, sheriff, I would not do that. Zane tends to get agitated when a man goes for a gun without a cause."

"Yes, let's not get all nervous for any reason, and have you do something irreversibly foolish that will end badly, Sheriff," Zane warned.

Gavin could tell by the sheriff's sudden owlish express that he knew Zane's threat wasn't idle. "I agree, Sheriff. This is not a time to be temperamental." Gavin said it as if he was apologetic, but truthfully he wasn't fazed in the least that his brother put a measure of fear in the sheriff.

From the moment they walked into the jailhouse, Gavin realized the mistake. But, against his better judgment, he convinced Zane talking to the sheriff was the right thing to do. Of course, the regrets were there now, but the course of action had been set.

Gavin glanced at Zane hoping his brother didn't call the sheriff out for the insult about killing their mother. He knew by the way Zane glared through the idiot he might seriously be considering such.

"Th-this ain't getting us anywhere, boys," the sheriff stammered.

Zane pressed forward, and showed teeth. His tone was hard, unyielding. "We are not boys, sheriff, but educated men. My brother and I attended one of the finest boarding schools in Europe. We have doctorates in philosophy and business between us, and speak three foreign languages fluently--*men* who, regardless of the color of our skin, are not your boys, but gentlemen. I, like my brother, take offense to the term boy and what it implies. We don't care to hear it again. Do we have an understanding?"

Gavin added. "We came to you on our own accord to see if we could discuss matters amicably. We are not responsible for our mother's death. More than likely, Foley, is the culprit. It's no secret the idiot is seething with fury ever since he learned our father left a substantial inheritance. Our mother told us Foley is livid, outraged at the thought two half-breeds--his exact term, not ours--if two bastards

ever got their hands on one cent of money he believes is rightfully his own.” Gavin paused to see if the words penetrated the sheriff’s thick skull. “Foley relentlessly hounded our mother to change the will. I’m assuming he grew tired of trying to persuade mother differently.”

A noise sounded in the alleyway behind the building, as if someone or something knocked over a crate.

Zane stood up, withdrew his gun, and walked over to the door. He snatched it open, but nobody was there. He scanned the area, giving it the once over, before returning inside. Shrugging at Gavin, he replaced his gun. “I assume it was a cat. Nobody is out there lurking about.”

Gavin stood to his towering height, and loomed over the sheriff. “It seems we are at an impasse. Neither my brother nor me is a murderer, and nor do we intend to sit through a trial we know will be prejudiced from the beginning. So, it seems we will have to take matters into our own hands, and find our mother’s *real* killer. If you don’t intend to see justice is served.”

Zane withdrew the pistol from his jacket pocket, and cocked it.

“We will see you again, Sheriff, when we find the murderer and bring the person to justice. But, until then, we can’t afford to waste time trying to convince you we are innocent.” Gavin looked at his brother. “If you will please do the honors.”

“Wha-what do you intend to do?” The sheriff gulped, looking between the Banner brothers.

Zane grabbed the sheriff’s gun first, and then an arm. He hauled the man to his feet with little effort. Against adamant protest, Sheriff Grimes was drag over to a cell, the door opened, and then he was unceremoniously tossed inside. A cursory glance acknowledged the man sleeping off a night of drinking--the heavy scent of smoke and stale whiskey prevailed. The man stirred, smacked his lips, and mumbled when the door slam shut.

The sheriff blustered, cheeks puffed and flaming. “What the hell! You can’t do this you-you...this ain’t right.”

Gavin walked over to the cell. "Contrary to your belief my brother is not a savage," he said, pointedly. Then added, "Unless pushed."

"This is an outrage!"

Zane continued, as if he hadn't heard the sheriff's outburst. "It is Sunday when most people are in church. The streets are empty, but I figure by the time services are over, and you are discovered we will have a nice head start just in case you decide to do something foolish like send a posse after us."

Zane paused, and Gavin could see the devious glint in his brother's eyes. He knew Zane wanted nothing more than to put a bullet in the sheriff's butt, but that wasn't their way. No matter how ignorant the man, they didn't harm innocent people.

"If you shout loud enough, I'm sure when church let's out someone will come to your rescue. Have a nice day, Sheriff," Gavin said, and then strolled to the door.

Zane left the building without a backward glance.

* * * *

A man waited until the Banner brothers mounted their horses, and then rode off before entering the jailhouse through the back door.

Sheriff Grimes sighed with relief. "I thought I was going to have to sit on my ass all day in the stifling heat, and wait for someone to come to my rescue."

"Now, that wouldn't be right, would it, Sheriff? It's not as if you are some common criminal like the Banner brothers."

"The bastards." The sheriff cursed. "Get me the hell out of here."

The man folded his arms back, clasped his fingers together, and studied the sheriff a long time until the man started shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. He could see a sheen of sweat pop out on the sheriff's forehead. The thought the lawman was edgy amused the man.

He smiled, a fox-sly grin. “What did you tell the Banner brothers? Anything you would like to confess to me, Sheriff?”

“You think I'm foolish enough to say anything telling?” Sheriff Grimes uttered.

The man's eyes slit skeptically. A slender finger waggled back and forth in the air, and then he tsk-tsk. “I have to consider you might lie.”

“Those two bastards arrived with the intention of talking...ah, amichumbly, or something like that. Whatever that means. I swear it,” the sheriff lied.

The church bell tolled announcing the end of service.

The man stepped closer to the cell. “Now, why do I get the impression you are not telling me the truth? Huh, Sheriff, maybe, because I heard you talking. I listened outside the door. And guess what? I wasn't happy to hear the conversation going on inside.”

The sheriff stumbled backwards, and raised his arms in defense when the man withdrew a gun. “Now, you know what I told them was necessary.”

The man shrugged nonchalantly. “Perhaps. Maybe what you say is true, but regardless this is also necessary.”

The bell tolled, drowning out the sound of the gunshots.

Chapter 3

The sun brightened the area surrounding the menagerie of tall trees with billowy tops. A blanket of grass covered the clearing, formations of scattered rocks of various sizes dotted the landscape, and a clear bubbling stream rushed through the winding path, gurgling as water splashed, and swirled by.

Jayce heard the approach of the men over the sound of the current. She turned around, and covered her breasts with an arm. She forced herself to remain calm even while staring at the band of rough looking ruffians who stood there gawking. All the men seemed to be salivating like a starving pack of dogs eyeing fresh meat.

“It isn't proper for you to watch, uninvited, while a lady bathes. You fellows want something?” she asked, doing her best to remain nonchalant even though the situation seem perilous. Six to one is bad odds for anybody, Jayce thought.

These men didn't come for casual conversation. She had sense enough to know that. Silently, Jayce berated herself for letting down her guard, and leaving the guns out of reach, but a hard days ride and the allure of crystal water was hard to ignore.

The men eyed her, all with salacious thoughts in their heads. She could tell by the way that they were drooling.

“Yeah, we want something,” one of the men said, moving closer to the water's edge. He snickered, licking chapped lips and leaving a coating of spit between the crusts. “And I believe ye have exactly what we came for.”

A thin, greasy-haired rat, Jayce thought.

Another man stepped forward and she could tell he at least bathed in the last week, because his scent didn't overwhelm her nostrils with stench. A recent hair trim and shave was evident, unlike the rat, but his decent appearance didn't put Jayce at ease.

"We done hit pay dirt," The Rat said, leering, and rubbing his crotch.

The other man had dark hair and even darker eyes, and deeply tanned skin. He held up a hand, and backed off the rodent. A smile curved thin lips. He spoke in broken English solidifying Jayce's first belief. *A Mexican*. Perhaps, 'The' Mexican, one of the most notorious leaders of a band of outlaws this side of Texas.

"Excuse my friend, but being on the trail for many days...he is, ah, in desperate need of female companion." Jayce knew what that meant. Things were about to get uglier. "He is eager, no? But then what man in his right mind wouldn't be in the presence of such a tempting morsel?"

The Mexican spoke eloquently, almost personably, but Jayce had met enough silky-smooth talkers not to be fooled. He was the pack leader. *The head of a bunch of wolves*, Jayce thought. If the vermin attacked, she knew it would be at the Mexican's command.

Jayce was a gambler, so she decided to bluff, and hope like hell it worked.

With all the aplomb she could stomach, a credible smile eased across Jayce's face. The forced beguiling smile, all pretty-like, and put into place in hopes she seem enthralled by being in the man's presence. If she could get the leader to drop his guard, even for a minute, there might be a chance to escape. If not, then Jayce had to consider the daunting possibility. As in war, a sacrifice might be necessary. She might have to set propriety aside, and willingly offer a compromise to mitigate the damage. The thought seemed unscrupulous, but when faced with a grim decision that spelled bad either way, it was necessary to put practicality aside. Suffering under one man as opposed to six was the lesser of evils.

“Now, that one there makes my skin crawl,” Jayce said, motioning to The Rat, “but, you are a sight for a lady's sore eyes.” She said, forcing the lie between teeth.

The Mexican eyes brightened with interest, and then a wide grin crossed the thin lips spreading an even thinner line across the narrow face. Then he threw back his head, and laughed for a brief moment before facing Jayce again.

“Ah, so you are a pretty temptress who lies easily, no? Come, we shall see if what you say is true, *senorita*.” The Mexican held out a hand, as gentlemen would ask a lady to dance.

If the Mexican got his way they would dance all right, but not the kind Jayce was thinking. She stared at the offered hand as if it was a rattler. “I thought we could settle things amicably. A gentlemen to a lady? Not that I expect you to charm me, but gain my acquiescence. At the least.”

“I'm no gentlemen.” The Mexican sneered, and then charged into the water like a stampede of one.

Jayce fought, but her attempt to struggle was futile when the others of the pack joined in the attack. They were voracious, like wild animals on a fresh carcass. Surrounded on all sides, Jayce fought at the multiple pair of hands that pulled and grabbed at her. Finally, after the predators exhausted the prey, she was dragged to shore.

A nefarious grin surfaced on the Mexican's expression when Jayce kicked out, slamming a foot into his shin. “We play rough, no? I like a wildcat,” the Mexican said, and then gave Jayce a swift backhand across the cheek. The force of the blow made her fall backward, and land on the ground.

She wiped the blood from her split lip, and glared at the leader. “I have killed men for less,” she said, nostrils flaring.

“And I have tamed wilder cunt,” the Mexican said, and then converged on Jayce. He grab a fistful of hair, twisted, and then forced her back down until the small pebbles ground into delicate flesh.

She tried to ram a knee into the man's groin, but he thwarted the attack.

“A little voracious bitch. I see. All the more entertaining,” the Mexican chuckled.

Twisting and turning, fanning arms and legs wildly, she refused to give up the fight. By the time the other men heeded the leader's order, and pinned her down, Jayce blew gusts of air through an open mouth. Her fingers curled into fists, and she glared at The Mexican.

“Bastard!” she hiss.

For struggling, and the nasty slur she flung at the leader, another slap landed.

The Mexican grab Jayce's throat. He squeezed, and forced her to be still. While he held her down with one hand, another worked at the fastening of his pants.

Acting like an excited child, the rat hopped about from foot to foot. “Hot damn, plow her good, boss.” The Rat snickered.

Air burst from his lungs, and sounded like a grunt when the weight of the man collapsed on top of Jayce. She bite her bottom lip to stifle a cry until the bitter taste of blood filled her mouth. When The Mexican tried to pry her thighs apart, she fought hard to keep them closed.

“We shall see just how hot this pussy is, no?”

“Go to hell!” Jayce snapped.

The Mexican chuckled, a sinister sound to Jayce's ears.

“Ride that heifer hard and long. Teach her a bitch's place,” The Rat said.

Another man leaned forward, and pinched a nipple until Jayce flinched. He said, “But save something fer us, boss.” He licked his lips in anticipation.

A void surrounded Jayce, as she attempted to block out everything around her. She squeezed her eyes close, ignoring the nasty taunts, and crude slurs.

It took everything inside not to feel the fingertips digging into the tender flesh or the roughness of hairy legs that scraped her sensitive skin when the man fell between her thighs.

An abusive past taught Jayce to put herself in another place and time, and close out everything happening during the vile acts. She centered her thoughts into a black abyss.

Hot lashes flicked against an earlobe, and a slimy tongue left a coat of spittle.

"I will fuck you good, *senorita*. No fear," The Mexican said, but the threat was a waste, and went unheard, as Jayce lay lifeless.

The Mexican prodded roughly between her thighs for what seemed an infinite time of fumbling, and then grunted, followed by the feel of wetness squirting against an inner thigh. The Mexican cursed vehemently to the heavens.

Having gone into an inner void, it took Jayce a minute to realize what happened. When reality dawned--he misfired, and never hit the target--a slow easy grin surfaced.

"Have a little problem, do we?" she said.

The Mexican snarled viciously.

"Can I 'ave her now, boss? Huh...huh?" the Rat said.

"Of course, I have made the tasty morsel ready for you, my friend. She is a sweet piece," the Mexican said, and glowered at Jayce, and she could tell he warned not to refute the bald-face lie.

Jayce couldn't help herself, though. "How would you know? You misfired." A triumphant grin crossed her lips.

The Mexican went into a rage. He lost it, and went for Jayce's throat.

She was ready, raised a knee, and shoved it at the dangling appendage. The force of the blow made The Mexican howl in pain, and bow cupping his balls.

"*That's* for thinking to rape me, you bastard." Jayce hissed.

"Kill her! Kill the bitch!" The Mexican shrieked, struggling to stand. "I want her dead!"

She tried to move toward her guns, but the distance was too great. Before she could blink, five guns all pointed in her direction.

Jayce refused to give the men any satisfaction by showing fear.

She waited for the explosion of gunfire, but nothing happened, and she wondered why. When The Rat turned attention to the boss, she shifted her eyes in their direction.

“Boss?” The Rat asked. “Don’t seem right shooting a woman in cold blood.” All the others nodded in agreement.

It seemed a ludicrous thought, but apparently, the men didn’t have qualms about raping, but for whatever insane reasoning, killing a woman was out of bounds, even for this gang.

The Mexican raised a gun and shot The Rat dead. Then he turned toward Jayce. “I will kill the bitch myself, you worthless pieces of coward shit!” he shouted.

This time an eruption of gunfire exploded.

Jayce dove for cover, falling to the ground, and watched as The Mexican clutched his chest before dropping to his knees and then falling over.

Another pop sounded, and then another. The gang scattered, and then dived for cover, returning fire.

Two more men met their maker.

She watched as two men in black slacks and white shirts emerged from the cover of trees and stepped into the clearing, as if they were oblivious to the bullets whizzing all around them. Both raised their pistols, taking aim and firing with precision.

The acrid scent of discharged weapons hung in the air. An eerie disquiet settled over the area. Death tended to silence things.

The man in the black vest and Stetson turned in Jayce’s direction, and seeing the sudden movement snapped her out of the trancelike state. Moving as quickly as possible, she scrambled toward the rock where she left her clothing and guns, and then made a mad dash.

As fast as she could, Jayce pulled on the blouse, and then attempted to wiggle into the pants.

The man moved closer. “Heck,” she uttered, and then gave up on the idea of getting dressed. She went for the guns having decided being naked in front of the strangers suited the situation better than not having a gun.

Jayce bolted for the pistols.

* * * *

She moved fast, a swift breeze, and with the agility of a sleek cat, Gavin thought, watching the girl dive for the gun belt. He considered the attempt to arm herself commendable, but that was as far as allowances would go.

Before she could put a finger on the belt, he swooped it up and tossed the leather strap over a shoulder. “I think you should calm down before I allow a gun...or two in your hands.” He noticed the twin pistols. Impressive. Then roving his eyes over the lush breasts, and feeling the effect on his libido, he added, “Maybe you should get dressed.”

Years attending a boarding school and an immaculate upbringing under the tutelage of educators who taught the practices of being a gentlemen required he did the proper thing. Gavin turned around while the girl dressed.

Hastily, as quick as possible, Jayce finished dressing. Then she said, “I’m done. My guns.” She held out a hand.

Gavin turned around, and the first thought that crossed his mind was that she was just as stunning dressed as she was naked. Appreciatively, his eyes appraised the shapely form, starting at the top of auburn hair...down past voluptuous breasts...further still, he outlined the figure in a quick but thorough assessment. The dark aureoles clearly visible beneath the damp material of the blouse she wore left his mouth watering, and his cock strained.

She took a cautious step forward and demanded. “My guns...now.”

Her sharp tone cause Gavin to give the pretty face his undivided attention. "If I give you the guns, do you promise not to shoot me, darling?"

"If you don't try to rape me, there is nothing to worry about."

Gavin arched his eyebrows and then slanted them downward. "Au contraire, I prefer a lady's acquiescence before I bed her," he said, and then added firmly, "I do not rape women. The thought is not only incomprehensible but despicable."

"Really now, that," Jayce said pointing at the outline of swollen cock unabashedly, "says differently."

She apparently didn't have an embarrassed or reticent bone in that pretty little body. She stared at his crotch with indifference before boldly staring him in the face.

"I would be dishonorable if I told you there was no interest, but that doesn't mean just because a man is aroused in the presence of alluring beauty you should assume the worst. I'm not immature enough I can't control my cock." He stepped forward and held out the gun belt.

A keen sense of awareness of her femininity surfaced again as her slender fingers wrapped the belt around her waist, and it settled over full hips. Then she stepped back a few steps, and Gavin assumed she felt it necessary to put a safe distance between them. *Cautious and attractive.*

"Unfortunately, though wounded, one of the men escaped. If I had to hazard a guess, reinforcements will be here shortly. If you don't mind, darling, we should be on our way."

"I don't know what you have in mind, but if you think I intend to go anywhere with you or your partner, you are mistaken."

"You prefer to remain behind and face what could possibly be another insurmountable force of men alone? That is not an intelligent idea. If you ride with me and my brother, we can protect you."

"I don't need your help. I ride alone," Jayce said.

"Even though you are aware the odds are already against you?"

“It may not have looked like it a minute ago, but I can handle myself, mister.”

She turned to walk away, and then Zane stepped into the path, causing Jayce to freeze mid-step.

Gavin looked at his brother. “I’m afraid the lady is still nervous. She does not trust us, but then under the circumstances I can’t say I blame her. Albeit, I have assured the lady we intend no harm.”

“Look, I appreciate the help back there, and you two coming to my rescue, but I can manage things from here.”

Zane spoke with casual indifference, “That is not a wise decision, but if it is her preference then it would be improper to force the issue. Don’t you think, Gavin? We need to ride out. The sooner the better.”

Gavin didn’t think his brother’s words abrupt, but Zane clearly made it known he wasn’t waiting around for the girl to make a decision. He made a valid point. The ground trembled denoting a large number of riders were coming. Fast and furious, and heading straight in their direction.

Turning to the girl, Gavin said, “I wish you would reconsider, but as my brother said, we don’t intend to force the issue if you wish to go it alone. However, keep in mind only six idiots found you this time. The next it could be more, and even though you carry two guns, darling, is that enough against such a force? Even I wouldn’t take such odds.”

“I don’t scare easily,” Jayce quipped.

Gavin bowed graciously, and then said, “Adieu, darling.” He walked away wondering how long it would take the lady to see reason. They would ride out and keep a steady but decent pace so that when the girl stopped being unreasonable, it wouldn’t be difficult to catch them.

He mounted his horse and then clicked, setting the Black into motion. He looked over at Zane. “I was wondering how long it will take the lady to come around to seeing it is ridiculous to go it alone.”

Zane kept pace with his brother's horse. "If the lady is as astute as pretty, I suspect she should be joining us shortly. Why do you think I haven't spurred my mount to a faster gallop?"

Gavin grinned. "I didn't think you intended to leave the lovely to fend for herself even though you gave the indication of such. That would have been gauche of you, brother. Thankfully, my faith in your infallible nature to be proper is restored."

"I believe I hear the sound of a horse approaching," Zane said.

Gavin look over his shoulder seeing the lone rider beating a path in their direction. Purposely, both brothers slowed the horses down to an easy stride.

"My belief that beauty and astuteness are not synonymous is no longer a valid argument, I'm afraid. Not that both attributes need be present for me to have an interest in the fairer sex, but it is a refreshing twist that has my curiosity peaked."

"Of course. And the nice breasts and round ass have absolutely nothing to do with it. Right?" Zane asked, grinning. "I know your general requirements where the ladies are concerned. Unquestionable obedience, and to be very receptive in bed."

"True. True." Gavin couldn't deny that.

The two brothers parted ways and allowed the lady to move in between them, as if it was where she belonged. Then without warning--they didn't doubt the lady's ability to keep pace--they spurred the horses into breakneck speed and raced over the landscape in hopes of putting a nice distance between them and the band of riders thundering in their direction.

Chapter 4

The sun slowly disappeared behind towering precipice, blanketing the mountaintops in a warm glow of orange and red rays. The serenity of it all was unspeakable, but only lasted a few minutes. As quickly as dusk began to fall, the area became shrouded under dark menacing clouds that rolled in and cast the landscape in shadowy umbra. The air remained stifling, and only grew more stagnant as pellets of rain began to fall, making it difficult to breathe as the dust absorbed the humidity building. The thick air made it impossible to breathe without feeling as if you were sucking air through a hose.

As the soft pelts of rain quickly changed to heavy drizzle, the three riders came to a stop at a clearing where a cluster of towering trunks with wide mushroom treetops would offer a semblance of protection from the elements.

Zane dismounted, and scouted the area on foot leaving Gavin to attend to the lady.

Gavin dismounted, and made his way toward the girl. He watched perceptively wanting to gauge her disposition. She did have two guns, and he was cautious by nature.

Jayce remained mounted. Eyes forward, and her back tight. She completely ignored the man. The long and laborious ride wasn't conducive to conversation, but the infrequent and short intervals when they stopped to rest were an opportunity to talk with the stranger. He appeared a gentlemen, and they actually had civil communication. He seemed personable enough, but that didn't mean any type of trust was forged. She certainly had reservations about the darker skin man,

because he remained indifferent to her presence, and barely said five words the entire time.

Instinctively, she knew better then to accept the brothers at face value. During years of hoping from state to state, it wouldn't be the first time she met a fancy dressed, smooth talking man who didn't have a chivalrous bone in his body. *Snakes wear many skins.*

Gavin held out his hand. "Do you intend to stay mounted the entire evening? It might prove uncomfortable."

Regardless of the naughtiness of it, aware that she should concentrate on something other than his handsomeness, Jayce couldn't help scrutinizing the man under the cover of lashes. His features were unique in appearance, given the exotic slant of dulcet yet luminous gold-brown eyes, high cheekbone structure, and full lips too daring for a man. Not to mention the rich dark hair, straight nose, and the air of confidence about him that added just enough arrogance to make him appealing. *He smelled nice, too!* Even after the long hard ride, an alluring scent of leather, spice, and male was prevalent, and pleasingly tempting.

You have been dismounting since you were five! Her conscience reminded her, as Jayce allowed the man to assist her down .

She notice he kept his body well away from her own, and Jayce was thankful for his show of propriety. Strong fingers held her waist as he lifted effortlessly, attesting to strength of the long frame, honed hardness, and defined muscles evident beneath his shirt.

As soon as her feet touched the ground, Jayce immediately took a step back, and thoroughly chastised herself for the wanton thoughts. *How could she be thinking about a complete stranger in such a fashion?* It wasn't that she was a prude, but nothing like this had ever happened before, and unsettling warnings forced her to curb the wicked thoughts surfacing.

"Thank you," she said, ignoring the rush of excitement cursing through her body at the brief, albeit intimate contact.

"You are welcome," Gavin said, and then nodded.

It wasn't quite a bow, but close enough that Jayce noticed the courtesy. Cowboys don't do that--the regal air thing. Even that aside, his speech, and mannerisms clearly set him apart from the average gun in Texas. She suspected from anywhere except maybe Europe.

For an uncomfortable moment, their eyes clashed, one observing the other with equal curiosity, until Gavin broke the silence.

"I apologize there isn't a more accommodating place to rest for the evening, but the earth is turning to mush. It isn't wise to try and keep going, and risk maiming one of the horses by riding through the thick mud."

Jayce nodded, but otherwise remained mute. She stood there eyeing the man until she realized her inappropriate stare lead to more wayward thoughts, and he was aware it.

Under an amused stare he didn't try to hide, he watched her make an utter schoolgirl mistake by standing there gawking.

"What is your name, lovely?"

An innate suspicion of politeness turned Jayce cool. Privacy was paramount, and with the incident of Brewster still fresh in mind, she didn't think it was a good idea to provide any information to the stranger. Not even a name. Jayce glanced at the man. Not that he appeared close to wallowing in the mud with a pig like Brewster--there was no way to be a hundred percent sure. Brewster was a coward. It would be just like the idiot to send a hired gun instead of coming to do the dirty deed himself.

Jayce looked at the man's pistol. *He didn't purchase that in the local mercantile that was for sure.* The gun was obviously new, well manufactured, and she could tell expensive. There were two types of men who wore a gun like that--someone who had money and more money or was backed by an idiot like Brewster who had plenty.

"I can continue to refer to you as lovely, because the byname suits you. That is, if you prefer not to divulge your given name for whatever reason. Or, you can get over this obvious mistrust issue you are still harboring, and allow me to properly address you."

He was as attractive as cocksure. An atypical male she never surrounded herself with, which meant he was more arrogant than she first believed.

Jayne spoke with a cool affront. "I don't like cocky men."

"Why, because you are one of those modern women who like to take control--be on top?"

His words, though subjective, were damn close to sounding like a double entendre. It didn't go over Jayne's head. Nor did the fact he had moved, and intentionally invaded her personal space. Why she didn't put her knee in his groin was beyond Jayne. It had to be the undeniable attraction she felt, but had yet to figure out; she felt an unusual sense of comfort with their banter.

"I'm quite modish myself, or so I have been told. I don't mind allowing a lady to dominate, as long as she understands turnabout is fair play."

He was good. Damn good. And more dangerous than a male cougar on the prowl.

"If you don't mind I want to wash some of this dust off. Excuse me." She walked away telling herself not to look back. Not to go there, but found she couldn't help it. Jayne glanced back over a shoulder, and wasn't surprised to see Gavin shamelessly staring. She turned around and smiled. Not sure why. She couldn't explain it, but a giddy feeling surfaced that went beyond the norm of reasonableness. Damn it, if he didn't stir female sensibilities Jayne believed were long since dead.

Half way to the water's edge, Jayne felt another pair of eyes on her. Instinctively, she turned around to find the other brother watching as she made her way down the slight decline.

For a brief moment, the other brother's and her eyes collided like sparks of fire. An odd sensation rippled through Jayne, and she told herself to turn away. But, there was something about the other brother--a direct contrast to the first--dark and full of mystery, where the other was openly personable. Personality wise, a little bland in her

estimation. But, an equally appealing male specimen, with captivating clear sky eyes that were heavy-lidded with feathery dark lashes for a beginning. Not to mention his large build of muscles, every nuance of the physique sculpted to perfection. A cleft chin that might soften his features if he ever smiled, and raven dark hair so black it appeared almost blue fell untamed around his shoulders--an adventurer or rogue. Either option alluded to the possibility that the appeal, though strong, was dangerous.

Then stop the insane fluttering of your heart, and attempt to show some sense of control.

Without a hint of remorse, the sky blues boldly appraised Jayce from head to toe. Slow deliberate ogling began, a heated gaze washing over her body, quite thorough, as if the man was envisioning her sans clothing. Then he did it again, as if convinced he'd missed something the first time. *Ignore him.* Try as she might, to Jayce it seemed an impossible feat. It was as if she stepped in front of the direct reflection of the sun over a shimmering stream of clear blue water. The desire to start fanning was strong, but thankfully Jayce had the sense to keep her hand still. *Get control, Jayce.*

She almost sighed with relief when he finally had the decency to look at her face. Though, his gaze lingered beyond what is proper on the swell of breasts, eventually their eyes met again.

God, she hope she wasn't blushing! Her cheeks felt warm, and that unsettling thought alone should have made her have the sense to curtail the wicked thoughts. Then again, it seemed common sense apparently alluded Jayce now.

Being worldly and independent doesn't mean you're a floozy. Jayce turned away, and completely ignored the slight lift of lips, a telling sign he was amused, but not taken aback by her very unladylike reaction--he openly gawked, knew she was aware, and allowed the liberty. *Can you say wanton?* Jayce chastise herself.

Damn if this wasn't odd, Jayce thought. She considered herself a woman of the world, which meant her position allowed certain

freedom she often took advantage of, but being attracted to two men had never come into consideration. In fact, up until now, she felt as if a hint of a prudish attribute resided in her body.

She and Hugh had been intimate, but lying in his arms offered her the protection and warmth that she often craved after living alone too many years. But, for all Hugh's attention, she only felt a fondness for the sheriff. Even love, but not this insane awakening of feminine desire cursing through her body.

Jayce couldn't explain her reaction to the two men. The hour was late, the wind chilly, and she was too hungry, and weary to attempt to dissect it now. She chalked it up to delirium, and the adverse affect of riding too long in the saddle, an environment conducive to not thinking clearly.

The reason seemed farfetched, and outlandish in her mind, because Jayce believed herself to be extremely logical, if nothing else.

Christ, Jayce, get it together. Feeling wicked about two men is the furthest thing from logical!

* * * *

After Zane finished tending the horses and assured the animals were settled for the night, he walked over to where Gavin stood leaning against a tree.

Seeing his brother's gaze focused in the distance where the lady bent over the stream to douse cool water on her face, he grinned, knowing exactly where Gavin's thoughts centered.

The grunt of male satisfaction at seeing an exceptional sight that escaped Gavin's lips solidified his belief. He knew the beauty of full hips and a nice round ass in perfect view could have an arousing affect on a man. The pants she wore weren't tight, but riding too long in the saddle and sweating caused the material to fit snugly, accentuating the perfect shapely derriere.

“My sentiments exactly.”

Gavin turn and looked at his brother. “Interesting. Normally, a sassy mouth and what I expect to be brains between a female's ears, is normally a turn off for you.”

Zane chuckled. “Maybe too many days in the saddle, the ungodly draining heat, weeks sucking in dust and the odor of a horse's behind coupled with my own stench are making me yearn for something softer and a hell of a lot sweeter. Perhaps that is why I'm not as discriminate. Not to mention that's about the prettiest face I've seen in a long time. My God, those pouty cock-sucking-lips alone are enough to make a man lose his train of thought.”

“True. That, and you should just admit she is stunning, and you want to fuck her as much as I do.” Tilting back the hat from his forehead, Gavin wiped the sheen of sweat coating his brows. Even at night, though the temperature was cooling, and a light rain continuously fell, the heat of Texas took some getting used to.

“I agree, but sometimes what you wish for, and what you get isn't always the same.” Zane looked at his brother. “You can't fuck them all, Gavin. Some simply get away. From the looks of the lady,” he motioned to Jayce, “I don't perceive a warm welcoming if we try and engage in a ménage a trios play. Though, I admit the possibility is intriguing.”

“I beg to differ. Call it arrogance, confidence, or whatever you prefer, but I get the sense the lady is worldly in every sense of the word. Perhaps it's obtuse of me to say, but I have been in the presence of enough females in a causal setting that always ended up in their boudoirs to know when a lady is clearly interested. Though subtle, she did openly peruse my person.”

Zane laughed, and then said. “That only means a lady is breathing, but doesn't necessarily mean she has an interest in making herself available to the first pair of strangers who are gallant enough to rescue her from a band of uncouth misfits.”

“I'm afraid I'm banking on more, brother. Hell, I'm praying on it.”

“You care to make a small wager on your belief?” Zane said, his eyes concentrated on the flare of hips, and bountiful breasts.

Gavin tore his attention away for the moment, and turned to face Zane. “Of course. You know I can't resist a bet when the odds are stacked in my favor.”

“It's a deal then. Would you care to shake on it? A gentlemen's agreement?”

Gavin stood erect. He gave his brother a mischievous grin. “I hardly think that is necessary. I have never known you to welch on a bet. You always pay up when you lose.” Gavin casually called over his shoulder, as he walked away with a confident swagger toward the object of interest.

Chapter 5

The wind escalated, whipping by, sending a torrential downpour lashing furiously all over the area, turning the earth spongy with mud, and ripping leaves from the swaying tree limbs over Jayce's head.

Leafs and small twigs snapped by the wind fell and hit Jayce on the forehead and cheek.

Jayce groaned, wiping away the nuisances, and then threw the cover over her head and burrowed down, wrapping herself in a cocoon. She was thankful for the measure of protection the mushroom treetops and overhang wall of stone offered, or she'd be soaked through and through by now. Her blanket was too thin. She moved back, further against the wall of the mountainside that helped keep some of the rain off.

For an instant, she berated herself for not accepting the additional cover Gavin had offered, but her stubbornness not to be coddled had driven what she considered an insane refusal now.

The wind was brisk, but thank God it seemed like the worst of the storm was passing over, and the downpour began to dribble.

The chill of the air still caused her to shiver occasionally, but that was something Jayce could handle as long as the rain stopped.

"Ha-chew." Jayce sniffled, and then wiped her nose. All she needed now was to get sick, she thought sardonically.

Jayce tried to stifle another sneeze coming, but it only made her head hurt.

"Ha-chew!"

The ground muffled the sound of boots, but Jayce heard Gavin approach. She knew it was him even though the damp earth, pine, and

other nature scents were present; summer breeze, maleness, and a hint of spice prevailed teasingly. The arousing balm awakened feminine yearnings that made her pussy alert.

Earlier, she watch from a distance mesmerized, as the lean hard body submerged beneath the water surface. The water was too brisk, and Jayce wondered how he stomached the coolness that her own cowardice refused to attempt. Instead, a quick sponge-off seemed appropriate, and Jayce had left it at that. Unable to help herself, Jayce inhaled the pleasant scent of a man, and tried to ignore the flagrant rush of heat rippling between her thighs.

When Gavin leaned down on one knee, and loomed over her body, it took all Jayce had not to reach up and pull him into the folds of cover, and steal the heat radiating off his body.

“You want that blanket now?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“God, I don’t think I have ever encountered such stubbornness from a woman.” Gavin toss the heavy wool blanket over Jayce. When she didn’t immediately offer profuse appreciation. He said, “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you, but honestly I was just fine.”

Jayce heard him chuckle. The sound was a low rumble, comforting.

“Maybe so, but neither me nor Zane was going to feel guilty because you are too obstinate to accept assistance when required.”

Jayce’s tone was cynical. “What, you two chivalrous males toss a coin to see who would save the damsel in distress?”

“Actually, no, that’s not what happened. We both discussed the fact you would rather catch an ailment then admit the idea of sleeping between us for warmth and protection from the elements isn’t a harebrain idea, as you so eloquently put it.”

Jayce scoffed, making an unladylike sound.

“Then, afterward, we tossed a coin to see who would come over here and risk life and limb to convince you that it would be better if you slept with us before you catch a chill.”

“Now, why doesn't that surprise me?” The sarcasm was dripping, and she knew it. Jayce shoved the covers off, and then wiggled until she could sit up.

Through the shrouded light, green met hazel directly, and the affect was dazzling. And, for a brief moment, the hazel hues sparkling with hints of gold reflected in the illumination of the moon, startled Jayce. Even in the dim light, the entire visual was sensual, and stirred something primal. A hot spur of lust surfaced making Jayce quiver, and insane thoughts, all wanton and unacceptable, surfaced.

“Look you--”

“My name is Gavin Banner. My acquaintances refer to me as Ban. Am I mistaken, or did we have this conversation earlier?”

Jayce huffed, clearly frustrated. Something she wasn't accustomed to feeling. She was a gambler, for God sake, and she'd bluffed more men than she could recall. Why this one--Ban, or Gavin, whatever he preferred to be called--had her all flustered and bothered, didn't make sense.

Jayce exhaled slowly, put a credible smile on her face, and then said calmly. “*Gavin*, I'm not sure what game you and your brother are thinking to play, but I assure you I'm not the winnings. I may be a modern woman, but don't misconstrue the facts. That doesn't mean I'm all that conventional, if you know what I mean.”

Even in the fading light, Jayce could see the roughish smile surface. “Excuse my bluntness, but what we have in mind is not customary in the least, Cheri.” There it was out. He'd unconditionally let the lady know the intentions.

“Excuse...me?”

“A gentleman rarely explains things in salacious details to a lady, but then again, there are those who prefer such. Tends to heighten the attraction, and adds a hint of wicked mystique, if what I'm told is to

be believed.” He look pointedly at Jayce. “Is that what you prefer, lovely? If that is what you want, then gentlemen propriety aside, I don’t have any qualms about doing whatever necessary to pleasure you.” He leaned forward, put his lips within kissing distance of a delicate earlobe, and then whispered.

Instantaneous arousal shot through Jayce. She went taunt, and then trembled, as the heated words raked over her like embers set against exposed flesh. Her conscience said not to fall under the rakish spell, but damn if she didn’t ignore the inner warning.

Okay, he was easy on the eyes. Quite the charmer, and audaciously arrogant, but that all equated to one thing--danger and more danger. The warning rang inside Jayce’s head. It was loud, practically screaming at her to show a measure of restraint. And she swore it was an intention, but then the handsome rogue tossed in a high card that trumped all sane thoughts.

Damn him.

His fingers were large and strong, yet held Jayce’s face with an ease of a gentle-giant, soothingly caressing, awakening fire with each stroke, as Gavin coaxed the mouth closer.

“This is totally...irrational.” Jayce breathed.

“Is that acquiescence to our offer?”

Soft pants escaped Jayce’s lips, as she tried to respond with some semblance that control existed. “Wh-what if I say no?”

His smile was narcotic, and sent a pulse of altruistic desire shimmering inside Jayce’s pussy.

“Then it’s hands off, darling. Neither I nor Zane take advantage of women--”

“Perhaps not physically,” Jayce breathed, as full lips brushed lightly over her mouth, “but, I get the sense you two have been methodically playing me from the first moment you laid eyes on me.”

She could see her words were true, but Gavin didn’t seem apologetic in the least. He remained politely indifferent.

Gavin chuckled softly. "If that were true, a gentleman wouldn't openly admit to it." Tender nibbles ate at the dewy flesh of her neck, teasing, tantalizing.

"God, this is crazy," Jayce said, clutching his lapel, digging her nails into the material, and arching up to meet the searing mouth intent on devouring.

"Not crazy, darling, but wicked," Gavin whispered, continuing to feast. "Just go with it, Jayce. You want to, and there is no shame in having the need to appease your inner most desires."

The brazen truth of his words shook Jayce to the core. Yes, she wanted this--two men--and for a moment, the idea made her pass judgment on the entire wanton fact.

She wasn't a traditional woman because the constrictors of most females didn't bind her since she was on her own. But, still, the idea of losing herself in the spellbinding madness made her leery.

"I sense trepidation, darling. Is there anything I can say...or do, that will convince you desiring two men isn't the worst sin a woman can commit."

Jayce needed a minute to put things into perspective, breathe, and reason though her insane thoughts of capitulating. She couldn't do that with the persistent pressing of hard muscle rubbing sensitive nipples, feeling the heat of maleness penetrate sending feverish rapture cursing between her thighs and saturating her panties.

Jayce moved Gavin away from her. When he advanced, Jayce put up her hands as a warning to stay back. "Don't..." she glanced through the darkness to find Zane standing nearby, but seemed complacent not to interact even though Gavin made it clear they both wanted her.

She needed a distraction. She said, "why isn't your brother coming anywhere near me?" It was something to say. Maybe not the smartest statement, because she could barely fend off one man let alone two. But, Jayce wasn't in her right mind, so it was the best she could come up with now.

Gavin look over his shoulder, and then grinned. "He's shy."

Jayce rolled her eyes dramatically. That was a bald face lie, and both of them knew it.

"Would you be offended if I called you a liar?"

"Would you be offended if I said you are fighting what you know you want?"

Jayce laughed coquettishly to cover her nervousness. "Men like you are more lethal than a bullet between the eyes."

Again, Gavin laughed, and Jayce the warmth in his tone was contagious. "Are we to play games, darling? If so, let me know. Otherwise..." he murmured. Moving like a predator, he advanced on the reluctant prey, and scooped Jayce up in his arms. His lips hummed over her forehead and trailed downward to the tip of her pert nose, and further still until his mouth covered her open lips.

The assault started slowly, and then increased...devouring, until the kiss was wildly arousing.

Gavin tore his mouth away. The authority of his words was brusque, unequivocally male, and sent a piquant ripple of desire cursing through her body. "Think of it like this, darling. Me alone would be enthralling, and beyond your wildest expectations, but two gives you twice the pleasure."

Jayce draped her arms around his neck in surrender, held tight, and was quaking as Gavin carried her over to the clearing he shared with his brother; a trio's love nest. *At least for tonight. This moment*, she thought as he laid her against the soft cushion of blankets.

Zane joined them, and it was then Jayce accepted the fact--she was shedding the shell of hermitage she had hidden behind an entire life to explore an unknown territory.

Chapter 6

Zane wasn't the communicator like Gavin, but he was equally attentive.

Nor was his touch the same as his brothers, but uniquely different; Gavin cajoled and coaxed, stripping away any fears that surfaced. Zane was more demanding, feverish. Not rough, but audaciously commanding.

There was no doubt to Gavin's expertise in undressing a lady, because he did it skillfully, and with a quickness that told Jayce it was habitual. In a matter of seconds, the small buttons that should have been a nuisance for his large fingers were deftly undone, and then the blouse was removed and tossed aside. Next, spurned by Gavin's instructions, she wiggled her hips so he could get the pants down. Zane was helpful, and pulled the trouser legs free, and then he threw them over his shoulder into the wind.

Jayce's body was hot. The wind was crisp, but that wasn't what made her tremble. She inhaled, unable to breathe at the sight of the twin powers standing over her undressing. A slight moue of appreciation escaped, as tall muscle, every inch of the bodies honed, and defined in perfection of colossal maleness was revealed.

Shamelessly, she stared at the men whose bodies were obviously designed for pleasure. Jayce's eyes followed the contours of masculine flesh to the objects of interest jutting from between the pair of powerful thighs.

Both cocks were like towering columns with flaring bulbous crowns, and thick shafts of glory.

The pink of Jayce's tongue licked her bottom lip. She lifted her brow, and then cooed unabashedly. "My, my, if those aren't the finest guns I've seen."

Zane smirked with cockiness, accustomed to such accolades.

Gavin threw back his head and laughed fully before he dropped down beside Jayce. "Darling, you're a ray of sunshine after a storm. To think I thought we were dealing with a--."

"Prude." She finished, arching her brow.

Gavin kissed her lightly on the mouth. "No," he hummed against sweet lips, "more docility."

Jayce bite into her lip, pressing her palms against Gavin's strong chest. "I'm not very...experienced," she whispered.

"Are you a virgin?" Zane asked, blandly.

Jayce saw that both men were holding their breathes in anticipation. "No."

Zane sigh with relief.

Ever the communicator, Gavin explained his brother's reaction. "We really aren't into innocence. That, and I'm not sure if either one of us has the patience to take you as required, because we both feel so rapacious." Hot fingers stroked down Jayce's breast and settled over a globe. His fingers began doing wicked things to a nipple, drawing out a soft purr, before he looked up. "How many men are we talking about, darling?"

Jayce couldn't find her voice with the diabolical fingers tugging, plucking at the strained nipples. Finally, breathless, she uttered. "Two."

"Too many to name?" Zane said.

Jayce raised two fingers.

"We'll take it slow, darling," Gavin whispered between her lips. His kiss was subtle, and then escalated to heated strokes, parlaying, dueling that consumed her willing mouth in sizzling lashes.

Jayce accepted the kisses, enjoying the hot, moist, attention. She shuddered, wrapping her arms around Gavin pulling him closer, wanting more of the rapturous taste.

“God, she tastes sweeter than a sugar coated sweet treat,” Gavin said, looking at Zane with a wolfish grin. “Nectar of the Gods.” He confessed, and then consumed himself in arousing Jayce with his mouth, tongue, and hands that busily mapped out the creamy planes of flesh withering beneath him.

Zane's tone was dispassionate and cool, but not his startling blues that washed over Jayce like raw heat. “I don't doubt you, brother. I can't wait to taste this sweet pussy.” A finger slide up, and eased the plump folds apart to reveal a rosy interior filled with cream. The first lick was reticent, but caused Jayce to squirm in pleasure.

“I think she like it, brother,” Gavin said, grinning.

“Then she's going to enjoy the hell out of my mouth eating such a luscious pussy. Ripe as a peach,” Zane murmured.

“Zane likes the taste of a woman's juices. Claims it's the sweetest thing, better, then syrup.”

“Oh!” Jayce gasped, feeling herself flower up when Gavin reached low and spread her legs wider, and then ran the tip of his thumb over the slit of wet flesh. He exposed her fully to his brother's view, and the feeling of unabashed surrender proved as wicked as the feel of fingers sliding between the cleft. “Enjoy, brother.”

It was obvious this wasn't the first time the brothers shared a female. Jayce could tell, because they worked as one, synchronized. Gavin glided two fingers, distending the labia, but she couldn't figure out why his finger didn't penetrate. God, she wanted to feel the thickness of something hard delve inside her pussy. The desire to be filled strong--a finger, cock, something! But, then it dawned on her why Gavin didn't enter her. He was allowing his brother unhampered access.

“Lordy...lordy.” Jayce quivered, as the heat swirled around the swollen clitoris, before Zane unleash his sybaritic tongue, teasing.

The feel was hedonistic lashes of fire that repeatedly washed across the tight bud of flesh, again and again, until she felt the entirety of pussy eaten with the intensity of a man suffering from starvation.

Gavin held her close, caressing every inch of her body, igniting it to an inferno of desire. His lips suckled her breast, nibbled over the skin on Jayce's shoulders...paused, and then took tiny bites out of the sensitive flesh on the neck.

He held her firmly, as her body bucked, arching, withering as Zane continued his devious feasting.

"Oh, my...oh, god!" Jayce cried out, and then her entire body shuddered in release. The climax complete, all consuming, leaving Jayce feeling like a heap of butter left in the sun too long. She turned to mush.

Gavin smiled into her mouth. "Was that good, darling?"

"Give me...a minute." Short bursts of air escaped, as she tried to catch her breath. Finally, she whispered. "A...first."

"Really? That doesn't seem right at all. A tempting morsel is made to provide pleasure, and receive equal reciprocation. Wouldn't you agree, Zane?" Gavin said.

"Unequivocally. Perhaps you should rectify the situation, and give Jayce what she deserves--again and again."

Jayce had no idea what they were saying, because her mind was still in the aftermath of languorous bliss.

She figured it out though when Gavin move and covered her body. His knees gently prodded her thighs apart, and then she felt the unbelievable hard thickness attempt to explore the rarely chartered terrain of her pussy.

"You are...too large." Jayce sucked in her bottom lip, as Gavin rocked powerful hips forward, rotating, forcing acceptance.

"*Au contraire*, darling. Better to pleasure you," Gavin cooed, and then gripped her hips, pulling Jayce into his cock. He thrust burying himself deep on the first surge. He surrendered the entirety of the long heavy shaft, leaned forward pressing Jayce back, and then without

considering the snug passage, he began a deliberate undulation of his hips.

His movements were measured, strong and complete, driving continuously in a succinct tempo of rapture. Stroking, tunneling into her pussy vigorously. Jayce was at a loss, having never felt anything close to the hedonistic rhythm of cock fucking inside her. “Mmm...you are delicious, Gavin.” She welcomed his thrust, arching into the demand, closed her eyes and rode out the wondrous bliss of being filled to capacity, but not in the least bit uncomfortable because the first orgasmic release made the burrowing largess glide easily back and forth.

“Gavin!” Her voice was foreign, a throng of guttural moans, as another mind numbing rush of pleasure suffocated her words. Jayce buried her face into Gavin's shoulder, locked her legs firmly against his flanks, and succumbed to the orgasm rippling through her pussy with the velocity of a bullet projectile. She cried out, shuddered, and screamed in satisfaction.

Gavin lost control shortly after her climax. She felt his cock surge to the depths, seemingly piercing her belly, and then his animalistic grunt escaped from deep within his chest before she felt seed burst freely inside her pussy.

And just when Jayce thought she could take no more, Gavin rolled to his side taking her with him. The warmth returned, as Zane moved up behind her.

When she felt strong, large palms move her ass up, and tossed a thigh over Gavin. It surprised her how readily, and greedily she welcome the next cock to settle home.

Feeling another hard cock prod between her legs, a moan of pleasure escaped from her, and then there was a pause before Zane thrust deep from behind. Jayce inhaled sharply on the next upstroke that was savage, almost painful, because her pussy was oversensitive from Gavin's attention.

Zane whispered profuse apologies in her ear. "I apologize. You are so wet, so incredibly hot. I'm ashamed to admit I forgot myself."

Jayne didn't respond, but raised her thigh, allowing the pulsating cock more access. Zane flexed his hips, driving deeper to heighten the pleasure. She was clinging to Gavin, bucking back to meet the urgent thrusting, gyrating hips...prodded by Zane's instructions, she welcomed his insatiable need that was evident by the way he fucked. Each stroke hit bottom, sending a profligate rush of licentious sensations spiking inside her pussy.

She knew she was close to climaxing again. Her clit was swollen, beyond sensitive, and the hard length and thick ridge of the crown gliding over her clitoris was too much to bear.

"Oh--again!" Her tone said she thought the feat impossible.

Gavin was in her ear, whispering. His words explicit and wicked, added to the excitement drumming inside her body. "Again and again, and then some more. We're going to fuck ourselves to death." He licked his tongue over the earlobe, and tugged on the tip. "Then just when you think it is over...we start fucking that sweet pussy some more until you fade away in pleasure," he said, and then slide down Jayne's body.

Her thigh moved aside and flung over Gavin's shoulder so he could get to the soaked passage nestled in the crevice of her legs.

Without hesitation, and with no warning, his tongue licked the swollen clit, and then started suckling the bead.

"Oh God--again." Jayne breathed, eyelids fluttering, her voice broke with the torrid rush of another climax.

Jayne gave Zane her attention when he cupped her cheeks, turned her head, and crushed his mouth against the open sweetness. He sought out her tongue. His kiss was wild, as untamed as his fucking. Then he froze, tensed, and shuddered spilling his seed.

Gavin moved up, and kissed her. She tasted herself on his tongue.

Hard, powerful arms protectively encircled her. She felt a hand rest against her hip, and another one just as large cup her butt, and

then incredible warmth spread over her body as the two men sandwiched her still trembling form between them.

A light kiss whispered over her forehead. “Warm enough, darling?”

“Uh-huh,” Jayce murmured, and then closed her eyes.

Just before she drift into slumber, she wondered if she would survive another round with the two rapacious and insatiable brothers. A light smile curved her lips. *Probably not, but she was damn well going to try.*

Chapter 7

God, what did I do?

That was her first thought as the early morning sun forced Jayce to open her eyes and face the new day. A new her. She peeked at the horizon, and then groaned closing her eyes.

She rolled to her side, pulled the covers up to warm herself now that the convenience of the two heaters were missing, and the morning breeze chilled her body.

She heard voices, and then splashing. Jayce opened her eyes to a beautiful sight. More enthralling than the sunrise raising over the mountaintops, and casting a soft glow over the serene landscape.

Gavin and Zane stood naked, the surface of the water well below their waists.

Jayce stared mesmerized, watching the hard chords of their backs, muscular butts, and honed thighs. Her eyes followed their every movement as they bathed. She continuously flicked back and forth from one brother to another, watching as long, large, hands lathered soap over their bodies.

Then she focused her attention on Gavin, staring when his hand moved down the light shade of hair covering his chest, over his flat stomach, following the trail that ended in a soft wispy thatch between his thighs. A rivet of heat surfaced between her legs when his palm encircled the straining shaft. His movements were deliberate, leisurely cleansing, very erotic.

When Zane moved, it caught her attention. She watched him bath, suds generously spread over his expansive shoulders, along defined arms and a hairless chest, and then he too began soaping his cock.

Jayce's tongue flicked against her bottom lip. She held her breath, and then slowly released it, as a rage of something untamed ignited, causing moisture to gather between her thighs. Red-hot pulses rippled through her pussy, as she watched the show.

As if they knew her thoughts, both brothers turned in Jayce's direction.

Even from the distance where she lay, Jayce could see the easy-grin on Gavin's lips. Her heart did something unusual, it started thumping wildly inside her chest. When Zane turned around, and smiled at her for the first time, she swore her heart did a flip-flop.

Though both brother's skin tone hinted at mixed ancestry, each remained uniquely different. Gavin was a mixture of rich vanilla and a sprinkle of cocoa, while Zane was more sun-kissed, swarthy with a rich burnt sienna hue. Both delectable hues good enough to eat.

An artist would depict the two bodies as hard, chiseled perfection of male brawn, sinewy limbs, and powerfully sculptured frames--dark Adonises.

Such a splendid sight. The intensity of heat magnified and raced up her spine. She could feel her pussy flower open expectantly, and moisture gather.

God, if she kept it up she was going to be dripping by the time they joined her.

Again, Jayce got the sense the brothers knew what they were doing--the bathing ritual was for show. They never touched, not even close, and didn't even face one another. But, it was evident their actions were synchronized rhythms meant to be tantalizing, and appeasing to the eye.

Sudsy hands stroked lazily over erect cocks. Their dual fists stroked the hard shafts teasingly, elongating the already thick stalks to unbelievable proportions.

The view left Jayce's mouth watering. The sensations of pure lust escalated, spiking, awakening every nerve ending inside her pussy.

Salvia filled Jayce's mouth, and for the first time she wondered what it would feel like to taste a man's cock--perhaps two.

What does a man taste like? Bitter or sweet? Perhaps a combination of both?

Would the sensitive receptors on the tip of her tongue go crazy with wicked sensations when stroked?

These questions and more surfaced, as Jayce watched the twin towers. When they walked from the water, and moved in her direction she had the feeling all her inquiries would be answered and more.

Jayce looked from one man to the other as they stood in front of her. Then unable to help it, she glanced at the erect phalluses that looked like smooth stone jutting from thunderous thighs. The tip of her tongue licked her bottom lip expectantly.

"Good morning, darling. Did you sleep well enough?" Gavin said, kneeling down. He cupped her cheeks, and gave her a deep tongue kiss. Quick, no more than a tempting brush of his mouth that was subtle, but arousing.

She hummed against Gavin's mouth. "Morning. I rested just fine. Thank you."

Next Zane dropped to his knees. Strong fingers captured her chin, forcing Jayce to face him. His kiss was hot, moist, and demanding. He didn't say as much, but she supposed it was his way of greeting her.

"Are you hungry?" Gavin asked. When Jayce looked at him she caught the brothers exchanging mischievous grins that made both look sexier, if that was possible.

She could only nod. Words had temporarily evaded her, as the heightened anticipation of what was coming next rippled through Jayce like an electrical current.

Gavin and Zane kneeled on their knees in front of Jayce so she was eye level with the cocks.

Without preamble, Gavin held his cock to her lips. Easy, a slow press forward, the entirety of the swollen crest glided past her lips and teeth into the damp portal.

“Moisten your mouth. It will make it easier for me to slide unhampered,” Gavin instructed. When Jayce complied, filling her mouth with saliva, he started a slow ebb and flow...back and forth...again and again, he repeatedly fed Jayce cock. “Suck harder, and use your tongue on the head when I withdraw. Ah--excellent.” He groaned, picking up the tempo until he was fucking inside the snug band of lips.

A quick swirl against the flaring cock-head, helped answer one of Jayce's questions. Bitter-sweet, she decided when drops of fluid flowed over her tongue. She lapped at the tangy flavor greedily.

Zane kissed her shoulders, trailed a rain of wicked licks down her back until she felt his tongue lash across an ass cheek. Curious, Jayce tried to turn and investigate, but Gavin's fingers gently entwined in her hair keeping the attention focused on his cock.

A brief moment passed when she couldn't feel Zane touching her, and then he was back. And, oh, did he return! His large hands spread her wide, and then Jayce damn near jumped feeling the wetness penetrate the untried territory. His tongue made licentious circles over the small hole, licking, and then pierced with tiny-thrust pushing into the puckered crevice.

Jayce swallowed, gulping, feeling the strange, but arousing plunder in her ass.

“Ah...whatever you are doing is making Jayce's mouth hot and incredibly wet. Don't--stop,” Gavin said. He threw back his head, and lost himself in the moment.

She assumed he was thoroughly aroused, because she could feel the thickness swell. More of the creamy fluid seeped free, and added to the already moist mouth that burst alive. Salvia thickened, so much it seeped down the side of Jayce's mouth.

Powerful hips rotated, rocking, and driving the rigid breadth repeatedly as he fucked her mouth as vigorously he'd done last night inside her pussy.

“Jesus.” He grit his teeth. His hands braced against the top of Jayce's head. “Fuck--I'm coming,” he said, and then jerked free sending a rush of cum splashing against her cheek and mouth. He sucked in his breath, and shuddered a final time before he found his voice. “Darling...incredible.” He kissed the top of her head. “Thank you.”

Jayce wiped the milky fluid from her face with the back of her hand.

Zane was back, and poised in front of Jayce. His cock in hand, the heavy bulb entered, as she opened to accept the offering.

The fullness bloated Jayce's mouth, stretching it, and then a piston of movements began. She suctioned, creating a vacuuming against the wicked assault.

This being all new, Jayce had no idea if she did things correctly, but common sense told her Zane wasn't disappointed. Low moans and a satisfied grunt told her she had gotten the hang of it.

Like Zane who seemed interested in her butt, Gavin moved behind her. She felt his hands distend her ass, and then something slick and oily slide back and forth between the crease.

“Relax...easy, darling,” Gavin said.

Jayce shuddered, and then mumbled something incoherent feeling the invasion, a combination of pleasure, but also discomfort.

Gavin warned her about what was coming. He said, “A little more...two this time.”

She gulped, and tensed all over as the thickness of two fingers scissoring, slicing, worked the opening to accept more. The thrusts measured, but complete, a steady flow of gentle strokes.

“That's it, darling,” Gavin cooed, and then picked up the tempo when he felt Jayce was ready. She was still tight, but opening.

“Fondle my sacs,” Zane said. “Lick along the shaft and head...now suck faster.”

The pulses beat hard inside her mouth with each palpitation of the cock. The hard ridge beneath the head continuously rubbed over the

rough surface of Jayce's tongue. The area the most sensitive to feeling ignited wanton urges inside her.

The intense spasms were almost uncomfortable, clenching and releasing, tightening her vagina until the need to climax became overwhelming.

God, she needed an orgasm.

She could feel Zane's thighs clench beneath her fingers. His cock twitched erratically, and she suspected his need for release equaled her own.

His voice was hoarse, throaty. He groaned. "Swallow it." Before the calescent semen filled her mouth, Jayce gulp as much as she could, and then pulled back letting the remainder of fluid hit her pursed lips.

Ever the polite one, Gavin immediately inquired, "Are you okay, darling? You have an expression on your face I can't quite decipher."

"I never had a man come inside my mouth. Heck, I never sucked a cock before now. Even though I knew it was coming, the abrupt eruption was a...surprise," she said looking at Zane. She could tell Zane felt contrite, even though he didn't say so. He had a mortified expression--as if he did something naughty, and knew it--on his face.

"It wasn't that bad. However, it is an acquired taste."

Zane went to his knees. He captured Jayce's chin and stroked his thumb pad over the stickiness cleansing away his seed. "Something we shall work hard to see that it becomes a delicacy." He kissed her mouth.

Jayce accepted what she considered a form of an apology. She couldn't be sure with Zane, because unlike Gavin who tended to be open, he communicated very little. He was a man of action. She felt his hand slip down between them and enter the soaking pussy in one thrust. He created lazy circles over the clit, and then plunged a finger between the folds.

Being finger-fucked dually with fingers inside her ass and pussy brought Jayce to a quick release. She cried out softly, falling against Zane when her orgasm burst alive inside her body.

She was whipping her head back and forth, fanning the long strands, as Gavin moved up behind her. She moaned, a pleasurable coo, not distress, feeling the hard cock search between her thighs.

"Forgive me for being insatiable, darling. I find I can't help myself," Gavin said, and then pressed her forward until she was clinging to Zane.

"You are far too delectable. Like a treat, I can't get enough of you."

Jayce purred feeling the solid length forge forward into the depths of her pussy that was saturated. She was so wet, the thickness glided easily inside and moved with ease. She felt every stroke against the inner walls of her pussy. Red-hot heat thrust against the quivering pussy, sending rapturous sensations to burst alive with each demanding thrust.

"Again!" Jayce cried out feeling her body respond to the hard shaft plummeting continuously inside her pussy.

Gavin lifted up, churned higher, forcing Jayce's body to bump against Zane. "And again...and again. We promised," he whispered against the sweat slick back.

Jayce tried to respond, but Zane's mouth greedily sought hers for a kiss. His tongue swirled about, licking, slurping, as Gavin rocked them in a hedonistic tempo that Jayce knew would be her undoing.

Her cry of pleasure suffocated in Zane's mouth as another blissful climax soared her to searing heights.

She felt Gavin surge a final time. Then he held still, and then groaned with pleasure as white-shot spurts of semen filled the willing cavity.

The twin pleasures were insatiable. Jayce figured she was too, as time and again they brought her body to indescribable pleasure until

she screamed no more. She was wrung dry. Pussy too sensitive to take another cock and sore between her thighs, she begged for mercy.

“Enough,” she moaned, but smiled to let the brothers know she was fine. She just needed a reprieve from their lustful attention. Something her body was not accustomed to, but enjoyed to the point of exhaustion.

“Rest a minute, darling, while we ready the horses,” Gavin said.

“Can you ride?” Zane politely inquired.

“I think so.”

“If not, you can mount with me for a duration,” Gavin said, equally courteous.

Jayce gave him a wicked smile. “I already rode that stallion twice, cowboy. I will use my own horse.”

Gavin laughed, swooped down, and claimed a kiss. “You are a delight, darling,” he said, and then left her to join his brother.

Jayce followed the twin pleasures, watching the easy swagger of hips, long strides, and bold confident movements as the men walked away.

Twice the pleasure, she thought smiling.

* * * *

The flat plains of Texas stretched out before them, as the three riders raced across the dry earth, leaving clouds of dust in their wake, and hopefully a good distance between them and the gang of men on their trail.

Their horses kept a steady pace that Zane set by taking the lead.

Gavin and Jayce remained behind, but not too far, and allowed Zane to forge ahead and scout the area.

As far as he could tell, the men who had been after them a few days ago either gave up or were falling further and further behind, because Gavin hadn't felt like they were being tracked today. Though,

he could be wrong. He wasn't concerned, though. If men were still shadowing them, Zane would find out.

He slowed his mount, and Jayce's mare automatically followed suit.

Gavin watched Jayce strain too see the outline of his brother, as Zane continued with the fast pace, leaving them behind.

It was odd, but something inside him felt a twinge of jealousy, although he was reluctant to call the emotion that, but it was as far as he was going to decipher the way he was feeling.

This is total madness, Gavin thought, watching as Jayce paid him little heed, her attention on a Zane that was no more than the size of a small boulder.

"Maybe we should keep up?"

Perhaps she prefers his brother's attention over him?

The thought shouldn't be unpleasant, but it was, and he found himself sulking like an adolescent. Not sure why, he'd never been jealous of any attention a female gave Zane over him, whether they were both fucking her or not. That he was feeling like a shunned schoolboy whose first crush just walked past without looking in his direction, was ridiculous.

When Jayce turned to him, and gave one of her rare, but brilliant smiles, Gavin's disposition lightened immediately, and then darkened when she spoke his brother's name.

"You think it is wise to leave Zane alone?"

"He's a big boy, and quite capable of taking care of himself." He didn't realize his tone was crisp until Jayce gave him a quizzical look. Cool, unwavering eyes scrutinized him up and down. Gavin immediately, although dishonestly--he remained irritated with earlier thoughts--allowed his façade of nonchalance to shine through, because it suited the purpose. It wouldn't do to have Jayce think, and lord forbid speculate, that he gave a damn she might be more interested in Zane.

"Is something wrong?"

Gavin had the audacity to lift his brows in total wonderment, as if he had no idea why she would ask such a question. “No.”

“Oh. You seemed...agitated for some reason.”

“If my tone was brusque, I apologize. I'm unaccustomed to this sweltering heat, and perhaps it's affecting me adversely.” He glanced at Jayce, and then turned his attention to the wide expanse of land rolling before them like a blanket of hard packed sand with sparse greenery and dry tumbleweed. Periodically, the landscape would rise, as malformed boulders and looming mountains materialized, before flattening again. Then he turned back to Jayce to find her still staring at him skeptically.

She smiled again, and Gavin swore the sun brightened by twenty degrees.

Damn she is pretty.

“The heat does take some getting used to. Where are you from that the sun doesn't shine so bright?”

“I travel abroad a lot, but my home is in Europe.”

“Ah, that explains your refined speech, and odd--*different* mannerisms.”

She tried to put it delicately, and Gavin gave her credit for that. He grin, letting her know he didn't take offense at being described as an oddity. Truth be told, today he dressed as a cowboy in denim, cotton shirt, and a wide brim hat. But, honestly, he didn't feel as comfortable in the easy clothing as when he wore dinner attire, a crisp white shirt, and felt the knot of a caveat tied at his throat.

“I didn't mean to insult you. I apologize if I did.”

“I'm not easily offended, but you said nothing offensive as far as I'm concerned.”

“It's just five minutes in your company, and anybody would realize you weren't raised in a small town around these parts. Most children don't go to school. Especially the boys if needed to work the farm, and even then, the educational system doesn't exceed the eighth

grade level. Schoolmarms teach the basics; reading, writing, and arithmetic. Certainly not French.”

“Yet, you know that I do speak the language fluently, because you heard me speaking to Zane? Therefore, I'm making the assumption you have been exposed to the dialect at one time or another to understand it is French?”

If spending six months in the company of a Frenchman who had a perchance for gambling, strong whiskey, and saloon girls counted?

“I don't speak French, but I have been around someone who did. I didn't even attend school past the fourth grade. I do travel a lot, though never to other countries, but I would certainly like the adventure. Hopefully, one day I will get further then the wilds of Texas, and its surrounding states.” Her voice sounded whimsical.

“You appear to be well spoken, given your admission about your education. It surprises me to hear you say such.”

“I have the belief that knowledge is power. I read everything I can get my hands on. I have learned many things by reading what others have experienced and written about.”

Gavin looked at her. “Then you are to be commended for a job well done, darling.”

Was she blushing at the compliment? Good lord, she hoped not.

“Why do you keep calling me darling? It's an endearment I'm not accustomed to being referred to,” Jayce said.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Jayce didn't respond for a long time, and then finally said, “I wouldn't actually describe it as uncomfortable, but I find it highly strange that you would easily toss out the word. You don't know me.”

Gavin looked at her perceptively before responding. “That sounds like a warning.” A slight grin curved his lips. “Duly noted. But, on the contrary, to what you think, I'm not one to carelessly assign endearments that I don't think are suitable. Darling, Lovely, Sweetling--all bynames fit you well, Jayce.”

He didn't elaborate as to why he thought this, and Jayce didn't ask. She changed the subject, because she thought it safer to change the topic. She asked, "Japanese or Chinese? Sometimes I get regions confused."

"Anglo father and Chinese mother."

"Oh, that sounds like an interesting story."

Gavin didn't normally provide details of his heritage, so it surprised him when he openly shared with Jayce. It seemed natural.

"My father along with thousands of others went to Sutter's Mill Colona during the California gold rush. The lure of obtaining quick wealth piqued his curiosity. With the clothes on his back, and little else, except hopes and dreams. He tried his hand at panning." He scan the horizon again for signs of any movement outside of Zane's before he continued. "Americans, Europeans, Chinese, Australians, all types of people from every walks of life became what is noted as forty-niners." He paused, and looked over at Jayce to see her hanging on his every word. Odd that. Contrary to most females when Gavin attempted to engage in a decent conversation--when he was in the mindset to talk, which didn't happen very often in the presences of a luscious body--Jayce appeared genuinely interested in what he had to say.

Most females were interested in one thing, and that was being fucked. Not that he'd ever taken offense, but being able to have an intelligent discussion with someone who wasn't absorbed in her own selfish needs was refreshing.

"My mother was an immigrant who followed her family to California when her father settled there, and offered his services to the hundreds of thousands of settlers who came to make their fortunes. My grandfather did laundry to make a living."

"And that afforded you a decent education in Europe?"

"No, hardly. My father apparently was enamored with what he called a little ball of fire...Jiao; dainty and lovely. He married her when she was fourteen, and I was conceived years later after several

difficult and failed births. When they moved back to Texas, the first winter my mother died from the lung disease.”

“I’m sorry.”

Gavin shrugged matter of fact. It wasn’t that he didn’t care for his mother, but he never really knew her. He was young when she died, and what memories he did have faded over the years. “I’m recanting stories my father told me, because I don’t actually remember things about my mother.” He turned to Jayce. “What about you?” He saw her stiffen, and wondered why. “Care to share your past?”

“Not particularly.” Her lips were tight, pursed as if to speak of yesteryears was taboo.

“Did I hit a nerve?”

“Nope.”

Gavin arch his brow. “*Au contraire*...perhaps I did? Was your upbringing so distasteful you wish to forget it?”

“I prefer not to discuss my past.”

“You did open the door on this topic.” He reminded her. “That, and at the expense of being impolite, I’m afraid my curious nature tends to get the better of me.”

“That are you are just plain nosey.”

Her words made Gavin grin. He didn’t relent, though. He said, “You are obviously of mixed heritage, but if you tried you could easily pass for Anglo if one didn’t observe too closely. And you avoided the sun. It darkens your skin, and makes it appear like warm butter rum.”

“I don’t try to pass for anything except what I am,” Jayce mumbled, noncommittal. Refusing to add further details.

He didn’t think it was polite to insist she answer his question, and Gavin respected that. However, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t circle back later and appease his curiosity. He was tenacious like that. Besides, and this was an oddity, which he thought very insane, but for the first time he actually wanted to know about a female past the point of her talents in bed.

When she wouldn't elaborate on her heritage, Gavin took the opportunity to observe the striking beauty more closely. Hair the color of chestnut with streaks of auburn fell like silky streamers down her back, almost to her waist. The gentle breeze caught and lifted the strands causing it to flutter about her slender neck. Naturally, her blushed cheeks were high, skin dewy as a newborn babe, and a full mouth added to her allure. Doe-shape eyes the color of moss, but dulcet, and not a harsh hue, were brilliant regardless of day or night, he'd noticed. The color remained the same, sparkling, and drew his attention because of the sheer luminous affect that made him feel as if he stared into a shimmering pool of emerald water.

Casually, as he'd done countless times before, Gavin looked over the full figure of the luscious frame. Remembering how the soft flesh molded against his body sent signals straight to his cock, and he felt himself swell.

The arousal was damned uncomfortable sitting astride a horse. He forced his thoughts to more mundane things in an attempt to settle the lustful urges.

"Since you have gone silent on me, darling, I will fill the void. If you don't mind? My father liked women, and apparently, there didn't seem to be any discrimination in his choices. He just loved women. I know little about Zane's mother, except that she was a full-bloodied Comanche who migrated to Texas with a band of Indians and settled somewhere near the land my father owned. The details from there are sketchy, non-existent."

Thankful they were discussing something other than her past, Jayce quickly asked a question. "It's obvious you and Zane have been reared with a gentlemen's upbringing. You said your father lived in Texas, so how did you get from here to Europe?"

"At the expense of boring you with a long tedious story, you will receive the shortened version. Is that alright with you, Jayce?" She nodded. "When Zane and I were of age our father sent the both of us to be educated in a boarding school in Europe. He feared we were too

wild, and on the verge of becoming heathens, as he so eloquently put it,” Gavin said. He paused to scan the area around them before continuing. “The school's admission only required money. Their interest in whether my father could afford the enormous tuition was paramount, rather than the fact both Zane and I are of mixed heritage. We were treated fair enough, and educated as any other white male, and reared with a gentlemen's practice.”

“Most people in these parts can barely make a meager living off their farms. Your father must have been wealthy to provide such a fine education.”

“Perhaps lucky is a better description. I think I mentioned he was a forty-niner, but the difference is he actually found gold, staked his claim, and had the sense enough to hold on to his fortune. Sin and wickedness was abundant in mining towns. Thievery, murder, and a lot of gambling that sadly caused most men to lose what they gained in one night of bad bets.”

Purposely she made the next statement to see his reaction. “I like to gamble. In fact, I enjoy it so much I've spent most of my life at one game table or another.” She looked at Gavin. “Do you find that offensive?”

“I try not to pass judgment on what someone decides to do with their life. There are so many paths sometimes. I am sure it boggles the mind. Then, sometimes a person is required to make certain choices for survival's sake. I'm not crass enough to think Zane and my education in Europe is common. Especially, given we are of color.” He paused before saying, “That, and frankly, it is none of my business. Though, I have seen a man lose his entire fortune in one night, and it's disconcerting. I'm a firm believer that one must be responsible for their own actions, as well as be willing to accept the consequences.” He looked at her pointedly.

“What drives you, Gavin?” She had no idea where the question came from. It just popped inside her head.

Gavin searched the horizon again, comfortable that everything was quiet, he turn his attention to Jayce. A devilish grin cross his mouth. "Being successful in getting a certain female to answer my nosiness."

"Ah, so we are back to my past?"

"I rarely circumvent a conversation that intrigues me. Is your father white?"

Jayce glance at him, inhaled, and slowly released her breath. "Yes. He owned my mother," she mumbled.

"Is your mother free?"

"Yep, she's dead," she said, somberly, and then turned her attention away making it clear she was finished with the topic of discussion.

Two quick shrill whistles filled the quietness when their conversation lapse.

Gavin straightened in the saddle, and then pressed his knees into the flanks of the mount, spurring the horse into a gallop.

Jayce was right there, and moved up alongside Gavin.

She shouted over the sound of the horse's hooves clomping against the ground. "What is it?"

"Zane's in trouble."

Chapter 8

An eruption of gunfire surrounded the area by the time Gavin and Jayce arrived in the narrow clearing that was nestled between mountains on one side and a cluster of trees and overgrown brush on the other.

Gavin could see Zane huddled behind a large tree. Bullets were pinging off the trunk, splintering wood, and sending shards of bark flying.

Before his horse stopped, Gavin dismounted, and then grabbed Jayce around the waist pulling her off the saddle. He ran toward large boulders, and pressed them back against the stone wall.

He raised his head, and caught Zane's attention.

Zane raised his hand to indicate he thought there were at least eight men.

Gavin nodded, and then settled back down. He withdrew his gun, and turned to tell Jayce to keep her head low. He lost his breath seeing her inching upward, guns aimed.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" He snatched her arm none too gently, and jerked her back down beside him.

Jayce rolled her eyes dramatically. "Don't try to coddle me, Gavin. I have two guns because I know how to use them. They are not ornaments, you know."

Gavin looked at her as if she was off her rocker. He ignored the ridiculous statement. "Stay back, and keep your head down. That's an order."

"Yeah, well I never learned to follow commands very well," Jayce said, and then started firing.

“Damn you, hard-headed woman!” Gavin cursed, using all types of unsavory expletives that he didn't care may have offended a female's sensibilities. Not that Jayce seemed phased in the least by his colorful remarks.

“You can spank me later,” Jayce said, and then let go a hell of gunfire. “Two down, and six to go.”

Her aim was impressive, she hit two marks, but that didn't mean he wasn't pissed. Gavin gritted his teeth. His nostrils flared, and then he throttled his temper.

“Oh!” Jayce yelp when he grabbed her arm and yanked hard until she fell, and her butt hit solid ground.

“Are you insane!” Gavin shouted. “I'm not playing, Jayce. Stay...put.”

“If I needed you to cosset me, which I do not, I would be in hysterics, all distraught, like most females put in this situation, but as you can see I'm not. I know how to handle myself, Gavin. Get over your innate nature to take control. Now, do you intend to sit there and let me save your brother's butt by myself or what?”

“I swear you are crazy.”

Jayce grinned, not confirming or denying. She raised her guns, got off two more shots, offering a break in return fire. This helped Zane break free from where he was holed up.

Zane ran toward them, zigzagging, intentionally creating a harder target. He raced toward Gavin and Jayce, who were both offering cover by repeatedly firing, causing the men shooting to duck low and temporarily cease firing.

The first thing Zane did when he reached Jayce's side was grab her arm, move her back, and then he shouted. “Are you insane?! Do you want to get shot?”

“Do you?” She retorted, letting Zane know she thought his question ridiculous.

Zane threw up his hand in frustration. He turn to Gavin.

“As soon as I entered the alcove they started shooting. If it wasn't for the reflection of metal...one of the guns, maybe a belt buckle, something catching my eye I would be dead.”

Gunfire exploded, splitting the rock, sending shards of stone raining over their heads.

Both Gavin and Zane returned fire.

Jayce rose to do the same, but the scathing looks on the brother's faces, made her slouch low, and sulk instead.

“If it was a sheriff's posse, they would have at least, by law, asked you to surrender nicely,” Gavin said it cynically.

“That's what I figured,” Zane said.

“Why would lawmen be after you?” They ignored her question.

A barrage of bullets zinged off the stone.

Zane returned fire, hitting two gunmen.

Gavin helped him out, killing two more.

Jayce just sat there glowering at both men who seemed oblivious to the rise in temperament that was bordering on fury frothing at the surface.

Gavin read Jayce like an open book. “We are gentlemen, it's our position to protect a lady. Calm down, Cheri.”

She narrowed her eyes at Gavin before petulantly interjecting between clenched teeth. “Don't you *dare* tell me to calm down! Three guns...four,” Jayce said motioning to the two guns in her hands, “is better than two!”

“Not that I'm discounting such, Jayce, but I don't care to see that pretty head harmed.” He didn't mean it to be condescending, but it was clear Jayce took the comment that way. He held up his hands in mock surrender, but kept them close to his chest. He smiled. “Truce, darling. For now.”

“Damn, I lost count. How many remain?” Zane said.

“One maybe two.” Gavin said. “But, it's awfully quiet. Maybe the rest have given up, and high tailed it out of here to gather more reinforcements.”

"I prefer if they were all dead," Zane said.

"That doesn't mean more won't come after us. Sheriff Grimes isn't going to sit on his hands, and let us escape."

Jayce looked at Gavin, eyeing him skeptically. "You have lawmen after you? Why?"

"When you divulge why you are out here alone willing to face imminent dangers, I might consider confiding in you. I have tried to reason it out in my head, but I keep coming up with the same answer. You put yourself in a perilous situation because you had to. Why? You in trouble, darling?"

She remained mute, refusing to respond. She pressed her lips together, and turned away letting Gavin inadvertently know he'd inquired about another sensitive topic.

"We can discuss it later," he said, matter of fact, letting her know there was no room for brokering.

Jayce didn't see it like that. "When pigs fly!" she snapped.

Gavin turn away from Jayce, and looked at his brother. "You think it might be Foley? An ambush would be something the low-life snake would do."

"I considered such, but I can't really say unequivocally it's him."

"You possibly have a sheriff after you, and now an enemy? Just how much trouble are you two in?"

Neither brother even considered answering Jayce's question, and it infuriated her. Without thinking, she stood up abruptly, ready to storm away, and leave the pig-headed men.

"Jayce!" Gavin roared. He was on his feet in a millisecond, but it was too late.

A shot rang out.

Gavin's stomach clenched seeing Jayce grab her shoulder, and then fall backward. He caught her before she hit the ground.

Zane made sure his brother had Jayce secured, before he aimed, and put a bullet in the chest of the man who had fired.

* * * *

The man pressed his back into the side of the mountain. He seethed with fury, watching as they escaped--again.

“Oh, death by the men who track you would be so much easier, I'm almost delighted you didn't die. That will be my pleasure.” The lurking shadow glared as Gavin carried his bitch to safety. His ever faithful brother on his heels.

He wanted nothing more than to reveal himself, spring like a 'gotcha', and bring down the mighty Banner brothers, but he forced himself to remain still.

The brother's time was coming. Now that their bitch had joined them, he had no recourse but to kill her. The notion made the shadowy figure tremble with anticipation of seeing Jayce withering beneath him, as Gavin and Zane looked on unable to do a damn thing about it. Then after he took his pleasure, he delighted in the fact the brothers would watch him put a bullet in her head.

Chapter 9

"I can walk," Jayce protested. It fell on deaf ears.

Gavin dismounted, and then stalked over to the clearing by the water's edge, before he stopped, and then laid her down.

"It's a flesh wound, for God sake," Jayce said, and then to prove her point she started to sit up.

"Stay...put," Gavin said, between clenched teeth. Then he went to the stream, withdrew a cloth from his pocket, and soaked it in the water.

"Jesus, he's acting like I'm on my death bed." Jayce made to move, but Zane loomed over her like a sentry. She settled back down.

Gavin stomped back over to where Jayce was laying, dropped to his knees, and methodically started working on the wound. He ripped her sleeve open, examined where the bullet hit, and then gently pressed the cool cloth to the slight welt forming where the skin was scraped open. It wasn't serious, but the thought that the wound could have been made him set his teeth. When he was satisfied, he looked up at Zane. "It's a flesh wound," he announced.

Jayce slapped her forehead theatrically. "Really?" she said, sardonically. "You don't say?"

"I'm not in the temperament for your sassy mouth, Jayce. Close...it." Gavin meant it. He discarded the soiled cloth, tossing it away. Then without saying another word, he stalked away from them.

Jayce watched him leave before looking at Zane. "Whew...he is pissed."

"You could have been killed," Zane said, and then opened a jar of salve and generously applied it to the wound.

“He cares?” Jayce uttered, dryly, as if the notion seemed incomprehensible.

“Of course Gavin cares. *We* care. What do you take us for? Insensitive brutes that would stand by idol, and watch a woman get shot, and it not effect us? We deserve a little more merit, Jayce. More appreciation then you obviously give us credit for.”

“It's just a flesh wound,” she said, instead of offering a profuse apology for acting like a ninny.

“If that is your way of saying you apologize it's unacceptable. To me, and I am sure Gavin as well. What you did was foolish, and irrational, and if you expect either my brother or me to accept your impetuous actions that might put you in harm's way again, I'm afraid you have misjudged us.” He walked away without a backward glance.

She felt thoroughly chastised. “Well, hell.” Now, she had gone and done it. Her actions were very immature--not to mention foolish. She could have gotten killed--and she knew it. As she figured the thing to do was apologize to both Zane and Gavin.

They care, Jayce thought, whimsically. Briefly, knowing better then to put anything into the statement except a gentlemen's propriety--their upbringing required they give a damn.

Sitting up, Jayce resigned herself to do what she must. She was wrong, and woman enough to admit it. Just as she knew the proper thing to do and that is apologize.

* * * *

He heard Jayce approach, but refused to face her. Gavin stayed focused on the distance, nothing in particular, but he swore if he turned around he was going to wrap his fingers around that little sassy bit's neck. She had him that furious. It had nothing to do with her childish antics, but because he was still trying to calm his nerves. A fresh wave of trepidation cursed through Gavin's body at the thought

of what-ifs. Jayce came dangerously close to getting killed. That thought alone made his gut spasm.

“I made my apology to Zane, and he readily accepted.”

“If that is your expectation with me, Jayce, I'm afraid you have sorely miscalculated matters.”

“I don't grovel.”

Gavin smirk, shaking his head. “Now, why doesn't that surprise me, *Cheri*?”

“If you are upset with me, but continue to call me darling, I'm encouraged.”

Jayce's pretense at humor did not bode well with Gavin. His tone came out more brisk than intended, but he didn't feel contrite. “Don't misconstrue the facts. The use of *darling* allows me to refrain from referring to you by another name that would better suit your earlier action. Albeit, probably offend your sensibilities.”

She stiffened her spine. “I have been on my own since I was fourteen. When I worked the potato fields until the skin peeled off the tips of my fingers and my nails split from digging in the hard soil, all while fighting off the advances of a lecherous overseer, I heard enough slurs to last me a lifetime. After I had enough, I started making a way for myself. On my own, I decided to start a gambler's life. My father had it in his blood, so I suppose it came naturally.” She stepped around to take Gavin head on. She stared at him boldly. “I have been in every backward town saloon in this territory. The drinking and whoring is a natural way when you live your life by the fall of the cards. I've had men say things to me--slurs, nasty innuendos, frank speaking that might curl a woman's toes--but, I learned to let distasteful words roll down my back like an oil-slick pelt. I doubt anything you call me or say will bother me in the least. Feel free to get it off your chest.”

Cool, unwavering eyes looked down at Jayce.

She took a step back.

Gavin furrowed his brows. By her action, it was obvious she actually thought he meant to strike her. The thought sickened his stomach.

“My God, do you think I would actually put my hands on you in a violent manner?”

Jayce jutted up her chin, and squared her shoulders. “I’ve been knocked around a time or two. Men tend to do that when I’ve upset them. Sometimes just because.”

Pure red flashed across Gavin’s eyes. That she would be so casual about abuse. He knew it was common, and even accepted behavior for a man to beat his wife, but that didn’t mean he agreed with the offensive and cowardly behavior. The thought Jayce confessed someone beat her before made him grit teeth tight. His hands clenched into fist at his sides. The burn started in his stomach again.

He stepped up to Jayce, and captured the slender column of her throat between his hands. He applied enough pressure to feel the erratic pulse beating. Ever so slowly, delicately, strumming fingers moved along the satiny skin over the column of her neck. Then he moved a thumb upward until he forced Jayce to raise her chin.

Mesmerizing hazel and green fire collided, and then simmered to glowing embers, as they stared at one another. Gavin inhaled, but otherwise simply concentrated on Jayce.

“Are you trying to decide if you are going to choke me?”

“I should for what you did. You scared the hell out of me, Jayce. I don’t like feeling that way. Understand?” Whispy soft, fingers caressed. Then Gavin said, “Nor does Zane, but he wouldn’t admit it.”

“On the contrary, your brother gave me a thorough tongue lashing before accepting my apology.”

“You deserve it...and more.” When he didn’t get a snappy retort, he seriously wondered if she’d lost her touch. Gavin arch his eyebrows. “What? No sassy comment? I admit it defies logic, and baffles me, darling.”

"Maybe I know I need to save the shoot back until after I hear all the unsavory things you want to call me."

Gavin grinned, and then wrapped a hand around the nape of her neck. He pulled Jayce closer until her breasts flattened against his frame. "Okay, darling, if you insist on seeing me shed my propriety, and want to see my ungentlemanly ways, so be it."

"Ahh...so sweet of you."

Gavin's voice was coolly reserved, dispassionate. "I'm far from being sweet, Jayce. Don't make the mistake of thinking such, because I would never put my hands on you in a brutal way. However, that doesn't mean I don't have a way of dispatching punishment when it is due."

Jayce narrowed her eyes at him. "That...sounds like a threat."

"It is," Gavin said. Then before he lost himself in sparkling depths, he added. "If you ever and I mean *ever* act like a recalcitrant child again in my presence, because you obviously have an issue with authority--something I behoove you to work on with haste--I will punish you. Understand?" His words final, he crushes his lips to hers, and kisses the luscious mouth with an untamed demand.

Breathless, Jayce finally responded. "You call that harsh?" She smiled, impishly. "I do feel thoroughly...punished."

Her smile was beguiling, and sent a rush of something primal shivering through Gavin that settled straight in his cock.

A devious grin curved his mouth. "You want to be punished, darling? My brother and I have a most unconventional way of seeing that a naughty lady behaves while in our company. Care to experience it firsthand?" He raised a brow, questioningly. The offer was sexually charged, full of mystery, and he knew it piqued a gambler's heart to take a chance.

Indecision surfaced for an instant, and then Jayce decided to go with it. One, because the narrow miss on her life was frightening, but she would never admit that to either brother. Second, curiosity got the better of her. And true to nature, the gambler inside was willing to

throw caution to the wind, and see just what the Banner's brother had up their sleeves. Third, and she admit this was by far the most enticing--she wanted to experience the primrose path that only the twin pleasures could provide.

"Punish me," she said, breathless.

* * * *

By the time Zane joined them he had some catching up to do. Gavin was naked. Jayce was too, and spread over the grass with her derriere in the air, and her stomach pressed into the ground.

Gavin looked up at his brother. "Jayce agrees she's been naughty, and desires to be punished. Isn't that right, darling?" When she didn't respond quickly enough, he delivered a slap to her ass. He knew the firm pat didn't hurt--that was not the intention, but knew the feel of his open hand popping her ass added a wicked thrill. "That was a question, and requires an affirmative answer, darling."

Jayce look over a shoulder with narrowed her eyes. "Yes." Now, she understood what *punishment* meant--obedience.

"Ah...so compliant," Gavin said. He leaned forward and licked the enticing earlobe. "Thank you, sweetling."

Zane undressed, and sat down beside Jayce. His hands mapped the silky contours of her back until he reached the swell just before her ass. Teasing, he stroked his fingers over the full globes. Then bent low, and washed his tongue over a cheek.

"Nice. Quite delectable," he said, and then looked at Jayce. "Punishment means you will suffer. You do understand that, don't you?"

"It's starting to sink in," Jayce mumbled.

Zane patted her butt. "Just so we have an understanding," he said. Then as an afterthought added, "Although, looking at this luscious ass pleasingly displayed, I'm not sure who will suffer the most."

“That sounds cryptic,” Jayce said. “And suspicious.”

Gavin explained his brother's words. “We are aching to fill you with cock, fuck that sweet pussy of yours until there is no more cream to release. But, a measure of restraint will be required, if your punishment isn't to be superficial.”

The heated words, explicitness, was so unlike Gavin's normal polite dialogue, and seemed out of place with his gentlemen etiquette it was strange to hear him talk like that--but, exciting as hell.

A ripple of red-hot sensations washed over Jayce. The salacious words awakening her body to a lustful, heightened status that made her pussy spasm in anticipation.

Zane's next words magnified the insatiable desires. “And then, after you are wrung dry, being the gentlemen we are, you will be allowed to recuperate.” He bent low, lashed out, wickedly teasing the crease of her ass. He said, “Then the games begin again. We are going to fuck you until we all expire from the pleasure.”

“Shall we begin?” Gavin said. He moved around until the tip of his cock met Jayce's lips. “Obedience is a virtue. I think I alluded to that point earlier. Open your mouth. I want you to suck me...and swallow.”

Jayce wrinkled her nose. “I thought we were going to work on the swallow part?”

“We are, darling.” The bulb of the head pressed forward, gliding passed teeth and tongue. “Ah...your lips are so full and firm. Designed for fellatio. Suck me.”

Jayce did as instructed. Taking the full breadth of the stalk, she greedily accepted the cock. She relished in the feel of tingling sensations on her tongue, as Gavin thrust with leisurely plummets. Then he increased the tempo, and began a hedonistic rhythm of fucking her mouth.

Gavin closed his eyes, and became absorbed in the moment of feeling the incredible snugness band around his cock.

Zane had moved, and spread her legs wide. Gently, two fingers eased inside the soaked passage.

In a matter of minutes, Jayce was moaning, wiggling about, greedily thirsting while the cock slavishly ravaged her mouth, and Zane did wonderful things between her thighs.

The brothers were artisans at bringing her body to the height of desire. Jayce went wild, moaning, pushing back to feel more of the two fingers fucking inside her pussy. She shamelessly slurped and licked the hardened length inside her mouth. Jayce couldn't get enough. Pre-cum seeped and filled the cavity mingling with saliva, and made her taste buds dance.

Gavin churned his hips, picked up the tempo, and then abruptly withdrew.

"Why did you do that?" Jayce said.

A mischievous grin showed. Gavin said, "I was about to cum," he said, casually ignoring the look of frustration on Jayce's face.

"I thought that's what you wanted."

"It's what you wanted too, isn't it, Jayce? To feel my seed fill your mouth. To taste me?"

Jayce looked frustrated, but refused to admit what Gavin said as true or not.

Zane chuckled, and then withdrew as well. This furthered her exasperation, but both brothers seemed oblivious that she was displeased. That or perhaps they didn't care. This was her punishment, after all.

The brothers switched positions. In a matter of minutes, Jayce had a new cock in her mouth, and seemed delighted with that fact. As she did with Gavin, she became a greedy minx.

She was into the moment, but temporarily distracted when she felt something slick glide over the crease of her ass. She tried to look over her shoulder to see what Gavin was up to, but Zane wouldn't allow it. He kept his cock steadily plunging. His palms place firmly on the top of her head, guiding the motion he desired.

“On your knees, darling, so I can get to your rosebud.” Gavin waited until Jayce obeyed.

“Nice ass, all round and smooth.” He patted the plumpness. “Made for fucking.”

Jayce withdrew, the cock popped free. “Excuse...me?”

Gavin gave her a feral look. “I don't recall stuttering. Did I?” he looked at his brother.

“I heard you clearly,” Zane said.

“Wait a minute...” Jayce started, and then inhaled sharply. She went down on her haunches; she trembled feeling the slick tip of Gavin's tongue penetrate the crease of her ass.

“Oh!”

“Push back for me, Jayce. Put your mouth back on my brother's cock. He is waiting.”

Jayce glared over her shoulder, to Gavin's amusement. Then she followed his orders. Rising, balancing flattened palms on each of Zane's thighs, she began to suck again.

Gavin felt her quiver when he parted her thighs, eased open the snug crease with deft fingertips, and then without warning inserted a smooth wood, phallus-shape peg between the folds, passed the puckered resistance, forging ahead forcing the tightness to distend and accept the dildo.

The makeshift cock firmly in place, Jayce rolled onto her back. Zane straddled her chest. He was careful to keep his weight from crushing Jayce. He asked Gavin for the oil. He smoothed it over the full breasts, coating her nicely, and then gathered the fullness between his large palms and created a crevice. With an easy slide, his cock moved between the fold of breasts and over the nipples. Rocking, he worked his dick back and forth in an ebb and flow.

Whenever his cock came within licking distance, he instructed Jayce to swirl her tongue over the crown.

“God, your mouth is sweet. Sinfully hot...suck me,” Zane said, and then raised enough so Jayce could hold the bulb between her lips. “Sweet--fuck!”

Jayce felt her legs being raised, and then her knees bent into position. The next thing she knew Gavin was working the appendage inside her ass, while the heat of his mouth devoured.

She sucked air through her nostrils, and gulped Zane's cock when she felt the sybaritic havoc of a quick tongue work back and forth over her swollen clit. She moaned, squirmed about, and then locked her thighs on Gavin's face almost suffocating him.

With gyrations, she started pushing her pussy against his mouth, silently begging for more...then more. She wanted it all, and wasn't ashamed to let Gavin know it. If Zane's cock wasn't impeded so deeply she would have shouted the demand.

She needed to come.

Finally, unable to take the pressure building inside her pussy, she pulled away from Zane, and pleaded to be fucked.

“Please--now!” She cried out, trembling.

Gavin didn't stop what he was doing, but took his own sweet time releasing her. By the time he did, Jayce was nothing but a withering form.

“Fuck me,” she said, breathing hard. “I can't take it anymore.”

“I don't know, Zane, do you feel as if our treat has been sufficiently taught a lesson?”

“We can only take her word for it.”

Gavin moved up beside Jayce so he could see her face. “Have you had enough, darling?” Jayce nod, shaking. “A lady would not lie.”

“I swear,” Jayce gasped. Zane was rubbing his cock over the tips of overly sensitive nipples, raking the rigid length around the aureoles. He stopped to tease the other nipple with the head of his shaft leaving a coating of cum on her breasts. Then he bent low, and whirled his tongue, cleansing the area. Jayce practically screamed. “I have learned my lesson. I promise.”

Zane's expression was wolfish. "She does sound sincere, Gavin. Do show a little mercy."

Gavin kissed Jayce's mouth. His attention started tentatively, a soft pressing, and then became ravenous when the sweet tongue delved between his lips. He crushed his open mouth against Jayce's, offering his tongue. They French kissed, dueling, lashing wildly, their mouths becoming one cavern of moisture and heat.

Jayce groaned into Gavin's mouth just before he left her, and Zane lips continued the devious assault without missing a beat. His mouth was just as sweet, twice as hot, and unbelievably diabolical.

"It's time, darling. I'm afraid I can't resist the temptation," Gavin said.

She could clearly tell Gavin orchestrated the actions of the dual. As soon as he made the announcement, Zane released her mouth. Shamelessly, she whimpered feeling lonely, as both brothers moved away.

"If you tell me you're not going to fuck me I swear I'll get my guns. Two--one for each of you!" Jayce threatened.

"There is no need for violence, sweetling. We do aim to please. A moment of patience, if you will," Gavin said.

Jayce's eyes slit, scrutinizing them to see if this patience thing was some sort of way to continue the punishment. She couldn't be sure.

Gavin looked in her direction. Smoldering eyes she could tell were full of lustful thoughts washed over her spread legs. His orders abrupt, close to demanding, and it heated Jayce hearing the authority in his tone. It was odd, unaccustomed to taking orders, she should have been offended, but for some insane reason the firm command made ripples of heat surface.

"Spread your thighs. Show us that delectable pussy we're about to fuck." When Jayce just stared at him, Gavin added in a heated murmur. "That was a demand, Jayce. Open your legs and show us how wet and ready you are for cock. Amuse yourself...Ah, that's it. Now, slip a finger or two if you wish, inside. More...deeper."

It wasn't as if she hadn't taken care of matters when lustful need came over her, and she was alone. But, fingering herself while Gavin and Zane watched added a wanton air that she found more wicked and gratifying.

Within minutes, she had herself at the cusp of release, paid little attention to the two pair of eyes watching as she thrust two fingers inside her pussy, and rubbed the clit with a thumb.

She groaned aloud. Her hips jerked, and then began pumping against her hand.

"I think she is there," Zane said.

"I agree. Shall we?"

Jayne didn't protest when Gavin asked her to remove her hand, because she knew in a matter of minutes what was coming to replace self-love. Anxiously, she waited, as Zane lay back, wrapped an arm around her waist, and then effortlessly pulled Jayne on top. His hands gripped her hips, and then with a swift invasion, the impalement was complete.

She felt Gavin's hand on the small of her back. He gently eased her forward until she lay firmly against Zane's chest. Her legs positioned so that they were locked tight against his side. His rough-soft palms cupped each ass cheek spreading.

Unbelievably, she'd forgotten the thing in her ass was there until Gavin started moving it back and forth in her anus. He worked with slow deliberation, measured strokes. Each thrust distending, scissoring, readying her for something more.

The peg was removed, and then immediately replaced with something hotter--larger.

"Take a deep breath, darling. A little discomfort."

She trembled, inhaled, and then squeezed her arms around Zane's neck, as if she knew to hold on for dear life.

Fingers held the ass cheeks separate, and smoothed the wrinkled hole. Gavin rock his hips until the thickness penetrated, and then

giving little consideration to the untied passage, he indulged the tight channel, driving pass the flex ring, and submerged into heaven.

“Lordy--lordy...” Her words burst pass Jayce's lips, coming out in short pants. Feeling the steel rod forge deeper, and then to the depths of her ass while equal strength churned higher and higher still, on each upstroke.

Their movements were measured, a succinct tempo of driving dual phalluses; Zane rocked his cock up...Gavin drove down...the synchronized motions a hedonistic roll and retreat of magnanimous portions each plundering into the unique portals as one.

It was devilishly insane, and pure wicked. Pleasure coupled with delicious-pain, but welcomed by Jayce. She let her appreciation of the newfound salacious introduction into being fucked by twin pleasures at the same time be known when she swiftly succumbed. She cried out, draping her arms around Zane's neck and riding out the turbulent bliss, before she fell limply against the strong force for support.

The tight feel of the spongy interior stroking his cock, sent Zane over the edge, and into a catalytic release that left him shuddering.

Gavin was a second behind the first two orgasms. His forehead fell against Jayce's back, his tongue licking the arousing tangy taste of the sweaty-dew. Firm fingers held the quaking body. He felt her ass cheeks clench, squeezing his cock in a vice-grip of fire.

The chords in Gavin's back tensed all over, and then in a throaty voice he did something incomprehensible--a first--he shout Jayce's name, as he filled her ass with liquid-heat. All that was male...*a part of his soul?*

When they switched positions, Zane looked at Gavin lifting his brows questioningly. Gavin knew why, but ignored his brother.

Jayce was tuckered from the dual attention, but found herself awakening with need as Gavin's fingers searched between her thighs and found the object of pleasure he sought. He slipped a finger into the depths.

“You are so wet...sweltering and oozing,” he said, whispering the words over Jayce's open mouth. “I want to fuck you again. Are you ready?”

“Uh-huh,” she moaned feeling the rigid length began to coax her ass to spread again and accept the breadth of cock delving between her thighs.

Gavin moved until Jayce lay beneath him. He raised and spread her thighs wide. He paused to reach for the oil, and then generously coated her ass with the slickness. He tossed the jar aside. Then he cupped Jayce's cheeks, and whispered into her mouth. “Do you mind if I fuck your forbidden treasure again. The feel was insanely delicious.” The reticent expression on Jayce's face required him to say, “I will not hurt you, Jayce. The oil and cum has made your ass more receptive. I'll take it slow.”

Jayce stared at him, as if she couldn't decide to relent or not. Gavin said, “Zane, she needs a distraction. If you please.”

“My pleasure.”

Jayce reached up and accepted the cock pressing her lips. She tasted herself, and found it exciting and not obtuse. She gobbled greedily at the head, and then swallowed the entire length.

Zane grunted in satisfaction.

Seeing her sufficiently occupied, Gavin moved forward, prodded through the slight resistance he felt, and then rocked his hips until his cock once again submerged in the tunnel. Undulating hips, he fucked the snug portal that distended and accepted his cock the more turned on Jayce became.

“Jesus--” Gavin swore between clenched teeth. “I'm going to come again...so soon,” he said, as if he believed the feat impossible. His stamina to fuck mindlessly was one of his many accolades with the ladies. Yet, he felt his cock ready to explode.

Then he did it again--he shouted Jayce's name, as spurts of seed erupted into the depths of ass.

Zane quickly followed. He went to jerk his cock free, but Jayce murmured, and greedily sucked it back into her mouth.

He spilled his seed in the willing portal making Jayce's mouth juicy wet.

Gavin having swiftly recovered was back inside Jayce. This time his cock, strong and hard, stroked the quivering pussy until she cried out in release.

Afterwards, they lay in blissful splendor. Jayce entwined around Gavin's body, and snuggled into the warmth. Zane lay behind, holding her, as they lay exhausted, and finally succumbed to slumber.

* * * *

The nefarious shadow stood watching the tempting scene of the three entwined lovers unaware of the perilous situation unfolding. He aimed his pistol. He made the motion as if he was picking the targets off one by one, but he didn't shoot.

"Not yet, but in due time," he whispered.

Chapter 10

“The field of wildflowers are wonderful,” Jayce called over her shoulder, and then rode ahead leaving the brothers behind.

Zane moved next to Gavin, and then waited until Jayce was out of hearing distance. “You want to talk about what happened last night?”

Gavin knew exactly what Zane was referring to, but pretended otherwise. He still wasn't sure what insanity came over him. Never, and it was worth repeating--never had he lost total control. He had been fucking since he was fourteen, and not one time did he ever do something as stupid as call out a name. Not even the first time as an adolescent, overly anxious, and inexperienced did he act so utterly foolish. It just wasn't him. He never lost control--until now.

He felt Zane staring, but Gavin continued to look ahead at the rolling lush green landscape that abruptly gave way to the flat plains of Texas. When a slight breeze occurred, dry balls of tumbleweed rolled by, and bounced over the dust, reminding him of the stark contrast of the land--cactus, leveled earth, and rising mountains completed the picturesque terrain.

Zane was persistent in his interrogation. “Not that I shared every woman you have attended to, but I'm pretty sure last night is probably the first time you were vociferous. Your control surpasses my own, so I'm struggling to decipher what happened.”

“Just because I called out Jayce's name one time doesn't mean anything. Cease trying to make something out of it, and let it go.” His tone was clipped, tight.

“Three times.” Zane corrected him.

Gavin snapped. “I don't recall that being a sin!”

“No, perhaps not, but the reality of it has me reeling. And for lack of a more appropriate explanation, which you refuse to give, I can't help but think your feelings for Jayce might be bordering on--affectionate.”

“That is ridiculous. Stop making assumptions that are unfounded, because I lost myself in the moment. Jayce is delicious, and more accommodating than any female I have ever known. So, I called out her name one...three times while I fucked her. Haven't you ever been with a woman where you forgot yourself?”

Zane's response was swift, and said with conviction. “Not once. Hence, you understand why I'm thinking there is something going on between you and Jayce that you don't care to divulge. But, I know you, Gavin. Therefore, I doubt my speculations, as you so conveniently like to call it, are unfounded.” Zane looked at his brother a long scrutinizing minute. “Do correct me if I'm wrong. Call me a liar.” He dared his brother.

Gavin set his teeth, so tight jaws ached. He glared at his brother, but suspiciously refused to deny or confirm Zane's accusation.

“I'm your brother, Gavin. If you don't feel comfortable confiding in anyone else, surely you know that you can tell me anything and I will not pass judgment either way. Nor will I goad you endlessly, if you confess there is something special happening between you and Jayce,” Zane said, and then grinned. “At least not at first. I would offer you a measure of reprieve due to the seriousness of the nature, but then you would be required to take the ribbing in jest. I'm sure if the circumstances were on the other foot, I'd never hear the end of it.”

“Find amusement at the expense of someone else, because there is nothing going on between me and Jayce except fucking,” he lied.

God, did he lie.

Jayce, what have you done to me? Gavin wondered. Her allure was unbound, and he admitted she tugged at something so deep inside his chest that it scared him. But, he couldn't--or refused--to elaborate on what exactly came over him last night. What he did was

unthinkable, and a major faux pas, to say the least. He admitted as much, but as far as he was concerned, that was as much as he allowed his inner niggling to divulge. Compunction be damned, he couldn't afford to dissect things further until he sufficiently figured matters out for himself. He was in no hurry.

Because Gavin obviously intended to make their conversation difficult, Zane forged ahead at the expense of having his neck snapped. He could see his brother had a difficult time facing the truth. He was fighting it like hell.

"There is one final point I need to make."

Gavin groaned inwardly, rolling his eyes. "If you insist. Do say it, and then cease prattling, will you?"

"If you want Jayce to yourself, all you have to do is tell me. Though, I like Jayce well enough, and I think there is something special about her, I'm not apt to call you out for her attention. If you wish to pursue a monogamous relationship with the lady, I will not hesitate to step aside."

"Thank you for your consideration. Though, I assure you it is not necessary. I like fucking Jayce, she is the most receptive female, as I said before. Otherwise, she means absolutely nothing to me." Again, the lie easily rolled from his lips.

Jayce gasped.

"Fuck." Gavin mumbled, wondering how she sneaked up on their backsides. But she was there. As rigid as a board, and shooting bullets at him. Something inside his stomach grumbled. It was obvious she heard the idiotic lie he told Zane, because he wanted his brother to stop talking.

"I-I circled around to surprise you with these...ah, wild berries I found. I thought they would add a nice treat with supper tonight." Jayce's voice trembled. She sucked in the bottom lip between teeth. Then she plastered a credible smile on her face. "They are not as, ah sweet as I like them..." her voice trailed off, because she was unable

to finish the thread of conversation with the lump forming in her throat.

Gavin moved his horse forward. He stopped in front of Jayce, and seeing the moisture gathering on her lower eyelids made his stomach muscle's tighten. His voice was ultra-low. "Jayce, I didn't mean that last statement like it sounded."

"Like what sounded? I have no idea what you're talking about," she lied.

For an instant Gavin was grateful no explanation was required for his major blunder, because Jayce hadn't heard the falsehood. He would do it, but it was undesirable to have to attend to Jayce's demands with impunity for the rest of their travels. If not, the rest of his life. But, then reality snapped him out of a self-induced fantasy, because he knew damn well Jayce heard everything he said.

"Darling, allow me to explain."

Jayce jut up her chin. She stared at Gavin with unwavering brevity. "There is no need for you to explain if you don't like berries, Gavin. That's...ridiculous."

"Dammit, Jayce, this is not about berries and you know it." He was more upset that Jayce heard the slip of tongue than he was with her.

"So, do you like berries or not?" she asked, calmly.

Gavin throttled his temper. It wasn't her fault he'd said something stupid that obviously upset Jayce. He took the sole blame, because that was the manly thing to do. Albeit, he was pissed that Jayce refused to allow a chance at an explanation or foremost an apology.

"Well, do you like berries, Gavin?" she insisted to know, as if it was the most important decision she needed to hear.

"I like damned berries, okay."

"Great," Jayce said, and then threw the entire bundle in his face. She sat and watched the tiny balls pellet the skin, making it splotchy-red, as some of the ripe fruit burst on contact.

“Sonofabitch!” Gavin exploded, wiping a hand down his face. He looked up, glaring, but the sassy uncontrollable minx was already charging away.

When he made to go after her, Zane made a valid point. “She is hurting. Let her go, and give the lady a moment alone to simmer down. Under the circumstances, I’m sure you would want the same consideration.”

Zane was right, but Gavin didn’t like it. But, he turned his horse around and set off in the opposite direction from where Jayce had ridden off to.

He spurred the Black fast, and then faster still over the landscape. Escaping to nowhere. Needing to go somewhere other than the unnerving reality of his conscious. Fucking had always been fucking. Indiscriminately, one female to the next, sometimes two or three at a time, but regardless his sole pursuit had always been pussy.

Through his lifetime, he had fucked himself silly with casual indifference, and indiscriminately. Constant streams of availability lead to a blasé attitude and boredom. Sometimes, even while staring down in the face of a female, he’d struggled to recall her name.

His sexual conquest had been nothing more than a pastime frolic--until Jayce.

* * * *

“I like fucking Jayce, she is the most receptive female, otherwise she means absolutely nothing to me.”

Gavin’s word echoed insistently, drumming inside Jayce’s head. The pounding of it hurt, as much, if not more, than the cold heartless words.

Once again, she’d gone and done something stupid and fell under a rogue’s spell. It was immature, and a major mistake, because she knew better. Gavin wasn’t the first smooth talking man she’d

encountered, so why his words felt like a swift kick in the gut was beyond Jayce.

It was solely her fault. Jayce was ready to accept the blame, because if she honestly thought about it, Gavin had never promised her anything except mind-numbing pleasure. Something he and his brother undeniably delivered time and again.

She wasn't some immature schoolgirl, so she knew a ménage trios equated to lust, and nothing more. *What else could come from their lust tryst?* From the beginning she realized allowing Gavin and Zane to have her meant the chances of forging a singular relationship with either was impossible. She thought she was fine with that until now. The reality was daunting, hanging over her head like a pendulum--she was falling for Gavin--her stomach twist in knots.

Not a smart thing to do, Jayce.

The culprit of demise was the time she spent alone with Gavin sans Zane. She allowed him to get too close. She shared things with him about her past she'd never told another soul. Gavin never questioned her judgment and accepted her stories. He didn't even question why she lead the life she did, but listened with an understanding, and repressed the need to admonish even the most outlandish of confidences she shared.

She felt comfortable with Gavin. A first, she admitted. She should have just been smart enough to high tail it out of there when she realized their time together was beginning to mean more than taking the next breath. Each time she felt herself drawn toward his appeal, she told herself to leave. Then she would stay--one day rolled into the next--and now a team of runaway horses couldn't drag Jayce to leave Gavin.

While Zane's attention never went beyond sexual escapades, he kept an invisible boundary between them. Gavin--whether intentional or not--consistently drew Jayce into his world. He opened up desires she thought long since dead; hopes, dreams, and whimsical things only silly infatuated young girls conjure up. Not in the sense that he

made empty promises, because that was far from truth, and unlike Gavin's style. Being pretentious didn't seem to be a part of what made him operate, and that was part of the overall attraction.

Maybe it was foolish to live vicariously through someone else, especially a man, but simply being in Gavin's presence, and listening to him freely share adventurous experiences he encountered over the years ignited a yearning in Jayce. Things he told her about foreign travel, unique places, and people he'd seen, other worlds that went beyond the ocean. These things Jayce only read about, and up until experiencing it through the eyes of Gavin, it had all seemed surreal.

She lived a life roaming from one hot, smoky, seedy gaming hall--always at risk of imminent danger, being a woman in a man's world. It was what she knew. Her life had been thrust upon her, survival instincts naturally started, but it didn't mean she was complacent.

Her attraction to Gavin had nothing to do with the hopes of entering his world permanently. That was a folly-thought, a luxury one in her status never considered, but his unconditional acceptance of Jayce Payne, and the life she lived, was how Gavin made her feel special.

At least Zane had the decency to be honest and admit he liked fucking her, and at least held a fondness. While, she meant absolutely nothing to Gavin!

The bastard. She had a mind to return and put a bullet in Gavin's butt. Lord knows she wanted to, but deep down inside the reality burn inside Jayce like a brand.

She could no more hurt Gavin then she could bring herself to do the right thing--run--before her heart was rip apart even more.

With the daunting reality weighing heavily on her shoulders, Jayce turned the horse around to head back to the man she'd hopelessly fallen in love with.

* * * *

Dusk was descending, making the landscape barely visible, as the sun began to fade and the area was overcast in an umbra.

Something in Jayce's peripheral vision caught her attention, while she was contemplating whether to return and face Gavin or go it alone.

A shadowy figure moved in the distance, shrouded by the trees, but Jayce wasn't sure if it was an animal or something else. It was difficult to see as the sun settled.

She stood there a long moment, staring, but she still couldn't figure out if someone or something was watching her, or if it was a figment of her imagination?

Regardless, instinct told Jayce to mount the horse just in case a swift getaway was necessary.

She sat in the saddle clutching the reign in one hand, and another resting on the hilt of her gun.

Something was out there.

Friend or foe was yet to be decided.

She tried to ignore the hairs prickling the nape of her neck.

The horse whined, tossing its massive head back and forth, and began to nervously prance from hoof to hoof, as if it was anxious to put some distance between them and whatever lurked.

"Probably just a cougar, girl." Jayce patted the mare to soothe her. The animal threw back her head, the long mane whipping in the air, and then did something uncharacteristic. The horse began to move without Jayce's prompting.

"Whoa, girl." She pulled back on the reigns making the horse stop.

The sound was there, albeit subtle. Jayce swore she heard a distressed sound. She sat listening, her eyes glued to the nestle of trees where the noise came from. The place she suspected somebody had been only a moment ago was now empty, but the distinct sound of movement, a whimper...perhaps a low growl of an animal trapped by a hunter.

It probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but Jayce headed in the direction of the sound. She withdrew her gun, eased into the overgrown foliage until she came to a small clearing just at the mouth of the trees.

The low-pitch moan sounded again.

Jayce squinted to see through the murky haze of dusk. She scanned and then scrutinized the area where the noise seem concentrated.

Jayce's breath caught in her throat.

No, it couldn't be.

It was impossible. Incomprehensible, and she refused to believe her sight.

Slowly, Jayce urged the mare forward. She broke through the thick brush, forging pass the thicket of foliage until she stood directly in front of the thing responsible for the pitiful mews.

Her heartbeat escalated, and began pounding wildly inside the cavity of Jayce's chest, as she stared at...at--Hugh?

Cautiously, Jayce looked around, and then slowly advanced.

"Oh, my god! Hugh!" She jumped down from the horse, and ran to his side. She grab her friend's face, ignored the feel of the mushy surface, and his skin peeling and sticking to her palm.

"Jesus! Hugh--no!" Desperately, Jayce pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, and held it against Hugh's face to try and keep what little strips of skin remaining in place. "You stubborn, fool!" she cried. "I told you not to follow me."

Hugh tried to grin, but the side of his face was in shreds, so his lips curled crudely.

Jayce's cry of anguish was heart wrenching.

Something had ripped his face raw. Probably an animal. Jayce couldn't be sure, but whatever got to her friend had done a lot of damage, so much she believed death would have been better then suffering.

“Why did you do it? Oh, god...Hugh,” she said, softly. Dulcet eyes filled with tears as Jayce tried to ease some of his discomfort, but it was fleeting to believe Hugh wouldn't die. It was only a matter of time, and Jayce knew his final time would be in her arms. The thought was somber, but she knew if Hugh had to go, he would prefer it be with her by his side.

Hugh was mumbling deliriously.

She struggled to hear.

“What?” Jayce lean closer. He was trying to tell her something, but it was difficult to make out the words.

The attack had been vicious...an eye dangled out of its socket and lay by a thread against a cheek. Part of his nose was missing, and his face was so bloated that she almost didn't recognize him. Blood was everywhere, including the ground all around where her friend was buried up to his shoulders.

Animals wouldn't have done that. That meant somebody had gotten to Hugh first, buried him alive, and then the bastards left him at the mercy of animals.

“Brew--ster,” Hugh uttered.

Jayce stiffened, turning to hard wax. “Wha--” she whispered.

“Brew...” Her friend said the last word before dying.

A twig snap under the weight of boots.

Jayce whirled around, pistols cocked and aimed, piercing into the darkness.

A sigh of relief escaped seeing Gavin and Zane step into the clearing.

“When you didn't return we got worried.” Gavin advanced taking Jayce by the elbow, and helped her to stand. His eyes glanced at the dead man, and then he turned his attention away. The badge tossed carelessly on the ground beside the man didn't go unnoticed. “Who is he?”

“He is...was sheriff of Nowhere, and my friend.” Her voice broke with emotion. “This isn't right. Hugh was a good person, and didn't

deserve this.” She tried to look passed Gavin's shoulder, but he turned her in his arms to block the ghastly view.

Jayce shoved away from Gavin. “It's all my fault,” she cried out. “He came after me--the loving adorable fool thought he could save me,” she said, her voice trembling. “Oh, god...” Jayce fought off Gavin's arms, and took off running.

She ran as fast as she could, and then dropped and buried her face in her hands. The sobs were soul-wrenching, so intense her entire body shuddered, and then she collapsed on all fours, and puked.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but by the time she slowly walked over to where she found Hugh, his body was no longer there.

Zane and Gavin were shoveling dirt over the fresh grave a distant away.

Gavin turned when he heard her approach. “It didn't seem right for a man to be buried in the same grave his murderers put him in. We buried your friend, as deep as we could, but we didn't have much to work with.” He tossed the small shovel he carried aside.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Gavin watched as Jayce walked to the gravesite.

He and Zane moved away to afford a measure of privacy, and Jayce was grateful for their consideration. She wanted her last moments with Hugh to be private.

* * * *

The sinister form stood off in the distance, and watched the pitiful scene with a devious grin on his face.

“Poor, poor, Jayce,” the voice whispered in an ominous, low utterance that carried away on the wind. “You boo-hoo--oh, the suffering you must feel.” The man snickered.

When Gavin and Zane moved about, cold eyes bore into their backs, the very place where he wanted to put a bullet, but he couldn't

chance it. Not yet. Not this time, but the fury bubbling inside him--intense enough to make his body shudder--knew the time and hour of the Banner brother's death was growing near.

The anticipation of the kill made the figure giddy.

His eyes shift back to Jayce who was sobbing like a pitiful fool over a man who couldn't have meant that much to her, because she'd readily left him and fell into the Banner bastard's arms. She filled their nights spreading her legs, and acting the trollop.

"Oh, Jayce, you whore." The man quivered furiously. "You don't know suffering--not yet."

Chapter 11

Rising Moon watched the band of riders discriminately.

Other Indians sat proudly on horseback, staring across the plains, equally interested in the travelers crossing over into their territory.

A young warrior by the elder's side, keenly observed the three riders as they approached. He looked at the males, and ignored them as insignificant before switching his attention to the female, because she interested Hunting Gray most.

The warrior leaned into the elder man's ear, his tone low and firm, but not disrespectful. "The horses appear prime, otherwise they seem to have little of interest to us except the female. That, and they are brazen to cross into our territory." The warrior spoke swiftly in Shoshone dialect.

Rising Moon nod, but otherwise did not respond. Dark eyes continuously assessed the three riders, as they drew closer and came into focus.

The warrior bent the elder's ear again. "We take their horses and the female."

"Perhaps," Rising Moon said, and then raised his hand for silence seeing the impetuous warrior wish to bend his ear further, as he made his interest known. The female was Hunting Gray's primary focus, and the elder could hardly blame the young warrior, as the riders were close enough now that old eyes could clearly see what had the warrior anxious. Even from the distance, Rising Moon could see the pretty girl.

Finally, after a long moment of reflection, Rising Moon spoke giving orders. He watched, as the small party of warriors rode down the mountainside toward the riders in breakneck speed.

The band surrounded the males and female, and it appeared the three didn't intend to put up resistance, though it intrigued him to see the males stop the female from drawing her gun when Hunter Gray made his approach. No doubt, the arrogant, boastful warrior had made his intentions known. The girl did not seem receptive.

Amusement lifted the elder's craggy face, stretching the deep creases that spiked from the corner of his dark eyes, as he watched the scene with interest.

All the warriors circled Gavin, Zane, and Jayce, moving their mounts closer, corralling their captives toward the old man waiting just at the bottom of the hilltop.

The old man moved forward, and the band of warriors parted to allow their leader to enter the inner circle.

Deliberately, Rising Moon remained silent, as he observed the riders. Then he moved his horse forward, and advanced on the males unsure which one was the leader, as both men stood out in front, boldly erect, and watching.

He spoke in his dialect that was comfortable to him. Though he had learned the white-man's language, it was thick and awkward on his tongue.

Zane responded to the question. He spoke fluently in Shoshone. "We don't have a leader amongst us. We travel as equals...passing through this territory. Nothing more."

Zane's words seemed to offend Rising Moon. "A female, an equal?" That caused a brow lift. "You speak Shoshone? Your skin is of our own, but there is white blood that flows in your veins." The elder motioned to Zane's face. "The white-man's eyes...clear sky. The pale skin ways?"

"My mother was a full bloodied Comanche, and my father white. I have chosen to make my way, as my own."

Rising Moon did not respond, but turned his attention to the woman.

Jayce stiffened at the bold assessment.

Gavin sat casually, almost blasé, but very much aware of the perilous situation that could unfold, depending on the Indian's interest.

The elder turned to Zane. He spoke rapidly, and then motioned to Hunter Gray, and let his demands be known.

Zane's tone was firm, but respectful. "The female is not mine to bargain."

Gavin couldn't understand the exchange between Zane and the leader, but he watched the body language closely. The old man was not pleased, and his tone reflected such. The young warrior at his side, turned his mount to the elder, and the infliction of certain words was evident of disappointment, as he spoke.

Rising Moon raised his hand, as if he was weary of the warrior's insistence. He snapped for silence.

Hunter Gray's eyes narrowed at Gavin.

The warrior wants Jayce. Gavin understood that. He clutched the reigns tightly.

"My son wants the female."

"He can have my horse," Zane countered.

Hunter Gray moved his mount to Gavin, pressing forward in an intimidating gesture, but neither horse nor man moved.

The warrior spoke quickly, almost vehemently to Gavin, jabbed his finger at Jayce, and then slapped his chest with an open hand.

"Hell...no." Gavin said.

Zane looked at his brother, and then turned and started to translate, but the old man responded. His English was broken, but his message clear. They would settle the dispute of whom the female would go to by Comanche way.

* * * *

Jayce was biting to speak, but Zane made it clear to act docile, not look the warriors directly in the eye, and let him handle the situation.

As soon as they rode away, and the sound of the horse's riding over the rough terrain was loud enough to muffle her voice, she asked Zane what was going on.

"The warrior is apparently enamored by you," Zane said.

"Meaning?"

"He wants you," Gavin said, clenching his teeth, hissing.

"Well, he can want me all he likes, but he is not going to have me. I don't care what that chief decided." Jayce insisted, and then glared at the warrior's back.

Zane said. "The old man is not a chief. Comanche's rarely act as a cohesive group with a single leader, but at the advice of an advisory group that usually consists of elders who make decisions for the tribe. I'm sure his decision is in the best interest of the clan. But, I am curious why the elder travels with a band of warriors. Perhaps, he has visited with another Comanche unit to discuss the possibility of joining. Sometimes this happens amongst various tribes, sometimes not. There might be the possibility of war between the two tribes, and the elder sent to negotiate. Who knows...times are changing for Indians."

"I appreciate the information, but what does that have to do with the fact that the warrior thinks he can have me even if he wins?" She glanced at Gavin. "Which, he will not, of course. Regardless, I will not go with him either way," Jayce said.

"I told you about some of the Comanche ways to make a point. If these Indians happened to be scavenging, we would more than likely be dead by now. They would have taken our horses, and whatever they wanted, which includes you, Jayce. The elder, for whatever reasoning, made a decision to allow us to settle things their way. That, is a positive."

"I don't like it." Jayce protested.

Gavin remained silent, staring off into the distance.

“Neither do I, Jayce, but this way is probably best. We could have tried to fight our way out of this, but given our location...gunfire might have brought more warriors, and we aren't a match for a band of Comanche bent on protecting their own.”

They crossed over the flat rough range, entered the Bluff Passage, a high land mass of several malformed ridges of different heights enclosing the trail way on all sides. The narrow tunnel required the horses move single file along the passageway until they reached the crest that opened up to an expanse of dry landscape, and a small clear stream on the border that supported trees.

Cone-shaped teepees were covered by tan buffalo skins, with a large pole centered for support, and several hides laid side by side, stitched together, and the opening held back by pen-size wooden skewers. The tops were open, flaps pulled back, and smoke filtered upward through the opening.

The males walked about covered in leggings, loincloths, and bare chest. The females wore deerskin dresses with long sleeves and fringes. The skirts flared wide with decorative hems. Both the males and females wore animal skin moccasins. Some of the male children dressed like the older men, or were naked. The girls resembled the women in dress.

The elder moved into the center of the clearing, and the warriors, Gavin, Zane, and Jayce followed, aware of several pairs of eyes watching them. Strangers weren't uncommon to these Comanche's, not even the white man, because nearby settlers came to trade, so the visitor's appraisal was no more than that of curious onlookers. Within minutes of their arrival, every one went back to their tasks, and ignored the newcomers.

The elder dismounted, and without a word, disappeared into a teepee. He returned minutes later with another man by his side. Gray-white hair blew freely against the dark bronze skin as the older man

walked forward in a slow shuffle. He said something to the warrior, Hunter Gray, and then turned his attention to the three riders.

The man with Rising Moon focused on Zane, and spoke in a thick Shoshone monologue. He seemed to be asking many questions, and was very animated using dialogue and hand gestures to get his point across. When he finished, he walked away, as if further conversation was not necessary. He left them mounted in the center of the clearing, and returned to the teepee with the first elder, the warrior, and the other men who had joined them.

Gavin and Jayce waited until the conversation ended, and the two elders disappeared before they turned to Zane for an interpretation.

"They are going into further council."

Gavin looked at his brother. "I thought the decision had been made?"

"The first elder is called Rising Moon. The one I just spoke with is even older than him, if that is possible, but regardless he believes further consideration should be discussed before it is decided whether or not you will fight for Jayce with her suitor, Hunter Gray." Zane paused before finishing. "Apparently, this tribe knows my relatives, or at least distant members on my mother's side of the family."

"What?" Gavin said.

"The old man asked me several specific questions about my heritage, and when I mentioned my mother's name and her tribe, as best I can remember from what father told me, the elder spoke to Rising Moon. Apparently, there is some concern, somehow, it would be not be wise to offend me, as my mother's tribe is the very one Rising Moon just tried to negotiate with. Interesting."

Gavin looked dumbfounded. "Are you serious? He is speculating, of course. How could he possibly know anything about you to the extent he would care if your mother's tribe is offended? You are a mix-breed, and that was a long time ago."

"I can't really explain it, Gavin, but the Comanche are furiously loyal to the ancestry and history of their elders. What they don't recall

through an exceptional memory is captured and depicted in tales, and then shared with future generations. It is important a young Comanche is aware of his heritage. Comanche's take their history seriously, and each young warrior must know the Comanche's past before they are allowed to perform the rite of passage into adulthood. 'To not know where you come from, it is impossible to know where your destiny is headed.' A Comanche adage they apparently take very seriously."

Jayce looked at Zane. "So, what do we do?"

"We wait," he said, and then dismounted.

Since no uproar erupted from any of the warriors watching them started when Zane dismounted, Gavin and Jayce did the same.

Minutes passed before the warrior Hunter Gray emerged from the teepee with a sour expression on his face. He walked up to Jayce--Gavin stepped into his path--the warrior pushed pass and faced Jayce. Gavin made to interfere, but Zane cautioned him not to.

Hunter Gray spoke to Jayce, but she had no idea what he was saying, but whatever it was, he insisted she respond.

"He wants you to make a choice. Apparently, the elders have left the decision up to you. That is odd in itself; females are rarely given the consideration to choose a husband."

Jayce's mouth flew open at the word *husband*.

Gavin's nostrils flared.

When Zane saw Gavin might instigate a fight that wasn't necessary, again he deplored his brother to settle down. The warrior wasn't pleased with the adviser's decision, but Hunter Gray had no choice but to abide by it.

"Is it that difficult to make a decision, darling?"

Zane assumed by the way his brother presented the question, stiff and tight-lip, that he took issue with Jayce's delay in responding.

Finally, Jayce said. "I'm not inclined to marry--either."

Zane thought Gavin would bust. He certainly looked like he might, and it was amusing to see the telling reaction to Jayce's refusal.

Hunter Gray didn't take it well, either. He let Jayce know it.

Zane had to translate for Jayce, he left out most of the egotistical boasting of bravery and prowess, and simply said Hunter Gray didn't intend take no for an answer.

"This is ridiculous. I will not make a choice, because I don't want a husband." Jayce stomped her foot. "I don't care if the-the advisors, elders, whoever insist. I will not do it."

Again, Zane translated to all parties.

Hunter Gray made threats--damn, he was going to force a decision.

Gavin simply stood there like stone, and shot venom at the warrior.

Jayce uttered all types of unladylike expletives that Zane thought colorful, some the first he heard, and he was amused.

Rising Moon returned later, and he and Zane conversed in an intense conversation for a long time before the man left.

Gavin watched the elder leave before he asked Zane, "What does he want now?"

As if it was difficult for him to believe what the old man asked, Zane stood for a moment perplexed. Then he finally answered his brother's question. "Believe it or not, I have been asked to assist with the negotiations between this tribe and my mother's, to see if somehow I can persuade the other Comanche unit to join this one," Zane said, and then paused as if he was still trying to absorb the request.

"They want you to act as a diplomat?" Gavin said, unbelieving.

"The elders believe my soul divides between two worlds--white and Comanche. He thinks I know the white man ways, and therefore can understand how it will affect the plight of the Comanche's future. With the continuous influx of settlers on their land, uprisings, and the threats from the United States, it is obvious the world they know is changing. The elders know it is not for the best. Already young warriors of this clan are dwindling from war with the white man,

raiding, and the battle amongst the different clans. If this tribe does not join with my mother's tribe, they will not last another winter. They are getting pushed further and further from the bountiful resources of the area. What little is left is being wasted by the settlers, and white scavenge hunters. The situation is perilous.”

It was apparent to Gavin the totality of his brother's words were unsettling to Zane. The features of his face turned stern, eyebrows furrowed, as if he considered the injustice of it all.

“When do you leave?” It was apparent his brother would do anything necessary to help his people.

“Sunrise,” Zane said, and then walked off.

Chapter 12

Jayce's eyes popped open, hearing the flap of the teepee open. She searched in the dark as someone moved about, muttering expletives, as the form banged into this and that.

She sat straight up and squinted trying to make out the man.

"Gavin?" She whispered.

"Who else, darling? Perhaps you were expecting Flaunting Goose?"

"The warrior's name is *Hunter Gray*."

"I know."

"What are you doing?" She could hear him moving about, mumbling...a low cuss word slipped, as he knocked into something again.

"What else? Undressing."

Jayce folded arms over her breasts. "You are not supposed to be in here. This is a woman's tipi. The single males reside elsewhere."

Without responding Gavin striped bare, and then threw back the buffalo skin covering. Jayce didn't feel inclined to move, so he bullied her aside until she rolled from the mat to the chilly ground.

Her voice was stern. "I don't want you here. I don't care to look at your face right now." She hissed.

"Then I would suggest you close your eyes, because I'm staying." He reached out searching the darkness, and met stone cold resistance. She slapped his searching fingers away. It was easy enough to force the issue, but Gavin snuggled beneath the covering, threw a folded arm over his eyes, and proceeded to snore.

Jayce scooted until she felt the warmth of the mat, but also the heat radiating off Gavin's body. She knew right where to get him.

She shoved, digging an elbow into his bruised side.

Gavin sucked in air, and then cursed beneath his breathe. "Darling, don't do that again."

"Then leave at once." Her tone was insistent, and completely ignored.

"I'm serious, Gavin. I don't want you anywhere near me." She pushed again, barely budging the solid weight. This time he caught her hand and held it firmly, but not tight enough to hurt.

"Your suitor," sarcasm dripped in his tone, "apparently, was quite serious about you. That, and what Zane said was wrong. Elder's decision be damned, the idiotic warrior insisted we have a discussion concerning you. Perhaps, it was more of a demand." He waved his hand dismissively in the air. "Regardless, the man does not know how to take no for an answer."

Jayce's back stiffened. "What did you do?" She demanded.

"Au contraire, Cheri...it was *your* young buck who threw the first punch. He is of bad temperament, apparently. Flaunting Goose likes to get his way, but what is ironic is, so do I. More so, perhaps. I was forced to defend your honor--Flaunting Goose intended to have you one way or another. I'm sure he is somewhere this very minute licking wounds I thoroughly enjoyed inflicting."

"You had no right to do that!"

Gavin turned around, and faced Jayce. Even in the dim light, the glow of hazel penetrated through, and bore daringly. "What? Did you prefer the young buck instead of me, darling?" The cynical tone was back, and twice as biting. "I'm not sure he could be of any use right now, because it took three warriors to cart *your* young buck away after I finished with him." Gavin yawned, as if the entire accounting bore him. "Perhaps he might have added a measure of warmth to your bed, but little else. Maybe, come morning, he may have been able to appease that insatiable appetite you have to be fucked."

The sound of raw flesh connecting to bare skin cracked.

“Bastard!”

“I suppose I deserved that,” he uttered, and then without saying another word, not even an apology, Gavin turned over.

He could hear heavy breathing, a shooting burst of air, and a disgruntled sigh.

Gavin's nonchalant tone broke through the disquiet. He looked over his shoulder. “Are we fighting, because I beat *your* young buck to a pulp? Or the statement you overheard earlier? I prefer to know the situation for which I must defend myself.”

“There is no situation, either way,” Jayce snapped.

“Hmm...I'm rarely wrong in my assumptions.”

Another yawn sounded, and then he rolled over.

Jayce's voice was ultra-low, barely audible. “How could you say that about me? That I mean nothing...no, it was *absolutely* nothing to you?”

“So, we are to get to the bottom of why your ire is up? So be it, I suppose it is best under the circumstances.”

“What...circumstances?”

He turn to face Jayce. “Not to parrot, but *my* circumstances. I have an insane desire to touch you, but I know until this nastiness is settled between us, you intend to keep that delicious pussy away from me. Is that not right?”

“What if I tell you that you are *never* touching this pussy again?”

Gavin's comeback was swift. “What if I tell you you are sadly mistaken?”

Jayce gave him a stern look. “I mean it, Gavin. I'm serious as...as can be.”

“Darling, so am I. Trust me.” His next statement was arrogant. He said, “You want me as bad as I want you. Even now, as upset as you are, the scent of feminine arousal is prevalent. Are you burning for me, Cheri?”

Jayce huffed, and then wrinkled her nose. "That is a very egotistical assumption, but I suppose I should not be surprised, as your cockiness is unbound. Sinful."

A feral grin surfaced. "Care to make a small wager on whether or not you are already wet, aching to have my cock thrust inside your pussy until you scream, but are too stubborn to admit it?" He appealed to the inner gambler in Jayce.

"Why on earth would I do that?" She quipped, watching skeptically. Shivering, at the heated words that rung with truth.

"It allows you the chance to lose gracefully, albeit intentionally, because we both know that is what you want," Gavin said, grinning. He stood up, and searched around the dark interior for his saddlebag. Then he was back in front of Jayce handing out a deck of cards.

"I never lose," Jayce said, and then put on a poker face.

Gavin walked over to the entrance, and moved the flaps aside to allow the illumination of the moon to brighten the area so they could see. He called over a shoulder. "There is a first time for everything, darling."

Jayce sat Indian style, close to the fire pit for warmth.

She wished he had put some clothes on, or at least covered his middle section with a pelt, but he did not. He lay in leisurely splendor of male magnificent, and it piqued her. She would just ignore him--or desperately try.

Jayce shuffled the cards, and then put the deck in the center between them. "What is your pleasure?" She meant what type of cards he wanted to play. She instantly realized the slip of the tongue, but it was too late.

A devilish grin cross Gavin's face. "You, sprawled out like the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite. Gorgeously nude and generously moist with my cock poised to enter the succulent pussy--no, allow me to correct that--the full strength of my rigid phallus thrusting inside your delectable cunt."

The heated words simmered through Jayce, causing a flood of sensations to ripple down her spine and burst between her trembling thighs. She felt red-hot pulses beat steadily inside her pussy...the syrupy feminine moisture gathered and saturated her thin gown.

Jayce narrowed her eyes.

Gavin chuckled.

"I think we should make this simple--"

"Anxious to get at me, darling?"

"Draw? Stud?"

"How about we each pick, and the highest card wins?"

"Okay. What is your wager?"

"When I win, you withering beneath me," Gavin said, matter of fact, even though the thought made his cock pulsate and lengthen.

"If I win, and it is highly likely, what is at stake?"

An easy devil may care grin surface. "Then I shall be ever so obedient and allow you to take full advantage of my person."

Jayce frowned. "That means you win either way."

"You are very astute." He ran a finger down her nose. An intimate gesture that didn't go unnoticed by Jayce.

Shuffling the cards again, Jayce did her best not to look between his thunderous thighs at the burgeoning strength that thickened, pushing against the flatness of a honed stomach.

She spoke into the cards, working the deck skillfully between her fingers, rapidly. She shuffled the cards. She whispered, "If you win I agree to your bet. But, if I win, I want you to take back those awful words you said about me."

Gavin asked, blandly. "Whether I meant them or not?"

That was unexplored territory she refused dwell, because it scared the geezers out of her. "You accept or not?" She said, quietly.

"I lied. Care to offer another wager, or must we even waste time going through the motions? We both desire each other, darling. Things would be less complicated if you stop fighting the inevitable."

“You know, you should work on your cocksure attitude. It isn't appealing to some woman.”

Before Jayce could blink, he advanced like a predator, swiftly and silently. He had her in his powerful arms. A small moue of protest escaped, but it went unanswered, her back flattened against the hard dirt-packed floor as Gavin moved over her.

Jayce moaned, and then purred, as the thickness of two fingers glided pass her labia, spreading the moist folds, and then delved into her core of heat. He buried his fingers deep on the first entry, a rapturous assault unhampered by friction, because she was already oozing, ready.

Gavin leaned forward, his breath warm and teasing against full lips. “I don't give a damn about other women, darling. Just fucking you, before I burst, which I'm damn close to doing from the simple thought alone of being buried in this licentious pussy.”

She knew it was wiser to protest. She shouldn't give in so easily, but Jayce kept her mouth shut. He picked her up effortlessly, and then laid them against the fuzzy-softness of the buffalo skin.

Eagerly, she welcomed the feel of hard muscle that was equally satiny, pressed into her breasts until Gavin lay horizontally between her open thighs. She raised her legs, wrapping them around his flanks. She arched up to meet the steel rod, even before he tried to enter, wanting to feel the heat pressing into the sweltering entrance that was quivering for fulfillment. The yearning between her thighs, each spasm a beat, was so strong it was almost painful.

Greedily, she accepted the moist, hot, searing kiss that ignited another round of pulses to explode between her already quivering thighs.

Gavin's kiss was thoroughly arousing. So untamed, almost savage in nature. His mouth thirsted, devoured, and parlayed in a torrid tempo that left Jayce watering for more.

She was there. Almost at the cusp, her desire for Gavin was so strong, she almost came apart with the first thrust. His hips were a

driving force, so powerful and complete and filling that she swore to die if he withdrew. Then he did, and shamelessly she begged him not to leave again. And being the gentlemen he was--his cock was back, filling with the magnitude of maleness that made Jayce scream out in pleasure as a catalytic orgasm ripped through her pussy...vibrated inside her belly, and exploded between her breasts.

Her complete surrender made the walls of Jayce's pussy gush, suckle firmly, and hold the cock snugly in overflowing wetness that rushed along the stone phallus like a raging river of heat.

Gavin continued his rapturous assault between the slick folds. Urgently, he cupped the unbelievably dewy cheeks, crushed his mouth against the open lips, and kissed her with wild abandon, like a starving man. Then he tore his mouth away--Gavin did it again.

"Jayce!" Her name tore free in a guttural shout, as a roar of semen erupted, flooded, and filled the quaking pussy.

Minutes later, when Gavin found his voice, he repeated. "I lied, darling. I never meant one single word I said about you. I openly and unequivocally admit that. I apologize."

Twin pleasures. One solid force. No matter, Jayce knew she was never going to be the same.

She had taken the biggest gamble of her life, and lying in Gavin's arms she knew that whatever happened from this night forward--this was a game she wasn't going to win.

Chapter 13

Abilene, Texas

It's him!

Jayce heard the voice, and knew the man partially blocked by other men standing in front of the saloon was Brewster. The bastard came to Abilene. There was no mistake the over-stuffed fancy in the suit was the same man, a cheater, and now a murderer of a friend.

Her eyes focused on Brewster for a long minute, and then Jayce shifted her attention to another man standing in the bastards' inner circle. A gunslinger. He dressed sophisticatedly in pin-stripe pants, pressed long sleeve shirt, a black smooth cow-hide vest with shiny buttons down the front, and matching boots with silver spurs.

It didn't matter how refined the hired-gun attempted to appear, Jayce saw 'fast gun' all over him. The thought didn't bother her in the least. If necessary, she would go up against ten or more of the best guns from anywhere to get to Brewster.

Sweet, caring Hugh who Brewster treated like less than an animal.

The thought surfaced inside Jayce's head, the vision of the suffering, and then she shoved it to the back of her mind.

Getting revenge for Hugh's death was paramount. Nothing else mattered.

Jayce wanted nothing more than to march over there and put a bullet between Brewster's eyes, but refrained. One, because her timing and place had to be right. And, two, and most importantly, she didn't want Zane or Gavin interfering.

She wanted Brewster's killing a notch on her belt, but she knew if either brother got wind of her intentions--to participate in a gunfight--they would steal her thunder. That wasn't going to happen.

"I have to take care of a few matters at the bank, and then I will return shortly and we can have that hearty meal you have been craving. How does that sound?" Gavin asked.

"Fine," she mumbled.

"Just the thought a large steak, potatoes, and an enormous slice of apple pie makes my mouth water. I could do with a shot or two of whiskey, also."

"Uh-huh."

"Perhaps pig intestines, and a side of radishes might seem better."

"Sounds splendid."

"What is wrong with you?"

She strayed from glaring at Brewster, and put a fake smile on her face. "Whatever you want is fine by me."

Gavin looked her up and down, dubiously. "What's the matter, Jayce?"

The lies slipped from her lips like syrup. "Nothing. I'm absolutely fine. Wonderful."

Gavin's eyes narrowed, as he observed her skeptically. "On the contrary, you seem distracted."

She hoped the convenient and ready smile convinced Gavin he needlessly worried. But, by the way he watched her Jayce knew he didn't believe a single word she had spoken.

To break the intense scrutiny, Jayce touched his arm. Immediately, Gavin's attention was drawn to the affectionate squeeze she gave him. He smiled, and then just as quickly searched her face as if he could read the thoughts swirling about inside her head.

Jayce tried to look past Gavin's shoulder as if she was searching for someone. "Where is Zane?" Not that she cared one iota, but she needed to switch Gavin's attention.

"He is not here," he said grimly.

“I can see that, Gavin. I just wondered where he'd run off to?”

He spoke with cool affront. “Does it matter?”

Jayce could see the tactic to change the course of their conversation was effective. However, seeing Gavin's entire body go rigid, she wasn't a hundred percent sure the turn of direction was wise.

“I was just inquiring. Simmer down, cowboy. Will he be joining us tonight?”

Gavin watched her closely. “If I say no, will you be disappointed?”

“Of course not,” she said, quickly.

“Are you sure, Jayce? Because if you want me to I can retrieve my brother from the voluptuous red-headed widow's bed for you.”

Jayce put her hands on her hips, and glared up at Gavin. “Are we fighting about something? If so, the polite thing to do is let me know what. I simply asked a question about Zane's whereabouts, and all of a sudden I feel like mentioning his name is taboo with you.”

“I'm not enough for you, darling. Just say the word.”

She sighed in frustration. Gavin was being unreasonable, and she wasn't in the mood to attend to the fight he obviously tried to pick. It was odd, but as of late, she noticed every time Zane's name was mentioned Gavin got all-tight around the collar.

When Brewster started walking along the sidewalk, it caught Jayce's attention. Her eyes strayed, following him like a predator stalking prey.

Apparently, Gavin wanted her undivided attention. He captured her chin, and forced Jayce to face him.

“We will continue our discussion later. As I said, I have business at the bank. When I return we are going to have a nice long conversation, Jayce.”

“Does that mean you will finally tell me why Zane is rarely about, and when he is you get all antsy?”

Gavin's eyes creased. He dropped his hand.

She had probably pushed too far, but Jayce needed Gavin to go about his business so she could handle her own. Brewster and his gunslinger entered the saloon. No doubt, the pig was up to his old tricks.

“I made accommodations for us to sleep in the stables tonight, because the deplorable woman at the boarding house took one look at Zane and refused him a room. Therefore, I will not step foot into her establishment.”

“Fine. I have slept in worst. Besides, a soft bed of fresh hay beats a lumpy mattress anytime.”

“Then I will see you later,” Gavin said, and then turned to walk away. He stopped suddenly, and faced Jayce. “Stay out of trouble,” he said, and then left.

Jayce waited until Gavin walked a distance, crossed the street, and then disappeared. She hurried across the street, not running, because she didn't want to draw attention to herself, but moved at a fast pace.

Wearing a shirt, pants, boots, guns, and a hat, Jayce easily blended into the backdrop of other cowboys milling along the street if someone didn't pay close attention. When she moved down the walk, and then stopped in front of the saloon, the old hound raised his head and stared, before dropping sloppy jowls back onto folded paws. Otherwise, nobody paid her any heed. She sidled up along the wall, raised on tiptoes, and peered into the window. The pane was covered with dust, but Jayce could see through a smudge in the glass. She saw Brewster sitting at a table with a woman perched on his lap. He threw back shots of whiskey, paused to fondle a breast, and then played a card.

She thought about charging inside, and putting Brewster out of his misery, but then her eye caught the Marshal sitting at the bar.

For a late afternoon, the bar was filled, and nobody seemed interested in leaving anytime soon. The men at Brewster's table all tossed in their hands. The lecher raked in the cards, smiling like a

snake. Another group of men sat at the table, and another round of cards began.

Jayce's fingers twitched over the hilt of her gun. She eyed the pompous ass like a hawk spotting a field mouse out in the open.

The gunslinger stood off to the side with a whiskey in one hand and a girl in another. He didn't appear to be watching Brewster's back, but when a ruckus of laughter broke out, Jayce noticed his hand went to the gun at his side. When the man realized nothing was amiss, his attention turned back to the girl.

The bartender poured another round of whiskey and carried it over to the table where Brewster sat. The pianist started pounding the keyboard, and drowned out the level of noise from the loud voices and boisterous laughter. Saloon girls made their rounds, peddling their wares, and the room burst alive with gaiety and song.

Brewster didn't seem in a hurry to leave, and it piqued Jayce. She would have to bide her time, wait impatiently, and get him when the opportunity arrived. That didn't sit well with her, but she had little choice.

Gavin was walking toward her. He crossed the street, and headed in her direction.

Brewster's life just was extended for at least another few hours.

* * * *

Through the entire course of supper, Gavin didn't say ten words. When they walked to the stables, he was equally quiet, and seemed aloof and withdrawn. In fact, the more Jayce tried to pull him out of the indifferent mood, the deeper he receded into a shell of silence. Finally, Jayce gave up, and remained quiet.

She watched Gavin undress. His movements were slow and methodical as he removed his shirt first, and then folded it and laid it aside. Next, he unfastened his pants, and followed the same routine.

He sat down on the hay, removed his boots, and then lined them next to his clothing.

Equally quiet Jayce undressed, and then lay down on the mound of fresh hay covering the floor with a blanket thrown on top that made up their bed for the evening. She stared up at the rafters in the ceiling, all thoughts centered on killing Brewster.

Since Gavin had been distant, it was surprising when he rolled over and covered her body.

There was no kiss. No caress. No attempt to arouse. Instead, his knee nudged Jayce's thighs apart. A hand slide down over her belly and a finger delved between the plump labia and searched--a test to see if she was moist--then withdrawn.

When Jayce rose for a kiss, whether intentional or not, he turned away. Then without warning, she was flipped onto her belly, and forced to all fours.

Powerful hands cupped her butt cheeks, and started kneading the globes a second before Gavin's knee shoved her thighs apart. The invasion was swift and complete. The entirety of Gavin's cock burrowed home in one surge.

Jayce gasped at the down stroke that buried the solid length to the core of her womb. Then without consideration to anything but consummating, Jayce felt him start an erratic gyration. His cock entered and retreated...a steady beat of plunges...the heavy sacs bumped repeatedly against her butt at each thrust. His attention was primitive, bordered on savage...he fucked hard and fast and relentlessly.

Then as suddenly as he started Gavin abruptly stopped. His tone gruff, he demanded to know. "Am I enough for you, Jayce?"

"What are you asking?"

The words forced between clenched teeth. "Answer...me."

When Jayce didn't answer fast enough he backed drew, and then slammed his cock forward and held. "I want an answer. Is my cock enough or do you need my brother fucking you, too?" he snarled,

voice tight. Then he pushed hard sending the entire stalk to the max, as if branding, marking his possession.

The assault, almost too much to bear, made Jayce whip her head back and forth, fanning hair about, as the burgeoning force continuously plundered.

Gavin held his body tight. The chords in his back clutched, straining under the assertion to hold back. His tone sounded almost anguished. "Say what I want to hear. You need Zane or not?" he insisted on knowing.

Jayce's response was vocal, a projected cry. "No, you are more than enough! I swear to God," she whimpered. Gavin's thrust was almost barbaric, determined, but not intended to inflict pain. The assault was thorough and left Jayce trembling with the heat of the fever in which he fucked her.

Dominant hips rocked upward in a determined surge, held a second, and then churned higher...deeper. "Swear...to...me," he said, between clenched teeth.

Jayce looked over a shoulder. She looked at Gavin who stared with such intensity it made her shudder. "I swear to you," she said, and then moaned going down when he raised, and then started a piston of untamed motions. His drove complete, each downstroke forging deeper then the next, hips repeatedly slamming into the giving pussy.

A groan escaped Gavin's lips, and then he fell against Jayce's back. She could feel the dick embedded deeply pulsate inside her pussy. "Ah--Jayce..." Then his entire body stiffened when he released.

Gavin pulled out, and rolled onto his back. He threw an arm over his eyes, and struggled to calm the rage inside him.

"What was that about?"

"If I hurt you, I apologize," Gavin mumbled.

Jayce didn't respond, but lay down and fit snugly against the radiating heat. Her thoughts filled with all types of questions, but

when she finally got the nerve to question Gavin's actions further, he was snoring.

She waited a long time watching the rise and fall of his chest. She listened to the deepening of his snores before she moved away from him. She quietly, albeit swiftly dressed, strapped on the gun belt, and then slipped from the loft.

Chapter 15

“That's it, bitch. Give me that ass,” Brewster snarled, slapping his palm against the girl's butt. It wasn't to tease or as an affectionate pat, but meant to inflict pain.

The woman cried out. “Easy, now!”

Brewster laughed, and then hit her again with a few more whacks that turned the girl's ass a bright pink.

“I paid a lot of money, girlie. Now, give me my worth, or I can get real nasty.”

“Now, that ain't a surprise, Mister,” she said, sardonically.

He grabbed the girl by the ankles, roughly flipped her over until she laid flat on her belly. The entirety of his bulging middle pressed into her back, damn near suffocating the woman. “You got a smart mouth, girlie. Later, I will give you something to put in it to keep you quiet.” He snarled.

A boney knee jabbed between the thighs, pressing until he forced the girl wide. A sausage-thick hand gripped ample hips. The other gathered a nice palm full of hair, and yanked hard until the girl's neck snapped backward.

“Come on, Mister, no need to get all rough on me. I'll give you what you paid for,” she said, and then glanced nervously at the man sitting in the corner of the room. A shadowy figure, just watching, as if the entire scene amused him.

A nefarious chuckled sounded. “I like rough,” Brewster said, and then licked the girl's cheek leaving a trail of saliva. “Like riding a mare...just mount,” he slammed meaty hips forward that hit all ass with a thwack when sweaty flesh met the moist skin. “And fuck.” He

said, and then rammed his cock forward penetrating, not considering the pitiful pleas spilling from the girl's lips.

"In fact, pain is pleasure. Isn't that so, Dex?" Brewster chuckled.

The gunslinger responded with nonchalance. "Yep."

Jayce heard the woman scream. Somebody from below probably would have heard it to, if the constant chords of the piano weren't drowning out the distress call. Thinking about what Brewster did to the girl made Jayce's skin crawl.

She eased along the hallway, careful to keep in the shadows. Inching along the wall, Jayce made her way to the room where Brewster was laid up. A nice amount of money in the saloon owner's hand made it easy to get the information on the bastard's whereabouts.

Slowly, carefully, Jayce made her way to the room.

The girl screamed again, begging Brewster for mercy.

The sound made Jayce clench her teeth. Lord, she wished she could kill him twice. Once for Hugh, and then again just because. But, it wasn't possible to resurrect the dead, so she realized the first bullet between Brewster's eyes would have to be satisfaction enough.

She didn't think about it before, but now Jayce wondered if the door was locked. *If so, what to do about it?* It's not as if she had the strength of a man to knock it down. Not that she would even want to, because that would put Brewster on the alert.

Jayce looked behind her, hearing footsteps and laughter coming up the stairway. She eased into a dim alcove, and waited.

A sigh of relief escaped when a girl and her patron walk down the hallway all cuddled up, paying the shadowy figure no mind.

The knob twisted easily in Jayce's hand. Cautiously, she eased the door open and peaked inside. The mirror in front of the bed offered a view of Brewster's position.

If she were in a laughing mood, seeing his large flat behind all toot up in the air would have been humorous.

The last thing she felt like doing was smiling.

The girl was openly sobbing...Brewster pounded away, as if there was no tomorrow.

But, then for him--there was no tomorrow. Not even another minute.

Jayce eased the door open wide enough to stick her gun through the slit.

The old dry wood creaked.

Damn!

Brewster's head snapped up. She could see his lecherous grin in the reflection of the mirror.

"Wondered when you'd show up, girlie." He snickered. "This bitch first, and then you, Jayce. I've been waiting a long time to get you bucking beneath me."

Jayce met the cold glare with equal fire. "And I've been waiting to put a bullet between your eyes. You sick bastard. Hugh, didn't deserve what you did to him. I'm here to avenge my friend."

Brewster laughed, mockingly. "If it's any consolation to you that sheriff of yours screamed like a bitch." He chuckled. "That happens to a man when his balls are castrated."

"You bastard." She hissed.

Brewster threw back his head, and laughed. "Squealed like a pig," he pronounced deliberately nasty.

"For Hugh," she said, and then fired.

For his girth, Brewster moved with surprising agility. He rolled over, and came up on his feet beside the bed. A gun was in his hand.

Jayce fired again. Fast.

Brewster howled in pain, grabbing his gonads. He looked at Jayce mortified.

She wasn't finished with Brewster yet. Two guns. Two shots. One to the head, and another to the chest.

The force of the twin shots rocked Brewster. He clutched his chest, and then stumbled backward before toppling over.

The girl screamed. "He-he has a gun!"

Jayce whirled around, and saw the gunslinger step from the shadows.

The hired-gun fired--another blast exploded, echoing in the room.

The girl screamed hysterically, as Jayce was thrown back against the wall.

Chapter 15

Gavin almost dragged Jayce down the sidewalk. She tried to dig her heels deep, and then seeing the effort was useless, desperately, she grabbed a wooden pole and held on for dear life.

"I had to do it!"

"No, you *wanted* to do it!"

"He killed my friend!"

"*You* almost got killed. That trumps the stupid thing you did, Jayce. If I didn't arrive when I did..." He threw up his hands in frustration. "God, I'm beginning to wonder if you are not insane. That gunslinger had the upper hand on you the entire time. You'd better thank God I'm a light sleeper."

Jayce slammed balled fist akimbo to her hips. She juttied up her chin, and glowered at Gavin. "I can handle myself," she protested.

"The only thing you seem capable of doing is getting yourself into trouble with these rash decisions you make," he boomed.

"Go to hell!" She jerked away.

Lightening fast, he caught her arm again. His hold firm, he yanked hard causing Jayce to slam against his chest. Nostrils flared, and air burst free. Gavin's entire body shuddered with fury.

"Lady, don't you dare push me or I swear you will seriously regret it, Jayce. What you did was dangerous--and stupid." He roared.

Jayce fumed. She refused to look at Gavin. "That is ridiculous," she mumbled.

Gavin grabbed her elbow and gave her a little shake to get her attention. He ignored the crowd gathering. "If I had delayed one second you would be dead."

With strength that surprised Gavin, Jayce pulled away. "That is your opinion." She glared at him. "I don't you need to take care of me. I handled myself just fine until you came along, and I'm sure after you are gone I will not shrivel up and melt away like some wilting flower."

Gavin scoff, snorting rudely. "I disagree. You are a rare blossom. But, the insane notion you have to prove you're as good as any man, I do believe you forget sometimes that you are a woman, and the thought is unsettling to say the least. Actually, it tends to put one off."

The truth of his words hurt more then Jayce cared to admit. She thumped his chest. "Frankly, I don't care what you think!"

He grabbed her hand and held firmly. "Don't...do...that...again."

A cowboy walked up to them. "Problem, Miss?" He eyed Gavin.

"Yes," Jayce said, quickly.

"No!" Gavin snapped.

The man looked between them, and then scowled at Gavin. "Ain't right to treat a lady in such a manner, Mister."

Gavin inhaled, and then slowly released a burst of air. He glared at Jayce, warning her to get rid of the man or he would. She stubbornly folded her arms, and matched the fire of his stare.

A gun cocked.

Gavin stiffened. He narrowed his eyes at Jayce, ignoring the man. "Set him straight, Jayce, or I will. Is that what you want? You want a man to die because of your stubbornness?"

"Fine." She turned to the man, and put a credible smile on her face even though she was simmering inside. "Thank you for your assistance, but it isn't necessary. We are simply having a...spat."

"Seems like more to me," the man said, and started to withdraw his gun.

Before he could clear it from the holster, he found a pistol pressing into his forehead. "Take the lady's word for it." The cowboy threw up his hands in surrender and started stepping back.

"I don't want no trouble, mister," The man stammered.

“Excuse...us.” Gavin turned away from the man.

“Thank you,” Jayce called cheerfully to the man as he scurried away.

The chords in Gavin's neck strained under the attempt to throttle his temper. “I subscribe to certain principles that do not include chastising a lady in public, but you are seriously pushing my hand. Don't make me do something I will regret, but believe it is totally necessary.” He seethed.

Jayce's eyes narrowed. “Do...what?”

“Put you over my knee, and spank your ass until you can't sit for a day. The thought is obtuse to me, but under the circumstances you warrant it. If you insist on acting like a child then I have no recourse but to treat you like one.”

“The last man who tried to whip me got a bullet between the eyes.”

Gavin froze. The totality of her words sunk deep to his soul. His anger dissipated. “You told me the marks on your back were from being dragged by a horse.”

“I lied,” she said, bitterly.

“Who whipped you, Jayce?”

“None of your damn business.”

His threats were idol of course. Gavin scratched his head, as if perplexed, not knowing what to do now. He was blistering mad, but the thought she actually believed he might strike her made the lining in his stomach curdle like sour milk.

“What you did was foolish, and I'm beyond pissed about it, but I would never hit you, Jayce. Never. I'm furious yes, but you came close to being killed. But, what upsets me more is I ignored my intuition. I felt something was wrong earlier, but I let it go. Maybe if I hadn't, I could have stopped your rash actions,” he said, and then force himself to calm down. He eyed Jayce. His voice leveled. “Who beat you?”

Jayce squared her shoulders, and raised to a height nowhere as intimidating as Gavin's. "My past is none of your damn business."

"You brought it up." His retort was quick.

"Yeah, well, that was a big mistake."

Tears brightened her eyes, and her back was stiff; she glared at Gavin seeing he was getting all chivalrous again. He played the gentleman role too damn well, but what bothered her most was that Jayce wouldn't bet against his sincerity.

Nobody, and she meant nobody gave snot about her for as long as she could remember. Not even her mother. Certainly, not her father who wielded a whip like an extension of his hand.

Even when a man did show her favor, he had a single thought in mind. She glanced at Gavin, and something inside broke at the genuine expression of concern on his face.

Damn him.

"I like it better when you rant and rave at me," she mumbled. That she could handle.

"Why, because that's what you're accustom to?" She refused to respond. Gavin wouldn't let it go, though. "Stop living in the past, Jayce. Quit making me all the deplorable things that ever happened, because you're too stubborn to let it go. Trust me."

"I never trusted anyone in my life. It's not that easy."

"Then I guess I just have to try harder to convince you."

She struggled when he tried to pull her into his arms, but Gavin wasn't having it. He held her trembling form close, suffocated Jayce in attention, and the security of powerful arms.

Inwardly, she wanted to fight. She couldn't relent so easily. Her life...possibly her heart was at stake.

Jayce put on a poker face. She looked up at Gavin. "I can take care of myself." Her voice quivered.

"Madame, you continuously keep telling me that." He pulled her closer. His mouth moved a hair breathe away from the trembling lips. "And it's not that I doubt you one iota. You handle those guns with

unbelievable skill, but two fast guns don't mean squat when it comes to shielding your vulnerability. Stop fighting me, darling. Let me do what I do."

She bluffed. "I don't want you to coddle me, Gavin. I don't like it," she lied.

For the first time in her life, Jayce felt the need to be held. Coveted. Desired.

The crowd gathered, and outright gawked at the inappropriate behavior--he held Jayce close, intimately. It was obvious by the way Gavin looked at her that he intended to kiss her, too. She could tell, and anxiously waited.

Jayce could see the disbelief on the people's faces who were staring, but she got the distinct impression Gavin didn't give a damn.

He didn't.

He kissed her fully on the mouth. It wasn't affectionate, teasing, but so carnivorous in nature that it drew gasps from the women in the crowd. Some of the men look as if they wanted to throw up their hands and cheer.

When Gavin finally let her up for air, Jayce blushed, uncontrollably. "I'm never going to show my face in this town again," she whispered.

"It doesn't matter. We're leaving in the morning."

He kissed her again, lightly, but nevertheless sensually.

"That's all nice, and things. But, you, son, are under arrest."

Gavin let Jayce go, stepped back, and turn to face the Marshal. "Why, for kissing in public?" he said, cynically. Somebody in the crowd laugh. "I wasn't aware that was a crime, Marshal."

"Murder, son," The marshal said. "You and your brother are wanted all over Texas, and as far as the border. Got the poster right here." He held up the paper with a sketch of him and Zane that was a good likeness. "Been tailing you since Dallas. Lost you for a time, but then we picked up your trail again just before Abilene."

Jayce squeezed Gavin's arm. "What is the Marshal talking about? Murder?"

Gavin's entire disposition darkened. He heard Jayce, but ignored the question. His attention stayed focus on the Marshal, and the deputies with the lawman. "Who is it I supposedly killed?"

"Sheriff Grimes of Dallas. He was found locked in a cell, and shot down like a caged dog. Damn shame, Sheriff Grimes was a young man. Didn't have a chance to defend himself. The attack was inhuman, the blasts ripped his face to shreds so that he was barely recognizable. Shame."

"I did not kill Sheriff Grimes. We were setup." Gavin protested.

"From what I know, you and your brother were the last two see the sheriff alive."

"That doesn't mean we killed the sheriff. I admit we went to talk to him about our mother's death, but that was the extent of our visit. When we left Sheriff Grimes was very much alive." His tone turned firm. He spoke with conviction. "Neither I nor my brother killed the sheriff. Why would we?"

The Marshal shrugged, lifting his large shoulders, and then let them fall. "Don't know. Nor is it my business whether I believe you or not, son. I go by these wanted posters. The law says you are wanted. It's my job to bring you in. Court will decide if you hang or not."

"Gavin?" Jayce clutched his arm. Fear was evident in her eyes.

"Now, you gonna come along peaceful, son? The poster said alive or dead." It was a valid point Gavin didn't overlook.

He hesitated. Jayce squeezed Gavin's arm firmer. She silently pleaded with him not to put up a fight.

The color of Gavin's skin gave a man, lawman or not, reason enough to shoot a person dead without a second thought. It didn't matter if the killing was justified or not. With the wanted posters, nobody would bat an eye, or question if justice was served or not.

Reluctantly, Gavin pulled away from Jayce. He step forward, and held out his wrist for the cuffs.

The Marshal move forward and slapped the heavy metal links on. "This is best, son. Come real easy like, and don't make no trouble."

Jayce couldn't help herself, seeing the cuffs on Gavin's wrist made something in her heart break. She threw her body forward, wrapping arms tightly around his neck, and held on.

Gavin laid a cheek on the top of her head. A light kiss mussed Jayce's hair. "I will be fine, darling. Don't worry about me." He kissed her again, and then stepped back forcing Jayce to break her hold.

He lifted her chin, so their eyes met. "I'm not a murderer, Jayce."

"I know," she whispered.

"Come on now, son. We will stay the night here and then head back to Dallas in the morning. It's going to be a long ride back, and I don't expect no shenanigans out of you, son. When we arrive in Dallas, you will stay in the jailhouse until we can get a judge to come and oversee the trial," the marshal said, and then added, "Your brother wouldn't happen to be about?"

Gavin starred the lawman right in the eyes, and didn't blink. "No, we parted ways a while back. As far as I know, Zane could have crossed the border by now."

"Well, there's another posse out scouring these parts. Not to mention the renegade bounty hunters looking to make a quick buck by apprehending the Banner brothers. One way or another, your brother will be brought in."

Gavin did not respond, but merely stared at the marshal.

He tried to get her to leave, but Jayce ignored Gavin's demand. She trailed behind, following the Marshal and deputies, and the curious onlookers, as they walk to the jailhouse.

The balmy night cast shadows along the path. Something in Gavin's peripheral vision caught his attention. He did not turn his head, but eyes searched and caught a glimpse of Zane as he moved in the dark.

As subtle as he could without bringing attention to himself, Gavin looked at the area where Zane watched. He knew his brother, so

silently, shaking his head no, he told his brother don't do anything foolish like try to free him.

A knowing glance passed between brothers. Zane nodded that he understood, and then disappeared into the cover of night. Gavin knew Zane didn't like leaving, but he also knew his brother was smart enough to realize he had to. If anybody needed to be free right now, it was Zane.

Gavin's life depended on him.

* * * *

The ominous figure lurked in the background watching Gavin being lead away in shackles. There was a sense of giddiness cursing through his body at the elating sight.

When Gavin's neck snapped under the pressure, and twisted crudely at the end of the rope around his neck--oh, to witness such, made the hovering form shudder with excitement.

Chapter 16

The train depot bustled with activity, as people milled about waiting for the steam engine to make its slow ascent up the hill toward the town. The stack blew gray clouds into the air, leaving billowy puffs of smoke, as the train drew nearer.

A whistle signaling the train's arrival was shrill in the quiet. The rails rattled, causing the ground to tremble, as the train forged along the tracks.

The day was unnaturally warm, but the heat didn't seem to deter the crowd of onlookers. Some people walked about waiting for their relatives to arrive. Others stood in line to purchase tickets, while others stood around trying to catch a glimpse of the modern day steel contraption heading toward the station.

Zane pulled his hat further down to shield his face. He scanned the crowd, and then relaxed realizing nobody gave him a second look. As far as the people seemed concerned, he was just another half-breed who didn't warrant direct eye contact.

The train came to a halt. Porters jumped down, and helped the passengers disembark.

Zane stayed focus on all the men leaving the train. He eyed each one of them curiously, but unsure of what the lawyer looked like, he had no idea who to approach.

The lawyer he hired came all the way from New York, so Zane made the assumption he'd be some stuff shirt man with a stern face, spectacles, and carrying a satchel.

A portly man stepped onto the platform holding a briefcase clasp tightly between his fingers. He looked around, shoved his glasses up

the bridge of his nose, and then stood there eyeing the crowd, mopping the sweat from his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief.

Zane wished he'd given the lawyer a description of himself, but he didn't want to prejudice the man before he arrived, or worse, considered taking the case.

He set off toward the man figuring he could be G.W. Laurel. If not, he would find out quickly.

"Mr. G.W. Laurel?"

The man turned around, and then stumbled backward. Zane didn't take offense. This type of reaction was common when somebody set eyes on him for the first time.

"Wha--" The man stammered, and then high-tailed it out of there, as if he feared being scalped.

"I'm G.W. Laurel," the voice said, behind Zane.

Zane slowly turned around. He looked at the person smiling at him. He blinked, and then blinked again.

The woman stepped forward and extended a slender hand. "You are looking for G.W. Laurel, aren't you? Did I hear you correctly?"

Zane boldly looked the woman up and down. Then he realized his mouth hung open, so he closed it.

The woman stepped closer raising slender delicate fingers higher.

"You're a woman."

Gianna laughed, and the action made her dimples more pronounced. "The last time I check that is a yes, sir. You must be Zane Banner, I presume?"

It took Zane a minute to respond because he remained gawking at the petite, golden-hair, shapely little woman as if it was the first time he ever laid eyes on a female before. Maybe not the first, but he admitted not one so damned pretty.

"You are Zane Banner, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Good, then we are making progress."

“G.W.--I assumed you were a man.”

Gianna grinned sheepishly. “I know it is terrible of me to use my initials on my credentials deceitfully, but it tends to make things easier where gaining clients are concerned.” She shoved her hand forward. “Gianna Wila Laurel is my proper name, Mr. Banner. Do you intend to shake my hand or should I just stand here looking like an utter fool holding it out?”

“I apologize,” he said, taking the delicate fingers in his large hand that consumed the small palm. “Thank you for coming.” He raised the dainty hand, and lightly brushed the back with his lips.

Gianna slipped her hand free. Goodness, she never felt such heat. She struggled for composure, but realized she failed miserably. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. It was indecent, but the affects on her person were obvious by the way her voice quivered. “Ah...oh, once I read your letters, Mr. Banner, I knew this was an opportunity I could not afford to pass up. Your letters did justice to your brother's plight, and I immediately felt passionate about taking Gavin's case.”

“You are an established lawyer, based on what I was able to find out. You came highly recommended.”

“You seem surprised, Mr. Banner. I hope that is not because I'm a female.”

“I admit you aren't what I expected.” She was prettier then a sunrise, and more enthralling then the reflection of a full moon over a calm sea--awe inspiring.

Gianna smiled. “That is not an unusual reaction, I'm afraid. Me being a female and all, but I assure you Mr. Banner, I have an excellent record in the court.” She looked him boldly in the eyes. Something Zane wasn't accustomed to, even by females who were enamored with his physique, prowess, and hints of danger he eluded, as if that heightened their sexual pleasure--being with a man who might possibly be dangerous. The possibility of bedding with a man who was socially taboo--seemed to acerbate the fever in which females sought his bed. In the boudoir, they were rapturous and bold,

but if he met the same lady in public, she rarely met his eyes. That never bothered him, though. When prevarication was evident that he knew would result in an endless night of fucking himself silly, a measure of thick skin was required. He used the females who graced his bed, and spread their creamy legs willing, as well as they used him.

“I assure you I am good at what I do, Mr. Banner.”

“Please call me Zane.”

She smiled. Zane swore it brightened the sky.

“Okay, Zane. Do you mind if we retrieve my luggage, and get into some semblance of shade? I'm afraid I'm not used to such heat, and I feel it sapping my energy.”

Zane felt immediately contrite for being rude. He stepped back, and allowed Gianna to precede him to the luggage area, where he retrieved her bags. He expected to have to lug an ungodful amount of baggage. Her being a female and all, so it surprised him to see she traveled light.

“Is this it?” Zane asked, looking around sure he'd missed a piece or two. He put the larger bag under his arm, and held the smaller one in his hand. “You travel light for a...woman.”

Another girlish giggled sounded. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Au contraire, I'm not disappointed in the least. But...,” Zane pause to choose his words carefully so as not to offend the lady. “This is a murder trial. The judge hasn't even arrived, and it could be days before Gavin is brought before a jury. Matters could drag on for weeks.”

“If that is the case, I'm prepared to stay as long as needed to see your brother is freed. Never fear.”

Zane nodded. He liked her confidence, *and* the gentle sway of her hips beneath the satin traveling gown. The dress was a royal blue with a modestly long hem that brushed over the dusty sidewalk. She wore a matching jacket, frilly lacy blouse with ruffles up to her throat, and a

cute little matching hat with a feather that fluttered in the occasional breeze.

She was going to burn alive in this heat, Zane thought, but kept his thoughts to himself.

The soft scent of lavender invaded his nostrils as she strolled along the walk. Zane did his best to ignore the allure of femininity, but his attention kept returning to the enticing scent, and movement of hips that was ultra appeasing.

Summer breeze and sunshine, Zane thought mesmerized.

When the summer breeze turned, and glanced over her shoulder, he appropriately forced his eyes on her face.

"I'm a hundred percent sure your brother is innocent. If not, I would not have come. I'm good at what I do, Mr.--Zane. If you have any reservations concerning me, I suppose it is best to voice them now. I need you on my side, not against me."

Zane lifted his brow, unaccustomed to a woman who was obviously of polite society speak so frankly. Boldly, matching his stare, and silently demanding he respond to her statement.

"I trust you," he said, without hesitation.

"Good then, we are making splendid progress. For an instant, I was afraid you had reservations. Not that you said it out loud, but my intuition is keen."

The left corner of Zane's lip curled. Pretty as a button, intelligent, and just enough boldness further piqued his interest. Though, not his normal taste in the fairer sex, he preferred cute, and a measure of reticence, but his intrigue with Gianna was refreshing.

Zane stopped, and then stepped aside to assist Gianna into the buggy. He was thankful he had the mindset to bring a covered carriage instead of an open wagon. The day was sunny, and he could only imagine how uncomfortable Gianna would have been on the long ride to his place.

She was a little thing, reaching no more than mid-way to his shoulder. Even though he offered his hand, it was obvious she would be required to hop into the buggy.

Without saying a word, Zane clasped the slender waist, and effortlessly lift Gianna onto the seat.

She smoothed out her skirts, brushes the wrinkles free, and then turned smiling graciously. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." And that it was, an unbelievable joy to feel the soft feminine body pressed, albeit briefly, against his chest. Zane just wish he hadn't worn a jacket so he could feel more of the contact.

Gianna looked about, as the horses moved forward, and they worked their way through the busy afternoon streets of the town. "I'm assuming I will be staying at the hotel...over there." She pointed at the only building with a 'hotel' sign.

"I don't recommend the hotel. I have ah, secured a more acceptable residence for you to stay during your time here." Intentionally, Zane shrouded his comment in secrecy.

"Oh, I understand. You are a fugitive as well, so it probably isn't best for you to be seen in town frequently."

If she noticed he stiffened at her choice of words, she acted as if the flinch went unnoticed.

"Neither my brother or me is a murderer."

"I know that, but you did mention in your letters both of you were last seen with the sheriff before he was killed. However, you failed to mention the two of you were both wanted. I do my homework. I did some checking, and found out you are wanted for the very same crime as your brother. That is in the eyes of the law, of course. Technically means you are a on the run. A wanted man."

Zane pulled up on the reigns signaling the horses to stop. He turned to Gianna. "Is it your intention to turn me in?"

Gianna waved her hand dismissively. "If that were the case, do you think I would be riding in a buggy with you heading god knows where?" The response made Zane settle down. "However, as a

lawyer, I think it is best if you heed the advice I'm about to offer." Zane's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Turn yourself in, and allow me to settle this case in one round. You are both innocent, so there is no need to go through two trials. Such a waste of time."

"No," he said firmly.

"Excuse me?"

"I said no, and that is final. If you intend to push your ridiculous advice further then perhaps I should turn this buggy around and deliver you back to the depot."

"I'm good at what I do. I always win. You said you trust me, but now I'm not so sure. I thought we were making progress. Have circumstances changed?"

"Apparently, for the worst, if you think I'm going to turn myself over to the authorities. With me free, Gavin has a chance of escaping. If I'm locked up to, he will rot away in confinement until they hang him. I will die before I allow that to happen."

A discontent sigh escaped. "Is your brother as stubborn as you?"

"More so," Zane said, almost proudly.

Gianna inhaled, and then slowly released her breath. "Then I'm afraid this trial is going to be more tedious than I assumed." She looked at Zane. "Is there anything I can do to persuade you to change your mind?"

All types of salacious thoughts came to mind--her splendidly naked, purring, and pleading for more of his cock--but, at the expense of sounding uncouth, as if he hadn't been raised with a gentleman's etiquette branded in his brain. He refrained from speaking his thoughts aloud. He said instead, "Nothing that I can think of at the moment."

"Fine then. At least I know what I'm up against."

He never explained his decisions before, but Zane heard himself say. "Do you see the color of my skin? That alone will give a jury reason to convict me and my brother for murdering a white man."

There is prejudice in this world, Gianna.” The statement was not to offend, but to make a valid point.

“I assure you my vision is perfect. I too understand the prejudice of today's world as much as you do. I might not encounter such because of the color of my skin, but being a female in a male's world has not been easy for me. I understand your concern. However, I still highly recommend you take my advice and turn yourself over to the authorities, and allow this unsavory matter to run the course of the law.”

“No.” The tone of his voice meant there was no room for brokering.

Gianna toss her hand up in frustration. “Fine then. It doesn't hurt to attempt to talk some sense into what is obviously an obstinate head.” Zane's brows shot upward. *Had she just called him stubborn?* The thought amused him, and excited the hell out of him to. The lady was attractive, witty, and full of audacity. He wondered if Gianna had any other attributes, like was she receptive in bed?

“Zane?”

“Excuse me?” He hadn't heard one thing she just said.

“I was saying it is unethical for me to act as your brother's lawyer knowing what I know about you. Therefore, we can't be seen together or it could jeopardize your brother's case. I could lose my license. After you deliver me wherever we are headed I insist our contact be minimal.”

“Of course, I understand. I will attempt to make our communication brief.” He lied. She was staying at his place, so they would be practically living together, but he kept that information conveniently to himself. “Your concern is duly noted.” It wouldn't be respected, but mentally noted. *That was as much as she is going to get*, Zane thought, and click the reins setting the horses into motion.

The road ahead was rough terrain in some places, and occasionally the buggy swayed causing his thighs to press against ample hips. Gianna wanted to move over and put a decent amount of

space between them, but the man was large. No matter how many times she scooted from the direct contact, his thigh pressed firmly against Gianna, and it was discomforting.

He was not only tall, but also well formed, quite muscular, and unlike most males, she encountered in her profession. Though she could tell his mannerism and speech were refined with education. Possibly in Europe. He had spoken French without an English accent, flawlessly. Mr. Zane Banner was far from the gentlemen she encountered in polite society. The hopelessly boring, dramatically mundane, to the point their attention seemed forced, and unnatural. Practiced techniques of a gentlemen in rogue's clothing. Most attention, a means to get beneath her skirts, she knew. But, there was nothing theatrical about Mr. Banner. No pretense. She suspected what she witnessed was what she got. He was a bit abrupt, distant in nature, but nonetheless a refreshing change, Gianna thought.

The buggy bumped along the path. Again, he pressed into her thigh. The heat was stifling, and making her perspire. His closeness wasn't helping matters.

When the rode veered sharply, she was thrown against a solid shoulder. Even with the jacket he wore, Gianna felt the heat seep into her body, and set it on fire.

You are here for business, Gianna. She reminded herself.

There bodies tossed against one another again, and it was all she could do not to fall upon his lap.

"I apologize for the rough ride."

Gianna removed her hat, and started fanning herself.

Zane looked at her. "We should be out of the heat shortly," he said, apologetically.

"Of course." Her voice quivered, nervously. Gianna berated herself for acting like a schoolgirl. He was attractive in an untamed, primal sort of way. That didn't excuse her for acting as if she hadn't a lady's propriety.

The sun, heat of the rays, intensified the scent of Mr. Zane Banner to the point it was distracting. Untamed nature, leather, and pure male invaded Gianna's nostrils. She wasn't aware she inhaled sharply, and shuddered until his attention stray from the rode.

"Is there a problem? Would you like to rest a minute, and take in the shade of a tree to cool off?"

He could dip her in chilly water, and Gianna doubted that would help.

"No, carry on." Gianna encouraged anxious to get to their destination. The sooner she put some distance between her and Mr. Banner the better. She forced herself to stare straight ahead, and ignore the virile male sitting next to her.

Business, Gianna. You are here in a strictly professional capacity.

The horses sauntered along at an easy pace. Occasionally, jostling the carriage now that the road had leveled, and Gianna was thankful for small favors. Mr. Zane Banner wasn't as close, but his thigh still periodically moved against her side. A slight brush, but teasing.

"Would that be Laurel, as in Miss or Mrs.?"

"Miss. Being a lawyer hasn't afforded me the opportunity of pursuing a husband, I'm afraid."

"That is an odd way of stating it."

Gianna glanced at Mr. Banner, and then chose to look elsewhere and ignore the intensity of the most vibrant blues she'd ever encountered. Quite hypnotic. Equally entrancing against the bronze skin and black hair that fell freely around his shoulders.

"How so?"

"It's usually the man who gives pursuit. Not the other way around."

"Normally, I would agree with you, but New York is more modern. Not that the women are brazen, certainly not unladylike, and chasing men down on the street, but in these days of the desire for social equality sometimes we pursue. Though subtle, women are taking on new roles, and that includes making her interest known for a

man if that is the situation. Though a measure of aplomb is required if the lady is single, we mustn't wait to be looked over like prime horse flesh, and selected as if we are on the selling block waiting to be purchase by the highest bidder." The hint of disaccord the statement made Gianna envision came through in her tone.

"This desire for equality you speak of so eloquently. Is that why you chose to be a lawyer?"

"Somewhat. My father was a lawyer. He died recently."

Zane said, genuine. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. He lived a long and decent life. He had drive, desire, and a wish to help the unfortunate. Those of lesser station that couldn't afford a decent lawyer. He worked most of his cases, and won, knowing he would rarely if ever be paid. We lived a meager life, because of this, but we were happy. It seemed natural for me to follow his example. He was quite proud of me, in fact. After I graduated, I took over his practice."

"As he should be. Miss Laurel, I'm sure your unselfish forge into a male's profession with such conviction adds applause to the movement of equality between men and women."

Gianna smiled. "Thank you. I admit you are one of few men who believe such. I appreciate you saying it. Though I don't know you, it means a lot to me. I don't get very much praise. Especially when I win in court against a male opponent."

Zane nodded. He turned away, and concentrated on the path.

They sat quietly for a long minute until Gianna broke the silence.

"I sense you wanted to say more. If there is something you would like to say to me, feel free. Accustom to living in a man's world, I'm consistently in dialogue of frank speaking. Do you still have reservations about me handling your brother's case effectively? Would you like to challenge my credentials? It wouldn't be the first time."

"Not at all."

“Oh, I sense your desire to tell me something. If so, I assure you I can handle whatever you are thinking. It's odd, but my education and intelligence tends to make men...nervous.”

Zane chuckled. “Really? You make men *nervous*, Miss Laurel? I find that hard to believe.”

“It is the conclusion I have come to. Often men lose their train of thought, and actually stammer when speaking to me. I have no other explanation.”

Zane stop the buggy.

Gianna looked about wondering to the problem. She looked ahead to see if the road was block or something. “Is there a problem?”

“There could be, Miss Laurel.”

“Oh, my dear.” The thought of a long walk in the heat wasn't desirable in the least. “Has the horse gone lame? The wheel, perhaps?” she inquired, looking about. When she found nothing amiss, she switched around to find Mr. Banner staring at her.

She didn't care for the devilish grin on his face. It was mischievous, purely sexy, and made strange sensations burst alive between her thighs.

“Is there--ah, problem?”

“Men are nervous in your company, because your skin is flawless like porcelain. Eyes an undistinguishable hue, perhaps blue or green. If I had to assign a color, turquoise comes to mind. A pouty-kissable mouth, and hair the color of wheat. Shimmers, brighter then the sun. That is why men are nervous, Miss Laurel. It has nothing to do with your intelligence, though some fools might be intimidated by a female who is capable of forming two sentences together.” Zane looked at her pointedly. “I would not be one of those types of males.”

Gianna blinked. She blinked again.

Amusement curved Zane's lips. “You seem stunned at my admission, Miss Laurel. You said you were accustom to blunt speaking. Surely, I haven't offended you with the compliment. If so,

the gentlemanly thing to do is apologize, but, actually I'm not remorseful in the least." He grinned.

It took Gianna a minute, but she finally gained composure. She said, "I suppose I never thought about it like that. I assumed the worst."

"Because you are modest, Miss Laurel. Your faux pas is understandable. You have no idea how alluring you are, apparently."

It was a first for Gianna and unsure what to say she started furiously fanning her hat back and forth to cool herself.

Zane spoke, as if he was commenting on the weather. His voice casual, but spoken with silken emphasis. "You are so appealing, Miss Laurel, I have this insane desire to kiss you."

Gianna's mouth fell open.

Zane seized the opportunity. He brushed his lips lightly, teasing, over the full softness. A low murmur of satisfaction slipped. Then he increased the pressure of the kiss. His mouth was attentive, the tip of his tongue searching the slight crease beckoning her to open.

Gianna gasped, quivered feeling the slick heat invade. Then she put her flattened palms on the expansive chest.

Zane forced himself to stop.

"I apologize if I offended you." He lied.

"I...ah, no, ah not in the least. It just isn't proper, and I believe you have mistaken my statement about equality and, ah...women desiring--I mean *wanting* not desire, to be treated as men erroneously, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps." Not likely, but if that is what she wanted to believe he wasn't going to convince her otherwise. "Are you a virgin, Miss Laurel?"

She rapidly batted her eyes at Zane, unbelievably. She stammered. "Tha-that is certainly none of your business," she snapped, but couldn't stop the blush she felt rise in her cheeks.

"I thought you said you could take direct dialogue?"

"As it relates to business."

“My profuse apology, then.”

That little hat of hers started whipping in the air, and then Gianna clutched it so tightly it threatened to snap under the pressure. “I accept,” she whispered.

“Are you a virgin or not?”

Gianna groaned inwardly, rolling her eyes. “Mr. Banner, I'm not sure what you are thinking, but--”

“You know exactly what I'm thinking, Miss Laurel. I feel a strong attraction to you, and shamelessly I don't mind admitting it. You did say you could handle frank speaking, remember?”

“Whether or not a man has shared my bed is none of your business.” Her tone was more brisk than Gianna intended. Mr. Banner was unnerving. Not in a negative sort of way, but dangerously unsettling because he had this effect on her person she couldn't quite figure out. She wasn't accustomed to losing common sense and acting like she hadn't an ounce of proper upbringing.

Goodness, I allowed him to kiss me. I wanted the kiss, and heaven to mercy. I enjoyed it!

“I take your silence as a yes. We will go slowly.”

Gianna squared her shoulders, and set a stern look on her face, as if she was facing a worthy opponent in the courtroom. “Mr. Banner, I'm here for business. I intend to handle your brother's case, win, and that is all. Nothing more.”

Her vehement denial went over Zane's head. She sensed it was intentional.

“I preferred when you called me Zane.”

“Well, you might but...but I sense the need to keep things on a more, ah, business level.”

“That's fine by me, but I can't say I agree. You can call me whatever you want while in public, but when we're together,” he gave her a wicked grin, “I intend to feel your sweet lips whisper Zane over and over again, in sultry hums of rapture. Just so you know, Gianna.”

A lump lodged in Gianna's throat. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the mesmerizing stare that held her in rapt attention. Insane things, crazy feelings rippled between her thighs. Wanton feelings and unbridled desire, something she experienced for the first time, awakened a raw fever.

Zane knew the effect his words had on Miss Laurel, and it didn't bother him in the least. In fact, a proud sense of satisfaction made him grin smugly seeing her cheeks grow rosy by the minute. She was flustered.

"Mr. Banner, if I hadn't promised to help free your brother I would demand you turn this buggy around and return me to the depot. With haste." There was no conviction in her tone.

Zane laughed in her face.

Gianna huff at his arrogance.

Zane patted her thigh, gave an affectionate squeeze. "Calm down, Miss Laurel. We have time. Business before pleasure. You will take care of seeing my brother freed, and then," he eyed her, smoldering blues that mesmerized and were hypnotic held Gianna's attention. "I will take care of you."

Chapter 17

“Morning, Miss Jayce,” the marshal called out. His nose remained buried in the paper he was reading, a cup of coffee between his fingers, and a concentrated expression on his face as he read the news.

“Good morning, Marshal.”

Jayce hurried over to the jail cell. The hem of her skirt brushed against the wooden floor collecting dust, as she made her way over to where Gavin was waiting.

She hated everything about the small narrow cell with the meager furniture. A wooden table, and a cot, and a single window that she knew faced the back of the jailhouse where the hangings occurred. The view was torturous, certainly cruel, Jayce thought bitterly.

The small building was cramped, and the air stagnant. She felt like she had to suck air through a straw just to breathe every time she inhaled.

What she hated most was seeing Gavin behind bars, and caged like an animal.

Her thoughts a constant flux, all centering on concern for Gavin, while he seemed relaxed. He lay down on the cot, lengthy legs stretched out, and arms pillowed behind his head.

“You got a visitor, Gavin,” the marshal said, as if it wasn't obvious.

The marshal didn't seem a despicable fellow like most lawmen she encountered. He operated strictly by the book on the travel back from Abilene, and even chastised a few men who go out of line and became too frisky. It probably didn't sit well with a few of the men, but he allowed her to travel with the posse, and keep Gavin company. Not

that he ever left them alone, but she was thankful for his generosity nonetheless.

As soon as they reached Dallas, Gavin was escorted to the jailhouse and locked in a cell. The hour late, it surprised Jayce when the marshal left and then returned a few hours later with a tray of food for both of them.

She had the luxury of bathing at the boarding house, but Gavin didn't get the same consideration. But, the marshal allowed him to sponge off in the makeshift shower behind the jailhouse. It was nothing more than a bucket of water hung over a barrel, but it was welcoming after the long hard ride.

Gavin stood up. He walked to the bars, leaned forward, entwining his fingers around the cold hard steel.

"I thought I asked you not to come here again. I don't like you seeing me like this."

Jayce kept her tone conspiratorially low. "I had to come. The waiting, without seeing you day to day for a week is driving me insane." She leaned closer to Gavin. Her tone drops an octave lower. "I have good news for you," she said. She looked over her shoulder at the marshal immersed in the paper. "Zane hired a lawyer. She came all the way from New York to handle your case. Gianna seems smart as a whip, and I like her confidence."

"If Zane found Gianna, I trust her too. You look stunningly seductive, darling. A vision of splendor in satin and lace."

Jayce looked over her attire, as if seeing it for the first time. She was accustomed to wearing trousers, a blouse, and boots. On a whim, she had no idea why--okay, she knew why, but refused to elaborate on her wish to please Gavin by dressing in frills.

"Pretty as sunshine, darling."

She blushed. Her hand smoothed the satin skirt, nervously fingered the lace at the collar of the bodice that felt scratchy against her neck. The fancy hat on her head seemed odd and restricting with

her hair tucked beneath, but the storeowner convinced her it was the latest fashion, and that she looked as pretty as a picture.

“You been locked up too long,” she whispered, trying not to blush at his compliment. “And if you stay in here much longer, I’m sure any female will start to look appealing. Even ‘ole Tessy at the saloon,” she teased.

Gavin chuckled. He reached between the bars and softly caressed her cheek. “You’re a gambler, but I wouldn’t bet on it, darling.”

A warm rush simmered beneath Jayce’s skin.

“Gianna is trying to convince Zane to give himself up,” she whispered. “She thinks it’s best under the circumstances, but your brother is stubborn. No surprise there.” She saw her words amused Gavin. He grinned. “He isn’t willing to budge, though. His reluctance is making Gianna antsy, because it could jeopardize your case if somebody finds out she is helping you, and Zane is behind it.” Jayce looked at Gavin. “This is hard to ask, but can you talk to Zane? I don’t like it either, but I feel Gianna is right. She is confident both of you will win in court. I don’t know but...I trust her, Gavin. Besides, the town is filling with bounty hunters after Zane, and I’m fearful what will happen if they find out that he is here. They will not be as gracious as the marshal about bringing him in. They will kill Zane, Gavin.”

The truth of her words hadn’t eluded Gavin. The marshal kept him abreast of what was happening on the outside, and he knew what Jayce told him to be true.

“I will talk to Zane tonight, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

Jayce lean closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. “The marshal still hasn’t got wind of Zane’s frequent visits at night?”

“The marshal has a young pretty wife at home that he prefers to sleep with instead of a hard chair. He leaves me alone during the night, and returns early in the morning. I can’t say that I blame him, though. Securely locked behind bars, I’m not going anywhere.”

Standing on her tiptoes so she could reach his face, fingers gingerly searched the after five shadow along the jaw. He hadn't shaved in days, and she wondered why, but didn't ask. In the scheme of things, the reason seemed insignificant. She enjoyed the contrast of roughness against soft fingertips.

Gavin caught her fingers in his strong hand. He kissed the back of Jayce's palm. "You miss me, darling?"

"Yeah, I miss you, cowboy. I hate to see you behind these bars like you're some animal. You didn't kill that sheriff."

"We know that, but it's up to the court to set me free. I don't like it anymore then you, but I'm afraid there is no choice except to go along and see how matters play out. Don't worry about me, Jayce."

"I'm not worried, but fearful, Gavin. I'm about to go out of my mind."

Both of them knew the possibility that Gavin might hang was a strong probability. While the thought sent Jayce in a fit of hysteria if she dwelled on it too long, Gavin seem to take the notion calmly, and act matter of fact about the entire situation even though that was far from the truth. He would take whatever decision the courts decided, and deal with it. His worry had nothing to do with himself, but his concern for Jayce.

The last thing he wanted Jayce to witness was him swinging from the end of a rope. That's why he told Zane if something should happen, he should take Jayce away before the hanging, even if it meant dragging her away kicking and screaming. Something he knew his brother might possibly have to do. He knew Jayce.

"When is the judge due to arrive? I want things over," Jayce said, chewing her bottom lip nervously. "One way or..." Her voice broke with emotion. She struggled not to start sobbing like a child, and refused to dwell on what-ifs. "He should have been here days ago."

Gavin leaned against the bars. He shrugged nonchalantly, having no idea what delayed the judge. It was common, though. Towns didn't have a judge continuously about, but summoned one when needed.

Sometimes, because of the long distance a judge might have to travel to conduct court, marshals didn't request an official until they had at least two suspects behind bars to make the judge's long and tedious journey worthwhile.

The marshal leaned back in his chair. He tipped his hat back with his finger, and called over his shoulder. "Judge been summoned, Miss Jayce. Not sure why he's delayed, though."

"Thank you, Marshal."

"I hate to admit it, but the marshal is a likeable fellow."

Gavin nodded, but otherwise remained quiet.

Jayce opened her mouth to confide something to Gavin, and then reconsidered. The situation seemed complicated enough, and she didn't think it was fair to add to his worries. She wanted him to know, though. He should know, no matter the outcome of his trial, but Jayce couldn't bring herself to tell Gavin the news.

"What's the matter?" Gavin asked.

It amazed Jayce how Gavin could read her thoughts even when she put on a poker face. "Nothing," she said, quietly. Then drop her gaze, because Gavin stared at her skeptically, as if he knew she lied.

"Are you sure, Jayce?"

A credible smile eased over Jayce's features. She did her best to hide the fact she was keeping something from Gavin that he had a right to know.

"Positive. You look thinner. Haven't you been eating?" She asked, to distract Gavin's piercing gaze that seemed capable of drawing the truth out of her.

"The marshal is nice enough to bring me a tray of food. But, his wife isn't quite the cook, it seems." He grinned. "Of course, I have sense enough not to say such, but accept the food graciously, so as not to offend. Most of it is tossed through the window. The stray dog seems appreciative of the meals. You going to tell me what is wrong?"

It was just like Gavin not to allow her to circumvent a question he wanted answered.

"I'm under the weather," she lied.

"Then don't keep coming here, Jayce. Stay away, and take care of yourself. It's not worth your health." He gently chastised. "I expect you to listen to me, and not return again until the trial. Not that I want you there either, but I know better than to believe you will listen to me in that regard."

"You have that right, cowboy. I'm not going anywhere."

Gavin took a deep breath, and then slowly released it. "You're a stubborn woman." There was no vinegar in his tone, but a light teasing. He reached between the bars to touch her cheek. His fingers were warm, light strokes of heat against silky skin.

Jayce lay against his palm, and relished in the feel of his touch that she missed desperately. Then she looked at him. "Damn these bars."

Gavin chuckled, washing his fingers repeatedly over the velvety flesh. "Brazen woman." He grinned. He winked at her. "My sentiments exactly. Damn the bars, too." His mouth leaned forward, and Jayce rose to meet his kiss when he bowed down so she could reach him.

A tender kiss melded against Jayce's lips. The pressure light, but pleasing, and over much too quickly.

"Ain't no conjugal visits." The marshal called over his shoulder. He stood up to his impressive height, settled his hat further down on his head, and then turned to Gavin. "It's lunch time, and I'm sure the little lady is wondering what is holding me up. I'll be gone for about an hour. I'm going to lock the front door, 'cause the unrest with all the bounty hunters getting the town folks riled up, don't sit well with me. Bring you a tray when I return." He looked at Miss Jayce. "If you don't leave with me, Miss Jayce, I'm afraid you're going to have to stay inside until I return."

"I don't mind, Marshal, if it's okay with you."

The Marshal rubbed his chin, eyed her perceptively, and then headed for the door. "Don't expect no attempt to break him free, Miss Jayce. I'd hate to have to come after you both, and have to put such a pretty little thing behind bars. You would be an accomplice, you know." His words clearly a warning. An unnecessary one, but the marshal was a lawman, and it was best to make sure they had an understanding.

"We will be here when you return, Marshal." Gavin said.

"Afternoon then. See you when I return, Miss Jayce. I will inform my wife you are here, and needing lunch, too. Lord, that woman cooks up a storm. Enough for a small brood though it's just the two of us. There will be plenty left, so I don't mind sharing."

Jayce ignored Gavin's grimace at the marshal's offer of food for her, too. Then she smiled, when he had the nerve to look totally innocent about his antics. Trying to keep her lip from twitching, she said. "I appreciate it, Marshal. Tell your wife thank you for me."

The Marshal tipped his hat, and then left the building.

* * * *

Gavin waited until he heard the lock click before he reach between the bars and pulled Jayce as close as the steel barrier allowed.

This time the kiss was ravenous, wildly arousing, and thorough. Gavin ravished her.

By the time he let her go, Jayce panted softly.

"Gavin!" Jayce yelped, feeling his fingers working at the tiny button of the bodice. She swatted his hands away, but they returned with a fever. She looked over her shoulder at the door, nervously, and then back to Gavin. "You can't possibly be considering what I think you are?"

"I'm not considering it at all." Gavin's hands slip between the open bodice, and started kneading the swell of creamy fullness. He found a

nipple, salaciously began rubbing the hard peak between his fingers until the bead swelled to bursting.

“Gavin! You can't--we can't!” She protested, as he moved low and captured a nipple between his lips. “Lordy, lordy...this is insane.” She gasped, feeling the skirts raise, and then a hand glide between her thighs.

Gavin release the nipple to smile up at her. “You're bare beneath your skirts. How wanton, albeit terribly exciting.” He teased, immensely pleased.

“The heat is insufferable. I don't see how women wear so much clothing. It's suffocating enough to wear all the clothing society insist we cover ourselves with for the sake of modesty.” She glanced at him. “I couldn't bring myself to put on the constricting corset the dressmaker insisted I should wear. Just the thought gives me hot flashes. The uppity bitty looked at me like I'm a hussy, but frankly I didn't care.”

“You are not a hussy, darling, but deliciously unique, and it pleases me considerably.” His mouth went back to the tender assault. Fingers busily sought, and then eased inside the moist folds. He toyed with the plump moist lips a minute, and then slide a finger up the cleft. A leisurely undulation began, thrusting, finger-fucking the slick portal until Jayce trembled in his arms.

As soon as the hedonistic rhythm began, it stopped.

Gavin held Jayce's waist, and maneuvered her around until the fullness of her globes pressed against the cool bars. He unfastened his pants. His cock bobbed free, straining between his thighs pointing at the luscious ass displayed.

“Oh, lord...” Jayce swallowed, feeling the wet tip tickle the puckered entrance. “Gav-in?” Her voice unsteady, quaking in anticipation.

The moist lashes washed across the rosebud. The quick tongue teased, tantalized, slavishly consuming that made Jayce's knees buckle.

Gavin held Jayce up to keep her from falling. His lips whispered over the nape, licked along an earlobe, gently tugging the end.

“I want you, darling. I know the conditions aren't suitable, and I apologize for my lack of control, but propriety be damned. If I'm going to hang the last vision I desire is you withering against me. The look of pure splendor on your face. Remember the sweet feel of your succulent pussy quivering along my cock...”

“Please don't say that, Gavin. Please.”

“It's a mundane thought, but I'm afraid I tend to deal with facts no matter how daunting. Let us not allow what might be to dampen the few precious moments we have together. I much prefer to lose myself in the titillation of pussy before me.”

The first thrust entered Jayce like a sudden storm; swift and consuming. He buried the entire length of his cock in the moist tunnel. His hips swinging, forging deep, plunging relentlessly against the womb. The delicate stroke claiming, before the undulation of powerful hips began forging repeatedly. A slow flux and flow, an enticing tempo practiced with an art of finesse of a true lover. He repeatedly penetrated, languid measured thrusts--over and over again.

Delving slowly before the drives became more forceful and complete.

To add to the pleasure, Gavin reached around, and started circling the swell of clit expertly between his fingers. Kneading, gently tugging, and bringing the body to heightened bliss. Jayce began oscillating her hips, wiggling for more, pushing back--as much as the bars allowed--wanting more of the cock driving deep.

He could feel the walls of pussy spasm, and hug his cock tighter, and Gavin knew Jayce was almost there. That wasn't good enough, though. The desire was strong, and at the cusp of spilling over, but being a gentleman required he allow the lady release first.

The upstroke churned higher. His fingers increased the devious tempo against the clit. Gasping for air to fill his lungs, he strained not to let go before the lady surrendered.

Just when he thought he might erupt, Jayce shuddered and cried out in splendor.

It was then, and only then, that Gavin allowed himself to absorb the incredible feel of scrumptious heat, and let all the raging maleness building inside him free.

His last thrust compelling, almost savage, he let himself go. He gripped Jayce's hips to hold her still, and sent a calescent rush of semen deep within the womanly flesh.

Gavin held onto the bars, as Jayce wrap her arms around his waist. Their foreheads lay against each other's. They stood, both trying to recover from the aftermath of lustful fulfillment that still raged through their bodies.

When he could finally move, he kissed the sheen of sweat on Jayce's forehead. His lips sought her mouth where he planted a tender kiss. He whispered against the softness. "Damn these bars. I want to hold you."

"Soon," Jayce said, quietly.

Gavin's thoughts contradicted Jayce's words, but he held his tongue. Instead, he allowed her to relish in the moment. It would be obtuse to destroy her whimsical belief, no matter what he thought.

* * * *

The lock on the door clicked, and Jayce stepped away and hurriedly fixed her appearance while Gavin did the same.

The marshal stepped inside carrying a large tray, and put it down on the table. He busied himself with this and that, shuffling papers about, and then looking over the tray of food, as if trying to decide what to do next before he looked up at Gavin.

Gavin thought his actions odd. The marshal normally returned from a long afternoon lunch with his wife in a more jovial mood. "What's going on, Marshal?"

“The judge is in town, son. Just arrived minutes ago. Judge Richardson came down with an ailment, so another judge had to be summoned from several towns away to replace him. That's the reason for the delay.”

“Who is it?” Jayce asked, quietly.

“Judge Patchet. Don't know nothing about him. Ain't heard much in these parts.”

Jayce's knees wobbled hearing the judge's name. Even as far away as Nowhere, on her many travels from town to town, she'd heard of Judge Patchet.

The hanging judge.

Chapter 18

Foley waited until the man entered the room and secured the door, before he spoke. His tone cool and displeased. "I thought we had an agreement that you would stay out of the way. What are you doing here?"

The man walked into the room, and sat on the edge of the bed. He eyed the pretty girl's breasts a minute before he responded to Foley. "I came to make sure you hold up your end of the bargain. Gavin is behind bars, and he is going to hang. It's only a matter of time before Zane is dead, too."

"I know this." Foley arch his brow. "Ah, so you think I might try and double-cross you? You are here to ensure you get the money I promised when the Banner brothers are dead, and I secure all the wealth my father left behind?"

"Something like that." The man was careful to disguise the antipathy he felt for Foley. Against his better judgment, he decided to take Foley up on his offer to setup the Banner brothers, but greed overrode any reservations he had.

Foley was a self centered, spoiled brat, accustomed to looking down his nose at anyone he felt beneath him. That included him, until Foley realized his worth. Then like the snake he is, Foley slithered about, getting real friendly.

He detested men like Foley who hide behind their refinery instead of facing their adversaries with guts, and settled matters like men. Foley was fast with his gun. But, he doubted he could have picked a fight with the Banner brothers and won.

He had the power to exert authority, and use his alliance with the law to see things went his way. Something the man used without remorse and no regret when the outcome decidedly ended in his favor.

Foley is a fool, the man thought. Like all the others, he misjudged his character as the easy-going, personable, God fearing man who walked on the right side of the law, and was incapable of doing wrong. But, that is the perception he portrayed for good reason. He played the role well, and allowed Foley to believe he coerced him into helping bring the Banner brother's down. When in fact, he had already had the thought well before Foley approached him with the offer.

Foley's reason for wanting his brother's dead and his own were one of the same--they both wanted to get their hands on Stella's money.

The man didn't particularly like siding with the spineless fool, but after careful consideration, he knew in the end if his own plot to get Stella's money failed, there had to be a pawn he could use to toss to the authorities as bait.

"You will get your money. After my stepbrothers are dead, I assure you there will be plenty to go around. My father was an indiscriminate old fool who didn't know how to keep his cock away from unsavory flesh. He fucked anything, no matter the color, and didn't have the decency not to get bastards on the bitches. Not that I care about such, but thinking the tainted blood might receive a penny of *my* money is incomprehensible."

The man listened to Foley's ranting and ravings with little emotion. It's not that he hadn't heard it all before. The vehement tirade continued, passing by the man's ear as endless rattle. He let Foley vent, and listen to the sound of his own voice, which Foley seemed to favor.

"Are you done?" The man asked, as if the entire one-sided conversation bore him to tears.

Foley glared at the man. "Don't forget who is in charge here," he snapped.

The man smirked, and then chuckled low. A sinister grin showed. He stopped short of showing teeth. Foley was a fool, but the man wasn't one to underestimate people. He knew the outcome of such. He'd been unappreciated for his worth a long time, and it allowed the man to continue the farce of the life he lead. He played the country bumpkin well. Even perfected the accent necessary to make the town people feel like he was one of their own. And like with Foley, his pretense went over very well. No one suspect in all the years behind the law that the man wasn't what he appeared.

Foley looked at the man with disdain. The man added Foley to his list of derisive vermin that deserved to be squash like a bug.

Eventually, Foley would meet his demise. But, in the meantime, the thought of toying with Foley amused the man.

He couldn't exert his authority over the foolish pawn, not yet, but that didn't mean there was no way to see the simpering fool grovel. The thought made the man feel omnipotent, filled with supreme importance, and aroused at the thought.

The man ignored Foley's hissy fit as nothing more then that of a sulking child. His time would come later, and as all the times before in a matter of minutes, he would remind Foley who dominated between the two.

The man glanced at the girl giving her a cursory look before turning his attention away. She was pretty enough, and he understood why Foley seemed attracted to the girl, but she held little interest for the man when it came to appeasing his lust.

The fact the girl was deaf, and couldn't repeat a single thread of conversation between him and Foley added a little admiration for the girl, but otherwise the twit was there solely for Foley's amusement. Therefore, he allowed the girl to stay--and live.

That, and he didn't have to bother with listening to the fake accolades the whores normally boasted when he rutted between their thighs. It wasn't necessary, and he didn't care to hear such when he fucked. All the theatrical moaning and groaning grated on his last

nerve. He was thankful the girl had no choice, but to remain silent. The man just wished Foley would do the same, but luck wasn't on his side.

Foley was an entirely different matter. He was vocal in bed, and it irritated the man, but he understood it was a necessary sacrifice to listen to the vociferous applause when he fucked him. The saving grace, if things went according to plans, this would be the last time he had to suffer the nuisance.

The man watched with disinterest as Foley mounted the girl from behind, and started pounding flesh as if he had a vengeance to bear. He repeatedly plundered the girl's pussy, giving it his all, but the man knew no matter how hard he fucked the whore Foley was not going to come without his assistance. Unlike the man, Foley refused to accept the truth--he liked a hard cock and balls slapping his ass--that's what got both them off.

The man looked at the slender frame, fair hair, and blue eyes. Under different circumstances, he might be attracted to Foley since boyish features and an innocent appearance attracted his attention. But, he couldn't trust Foley. That squelched any desire he might consider to continue any type of relationship with the pawn after he gained the money Foley promised him.

In the meantime, it didn't hurt to amuse himself in the moment.

The man moved up behind Foley, cupped his face, and forced the pawn to face him. He brushed his lips over the full mouth, teasingly, and relished in feeling Foley quiver. "You *are* delighted I came, aren't you?" When Foley didn't immediately relent, the man forced the issue. His fingers tightened, entwined around in the loose strands hanging down Foley's neck. His hot breath lashed across Foley's cheek. He whispered, "I missed you." He lied, and didn't feel an ounce of remorse. The falsehood, the entire pretense was necessary. A means to an end--wealth beyond his wildest dreams.

He laughed when Foley attempted to show some restraint. A bluster clearly wasted on the man. He knew the truth whether Foley admitted it to him or not.

The whore whimpered when the man pushed Foley forward burying his cock deeper in her pussy.

Strong hands grab the round ass on display, spread the cheeks, and without consideration, slammed his hips forward burying his cock to the depths.

Foley moaned, wiggling enticingly, and went down under the assault.

The man grinned, drew back, and then forged ahead again. Within a matter of minutes, Foley was singing accolades, quivering, and pleading for more.

The man did not disappoint. He plummeted Foley's ass, driving deep on each stroke that sent Foley bumping against the girl. His attention was ravenous, searing, a steady beat of movements that sent his cock forging repeatedly in the snug portal.

Foley cried out in pleasure, and then crumpled limply crushing the girl beneath his weight when he released.

A sly grin eased over the man's features. He patted Foley's ass, and then withdrew, almost out, before thrusting back into the willing ass that had distended in acceptance. "As I thought," the man chuckled. Then with thoughts of nothing except the money that would soon be his, he came in an explosive climax that left him shuddering. It had nothing to do with Foley squirming wildly, and singing praises about his cock, but the pure revelation. The thought that soon, very soon, all that he desired would come to fruition is what drove the man's guttural cry of satisfaction, and then release.

* * * *

The marshal left the building, and walked across the street to the jailhouse. He had news for Gavin, and thought he should know.

“A bounty hunter is stirring up a ruckus outside. Fair minded, simple folks who usually mind their own business are beginning to mob outside. Blood hounds, all of them.” The marshal said, derisively.

He went to the cabinet that held rifles, and unlocked it and loaded two. He called over his shoulder as he worked. “Judge Patchet don't like what's brewing outside. Neither do I. Stella was a good woman, and we all mourned her death, but I can't allow a bunch of vigilantes to get hold of you, son. Stella wouldn't appreciate it.”

Gavin's brows furrowed. He wasn't aware the marshal knew his mother.

“I didn't know you knew my mother.”

The marshal offered, “Not that well, mind you. This territory belonged to Sheriff Grimes, but on occasion when he was indisposed...out riding with a posse, I came into town to watch over things. I ran into your mother on occasion. Right nice woman, she was. Liked her well enough.”

“I thought you lived in town, Marshal.”

“Not until after Sheriff Grimes was murdered. The town's people offered me more wages then I made in Kettle's Rock, so I moved me and the misses here. I hate to leave the people of Kettle's without a lawman, right nice folks, but my little wife can be very persuasive. She wanted to live in an area that wasn't as remote as our home so she could have more of a social life. Compared to Dallas, Kettle Rock is like mole against a mountain. Offered the little lady more entertainment.”

“I see.” The marshal never mentioned knowing his mother until now, and Gavin wondered why. Maybe because there was no cause to, but still the fact he didn't offer the information readily didn't sit well with him.

“Yep, sometimes you have to do things, son, to please your woman. That's just the way it is when you're right fond of the little lady. You will see when you go and get yourself hitched one day.”

“It's enlightening to hear your prospect that I might actually find that out for myself. If I don't swing from a rope, Gavin said, cynically.

The noise, a loud buzz of voices outside the jailhouse reached Gavin's ears.

The natives grew restless.

Chapter 19

The door swung open hitting the house with a bang when Zane stepped onto the porch. He walked down the steps, and then a few paces until he stood in the pebbled-lined walkway that lead up to the house.

He listened to the crunching sound his boots made against the tiny stones. He lit a smoke, and then inhaled, before blowing the puff into the dark.

The strong scent of outdoors after a heavy downpour lingered in the air. Pungent fragrances of earth, grass, pine, and the field of honeysuckle was more noticeable after a storm. He wondered why, and then ignored the insignificant question solely posed to distract from the true matter bothering him.

The moo of cattle could be heard in the distance. Crickets chirped mating calls. The stream on the border of the property that cut through the trees overflowed, and he could hear the gurgling, rushing of water over rocks.

Nature's song prevailed, serenity for the unrest settled over the landscape in calm after the storm, but was wasted on Zane.

Zane normally didn't pace, but he noticed he did a good job of wearing down the soles of his boots.

Judge Patchet weighed heavily in his mind. Of all the bad luck, Gavin got the one judge in the vicinity that Zane knew had a reputation for being a hard-nose. And if that didn't make his stomach grumble, the judge's daughter had been raped by a man of color--if the girl's story could have been validated. She refused to describe the attacker in any detail, but stuck by the convenient story right up until

the time she bore a child out of wedlock. The child's skin was darker than his own. In his mind that didn't mean rape, but cover up. He'd seen it happen often enough when a young girl got herself in trouble, she accused the easiest target to place the blame, and that usually meant an Indian. Right or wrong, his people were convenient suspects.

Due to Judge Patchet's prejudice his brother might hang. That set Zane's teeth on edge.

Zane flicked the butt into the night. He watched the tiny ember glow, and then sizzled out when it hit a puddle.

When the door to the house creaked, he turned around to see Gianna standing there watching him. She wrapped up in a shawl to ward off the chill. Her hands stayed inside the pocket of her gown. Her hair was free, like he liked it, flowing like a golden halo around shoulders.

He turned away and focused into the darkness. Nothing in particular held his attention.

Gianna stepped down from the porch, and walked over to where Zane stood. "It's going to storm again. Already another formation of clouds is rolling in," she said looking at the sky. "The lightening and thunder seem more striking, twice as loud in the country compared to New York. But, I admit the aftermath, the peacefulness that settles over the land is comforting...serene." She looked at Zane to see if he was paying attention. He was looking at her, but she could tell his thoughts were a million miles away. The disquiet was unsettling, and Gianna anxiously tried to feel the void with endless chatter. "After a storm in the city, people are milling about, hurrying to do this and that, to complete errands the rain delayed. I like the quietness after a country storm better. It smells different out here, too. The air fresher, nature is more prevalent and vibrant; wildflowers, grass, and pine. It's odd, but I even enjoy the musty scent of the cattle who roam freely over the land. This is all so new to me, different, but enjoyable to a city girl."

“Are you as good as you say?”

Gianna looked at Zane. “At the expense of sounding overly cocky, I believe so. I have never lost a case.”

“Any of those cases you won involve dark skin men?”

“No, but I have faith in the judicial system.”

Zane looked her up and down a minute, and then shifted his attention away. His voice low, barely audible. “That's because you have to, Miss Laurel. You're a lawyer. What else can you believe?”

“That is not fair.”

“Perhaps not through your eyes, but I see things an entirely different way, because I live in reality, and not a courtroom. The law has rules, but I have found they don't often apply equally to everybody, Miss Laurel. Rules of engagement tend to conveniently change when dark skin is involved.”

Gianna touched Zane's arm, causing him to look down. “I understand your cynicism, because you are concerned for your brother. But, I feel confident I will win his case, and set both Gavin and you free.” Her hold firmed. “Trust me. For once in your life trust somebody.”

The remark hit home, and unsettled Zane because Gianna effectively read him when most women couldn't or didn't bother to try to understand why he was the way he is.

Frustrated, Zane ran his fingers through his hair. He stepped away from the soothing touch, and it surprised him when Gianna gave chase. Her touch returned. She gingerly ran fingertips up and down his arm, soothingly.

From the first moment, he made his intentions know, Miss Laurel put a neat distance between them. She let him know there was nothing going to happen between them accept a plutonic relationship, and Zane accepted that. He didn't like it, but he wasn't going to force the issue if his attention wasn't reciprocated.

Gianna pressed into Zane. Her eyes searched the heavy lines of worry etched into his eyebrows. "I'm not going to let you or Gavin hang. I know neither of you is guilty," she said, with conviction.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just know. Call it my keen intuition, but I knew from the first moment I read your letters that the Banner's brother are not capable of murder. So, stop trying to scare me off." She smiled. "I don't frighten easily, Mr. Banner."

For a brief second eyes collided, clashing, more intense then the faint flash of lightening in the distance.

"That is what you are trying to do, isn't it?" Gianna rose on tip toes, but she still fell short of reaching the top of Zane's chin.

For some reason, Zane felt compelled to bow down to her. Their lips were within kissing distance, breathes mingled, but he didn't take advantage of what Gianna obviously offered.

Gianna looked at Zane. A slight lift to the corner of her mouth. Her smile was beguiling. "Are you going to kiss me or will I have to stand here all night feeling like an utter fool, because I'm throwing myself at you?"

"You have no need to feel foolish, Miss Laurel."

"You don't seem interested. How should I feel?"

"My cock is hard, Miss Laurel. Trust me, I'm feeling very receptive."

"Yet, skeptical?" She challenged. None confrontational.

"Maybe it's just curiosity, Miss Laurel. I'm wondering why the sudden change of pursuit? To gain my trust perhaps, and to convince me to throw caution to the wind, and rely on what I have most of my life."

"To run?" Gianna felt him stiffen. "Even if you and Gavin escape, and return to Europe, neither of your consciences will be free. The entire matter will hang over your heads like a sharp pendulum, and as long as you both live the thought justice was never served will eat you

alive. Can you live the rest of your life knowing you and your brothers are thought of as cold, heartless killers?"

"Though you make a valid point, Miss Laurel, it still doesn't answer my curiosity as to why the sudden acquiescence?"

Her hesitation solidified matters in Zane's mind. Not that he believed the lady was an opportunist, but even he had to admit winning a case of this magnitude--two colored men accused of murdering a white man--could be a huge boost to a lawyer's credentials.

His mistrust wounded Gianna, but she rationalized and understood Zane's point. "I have always felt this way. But, in order to retain a measure of professionalism, I convince myself to keep away from you."

Zane eyes roved over Gianna's face a minute, as if he tried to read more into the words, or perhaps what she refused to admit.

Gianna merely stared back, undaunted by the scrutiny.

The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance. A heavy roll of dark clouds covered the illumination of the moon. The sky was starless and shrouded as the formation of another storm threatened the horizon.

Soft pellets of rain began to fall. A brisk breeze settled over the area.

Gianna looked up, as drops hit her face. "It's raining." She said, as if Zane didn't know. "In a few minutes when the wind picks up and starts blowing we are going to get soaked. In a matter of minutes, both of us will be dripping. We should go inside," she said, and then turned to leave.

Zane caught her elbow, and turned her around. "I'm still waiting for my answer."

Gianna met his stare. "I do believe I answered your suspicions. Did I not?"

"You responded, but that is not what I wanted to hear, Miss Laurel."

That was all he was going to get, and Gianna let him know this by changing the topic. "Why do you insist on referring to me as Miss Laurel instead of Gianna? Or Giggie, as most of my friends do?"

"Perhaps I'm trying to remain politely formal."

Gianna laughed, coquettishly. "Is formality really necessary since it is obvious were we are going to end up?"

"And where is that, Miss Laurel? As far as I can tell we are standing in a downpour, albeit foolishly, having a conversation. What do you think?"

"Is it always going to be like this with you, Zane? No matter how intimate we are, will the invisible barrier you have conveniently shielded yourself in remain between us? Must I fight through all the mistrust and injustice you feel, and harbor like a ball of tangled twine inside. You wear impenetrable armor, Zane," she said, pointedly. Striking another nerve in Zane that she could read him so well.

A bolt of lightning flashed through the darkness.

Thunder roared causing the ground to vibrate.

The rain became a downpour soaking through their clothing, and plastered the material to skin.

Gianna shivered, pulling the shawl closer around her shoulders for some semblance of protection. She wiped wet strands of hair from her cheek and forehead. She shifted her attention to Zane who seemed unaffected by the sudden chill.

"I'm wet and cold. I'm going inside. You can stay out here if you like or join me inside to put on dry clothing, sit by a nice warm fire, and enjoy a cup of strong black coffee." Those were her last words, before Gianna turned and walked away.

Zane called out. "I don't like black coffee."

Gianna turned, and looked at him. "I have cream."

Zane walked over. Purposely invading her personal space just to see the reaction. Gianna didn't step back, but met him boldly.

He cupped her nape drawing her forward. His lips softly brushed the honey-lace mouth. "I don't mind a warm fire, but my preference is to heat you, Miss Laurel, sans clothing."

A light fluttery giggle teased Zane's lips when Gianna laughed. Then her expression turned serious. "Will you continue to call me Miss Laurel even after we are naked together? Somehow, the formality doesn't seem...appropriate. Very impersonal."

Zane leaned closer. His lips stole a quick kiss. Large, strong hands caressed Gianna's cheek. "Probably not, but if I do, be aware when we are naked, and I'm thrusting between your thighs that there is not a damn thing impersonal about it," he said, and then kissed her hard, melding his lips against the willing openness as Gianna leaned into the licentious attention.

Their kiss was ravenous, sending hotspurs of pleasure rippling down Zane's spine, and made his cock react and turn to a stone phallus.

Gianna whimpered, and then fell against the powerful force when he lifted her in his arms.

* * * *

Gianna lay splendidly naked on the bed waiting.

Zane undressed with the adeptness that told her he was accustomed to removing his clothing with haste. *Undoubtedly, from the numerous opportunities of gracing women's beds*, Gianna thought, and then pushed the ridiculous jealousy aside. It was ludicrous to think just because he was the first for her, a man like Zane Banner had never been intimate before.

When the steamy, muscular, body lay gently over Gianna the feel of Zane surprised her. His body was hard and taunt and she assumed would be rough. Instead, his muscles, and velvety skin were hot to her touch, and pleasing. Her searching fingertips outlined his smooth

male contours. Such a contrast to her own body. The feeling was wonderful, and terribly exciting.

Tentative, curious hands caressed Zane's body. Having never felt a naked man before, intrigue spurred boldness until her fingers slide along his defined back, over honed thighs, to the swell of his butt, and then lower still.

"I like the feel of your hands all over me. Especially on my butt," Zane hummed over the dewy flesh of her neck. He nibbled there a second, and then rose, moving so she could get to his front. "Touch me...here," he said, covering her hand. He moved her slender fingers over his cock, and then showed Gianna the rhythm he enjoyed.

The shaft, long and thick, felt like satin covered granite. "Oh, you are apparently large everywhere." The tone had hints of trepidation.

Zane threw back his head and laughed. When he looked at Gianna again, she swore glints of sparkles flashed in his clear sky eyes.

"I thought you said you didn't frighten easily?" He teased. Then Zane's expression turned serious. "You never answered my question earlier, Miss Laurel." He refreshed her memory. "The first day we met I recalled asking you a question about your innocence...or not."

"Is it really important since you are about to find out?"

His fingers caressed leisurely over a full breast. he stopped to tease a nipple, before dipping his head low and suckling the peak deep between greedy lips.

Gianna gasped, arching into the wondrous toasty feel.

Zane swirled his tongue over one peak, and then another until moisture glistened the buds. Then he playfully tugged the turgid bead between his teeth, but was careful not to apply too much pressure. His fingers slide down between their stomachs and caught delicate fingers, and encouraged Gianna to continue stroking, when she stopped.

Then he returned to ravish the delectable quivering breasts. His mouth feasting thirstily, licking, suckling the peaks until they were like ripe berries ready to be pluck.

With care, he nudged her thighs wider so he could get to the moist pussy he felt with his searching fingers. A finger eased between the folds, and gently prodded the labia apart. A startled sound escaped her when he thrust a finger up inside the sweltering wet cleft.

"You are small...very tight." Delving and stretching, he worked to distend the channel. Then he withdrew, moistened his finger with saliva, and then pushed two fingers deep. The pussy walls clenched, holding snug around the foreign penetration. Methodically, widening, he began a leisurely ebb and flow. "I don't want to hurt you. I suspect I'm your first, but I need to know before I thrust inside you. My cock is burgeoning, and I'm feeling rapacious, and deliriously wanting to surge inside this sweet pussy. But, I have no desire to hurt you unduly." He looked at Gianna. "Confirm what I'm dealing with here."

"You are the first," she admitted, avoiding his eyes. "I apologize."

Zane's brows furrowed. He captured her chin forcing Gianna's face up. "There is no need to apologize. Why would you think such?"

"My friend told me men prefer experience in bed," she said, quietly.

"I don't disclaim it has its advantages, but it certainly isn't a requirement."

"Then you are not disappointed?"

Zane grinned, maneuvering their bodies until Gianna was on top and straddling his waist. "Do I look disappointed?"

"No."

"Then there is your answer, Miss Laurel."

"I do wish you would stop being so formal."

Zane chuckled. He didn't respond, but slowly guided her hips downward until the tip of his flaring cock-head felt the enflamed pussy.

Potent arms wrapped around the slim waist, and arched into the descent, controlling the movement of his hips upward until the thick crown suffocated the bulbous head the tiniest bit. Then he thrust

upward, more...more still, until the trembling frame was impaled with the towering length. When he felt the thin barrier, Zane stopped.

"Miss Laurel," he waited until Gianna released the breath she held. She looked down into the smoldering blues. Her voice quivered. "Yes."

"I'm honored to be the first," he murmured, and then surged upward tearing through her innocence. He groaned, shuddering, but forced himself to wait until she got passed the foreign invasion. When he felt her relax, he started a slow undulation of hips. His tone sounded almost anguished. He said, "And the last, Gianna" He began thrusting into the heat, claiming her as his own.

Gianna was awed the by the compelling force. The virility of driving strength. The feel of deep, but measured strokes that heightened the pleasure of being filled to capacity.

The discomfort of his first entry long sense evaded, Gianna basked in the titillating movements...a steady flux and flow...building friction of bliss that Gianna found wonderful.

"Move with me," Zane said, showing her the hedonistic tempo that would send them both into ecstasy.

Gianna oscillated her hips, and then crushed her breasts falling against the solid chest. She rode the powerful tower, keeping pace with the driving heat submerged so deeply. The largess of maleness forced acceptance, rode higher, filling her womb.

A constant and strong heartbeat thumped wildly inside her breast. On the other hand, was that Zane's beat she felt? Gianna couldn't tell. She decided it didn't matter. Their bodies melded as one. A powerful driving force and the give of womanly flesh, meshed so that it was difficult to decipher where Gianna began and Zane ended.

Soft cries of satisfaction escape, as Gianna felt the indescribable pleasure building between her thighs, as the moving heaviness glided easily up and down...a steady fluid motion of heat.

She clutched the expansive shoulders, falling against the curve of where shoulders and neck met. Her teeth nipped, taking tiny bites out

of flesh, as a flagrant wave of sensations burst alive inside her body, as an orgasm erupted like sudden flashes of lightening, sending tendrils of fire running through her veins.

Gianna cried out again. More vociferous this time, drowning out the sound of distant thunder. Repeatedly calling Zane's name over and over again as the release stole all conscious thought, and left a withering form of mush limply holding Zane.

"Ah, Gianna..." Zane moaned, and then fulfilled the desire raging inside since he first laid eyes on Gianna. His entire body tensed, and then twitch erratically, as the feel of rushing roared up the stalk.

Then with as much control as he was capable of--his timing too damn close--he lift Gianna, and jerked free. Sending an eruption of semen squirting over her belly, thighs, and cover.

Zane blew out a breath, tampered the fever, and then sought something to cleanse Gianna. She was covered with his cum. He remained silent, wiping away the residue. He performed the required tasks, and then tosses the towel to the floor.

"Why did you do that? Withdraw?" Gianna ask, watching.

"You were dripping." That was not what she meant, and Zane knew it.

"I *meant* not release inside me?"

"I know for a fact you weren't protected, so I did what I must to avoid the consequences of our action."

"*Consequences?* Sounds so...informal. Not to belabor the description, as it pertains to us, but it continues to surface."

Zane lay down beside Gianna pulling the lushness into the fold of his arms. He kisses the tip of the cute nose. "That is your misconception, Gianna. Besides, when we are wed I will continuously fill you with so much seed you are bound to remain with child during the entirety of our marriage."

Gianna struggled to move, wanting to see Zane's face, but he kept pushing her head down onto his shoulder.

"Married?" Her brow lift.

“That is what I said, Miss Laurel.” Gianna pinched. He chuckled. “We are getting married, Gianna, and I will not take no for an answer.”

“Zane--”

“Shh--” He listened, then uncurled Gianna, and jumped from the bed. He walked to the window, and moved away the curtain peering out into the night.

Gianna set up in the bed, covering her breasts with the cover. She looked at Zane, noticing the stiff composure that settled over his frame.

“What is it?”

“Riders are coming,” Zane said, and then stalked over to the bed. Without further explanation, he began dressing.

Gianna stared, concern evident in her wary features, watching as the gun belt was secured around his waist, and then the leather strap tied about his thigh. He checked the weapon, and then shoved the gun back in the holster.

His voice was abrupt. “Get dressed.”

“Zane, what is it?”

“Can you handle a gun?”

Gianna moved her head back and forth, telling Zane no. He walked back to the bed, and handed out a small pistol. “It's ready to fire. If someone comes through the door other than me, shoot.

The gun was heavy in Gianna's hand, unfamiliar. She dropped it, as if the metal scorched her fingers.

“Do as I say, Gianna.” She flinched at his abrupt tone. “Ah, dammit woman.” He marched back to the bed, and put the gun back in her hand. “I apologize for being brisk. But, there are ridings coming fast, and until I know why, I can only assume the worst.” He put the gun back in her hand. “Stay put.”

* * * *

Zane waited on the porch for the men to arrive. He kept his gun holstered, but ready, waiting. He laid the shotgun against his shoulder, and watch as the band of men came closer.

As soon as the first man's face came into view, he instantly recognized the man as one of the Marshal's deputies.

His tone cool, unwavering. "What is your business?"

"The marshal sent us. He wants you to come to town. There is trouble at the jailhouse, and he thinks you should be there."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"The lady, ah, Miss Jayce told us."

This was serious. If Jayce gave up his location, Zane knew Gavin needed him.

"There are a group of town folks who are antsy. They are demanding justice, and don't seem inclined to wait for the trial," the young man said.

"A bunch of vigilantes," another man said, spitting tobacco before he looked at Zane. "We believe in law in this town. Your brother will stand trial like any other man. You too, and if there is any hanging to be done a jury will decide."

All the men nodded.

"What's going on?" Gianna asked from the doorway.

Zane shift his attention and glared at her. "I thought I told you to stay put."

Gianna ignored the displeased scowl, and pushed pass Zane. She observed the men, and then repeated the question since no one seemed inclined to answer the first time. "I asked what is going on?"

The young deputy nod. "Evening, ma'am. You the lawyer?"

"I am."

"I suppose you should come along too, ma'am. Judge Patchet is having a fit, and is selecting a jury tonight for the trial come morning."

"Without my presence? I should say not," Gianna fumed.

Before Zane could protest, she turned around in a whirl of skirts, and disappeared inside. Within a few minutes, she returned carrying a satchel, a wrap, and a hat, with stern concentration on her face. "Lead the way, gentlemen."

Zane caught Gianna's elbow before she could take a step from the porch. "Maybe you should stay here until I make sure it's safe." He had witnessed more than his fair share of unruly crowds bent on blood.

"Gavin and you are not about to go on trial without representation."

"The judge is just selecting a jury, Gianna. There is no need for you to be present."

"I beg to differ. What kind of lawyer would that make me if I allowed any type of action to occur concerning the case and didn't attend every step of the way?"

Zane said seriously, "A live one. If those men are after Gavin and me, they might not take kindly to interference. Especially if you are on the wrong side. Understand?"

Gianna snatched her arm free. "Well, the men who protest to me can go to hell in a hand basket," she snapped. Zane lifted a brow at the spicy retort. "I took this case, because from the first moment I knew you and Gavin are innocent. I will be darned if I stand by and allow anyone to make a mockery of justice, because of stupid prejudices." Planting her fist on her hips, she eyed Zane. "Now, come along or stand here all night if you wish, but I'm leaving."

Zane pulled Gianna close. He spoke for her ears only. "I like this side of you, Miss Laurel. Who would have thought I got myself involved with such a little spitfire. But, after we are married, we are going to have a serious discussion about your need to take control."

Gianna rolled her eyes dramatically. "Fine. Let's go. Time is wasting," she uttered, relenting, because to squander precious moments debating with what she considered a ridiculous ego, seemed useless.

Chapter 20

Overnight the saloon turned into a temporary courtroom. The furniture was rearranged, all the chairs pushed back for the audience except the few where the jurors would sit. A table and chair was positioned up front for the judge. One chair was situated next to it for the witnesses. And two tables with chairs were positioned directly in front of the judge's area for the prosecutor and defense lawyers and clients.

A short, portly man with a wide forehead, and pinched lips sat at the prosecutor's table. As soon as she stepped into the courtroom, and sat down at the defense table, the attorney vehemently protested her presence. The way he looked down his nose at Gianna made it obvious he had taken an immediate dislike to a woman defender. Immediately, Gianna's credentials were challenged. Politely, but firmly Gianna let the pompous man know she had impeccable accreditation, and deserved to be in the courtroom as much as his right.

This wasn't the first time she received such a response, and Gianna assuredly knew it would not be the last. She promptly ignored attorney Holmes for what he was--a name her politeness required she didn't voice aloud even though every fiber inside ached to do.

The small area was crammed with curious onlookers. Other town folk who couldn't find a seat the judge allowed to stand in the back of the room. Judge Patchet gave everyone in attendance a stern lecture about interfering with the proceedings.

The trial carried on for two days now, and the town folk along with neighboring people packed into the saloon in hopes of hearing

first hand the outcome of the case against two dark skin men, and their lady lawyer. Even the newspaper gave daily accounts, and the story was telegraphed to other towns, and as far as New York, at what all believed stood to be history in the making.

Judge Patchet banged the mallet on the rickety table causing it to rock. "I said silence!" he shouted.

Gianna just discounted a key witness story, and exposed the man as a possible liar. The disbelief sent the audience into a paroxysm of whispering.

"Please continue, Miss Laurel," Judge Patchet, motioned to Gianna.

"Now, Mr. Bellpen, you have already admitted you spent the evening consuming large amounts of whiskey in the saloon. Is that correct?"

"I wouldn't actually call it *large amounts*, Miss Laurel. That description don't seem fit simply 'cause a man has a few sips now and again."

Gianna stared at the man for the effect. He shifted nervously in the chair. "Okay, Mr. Bellpen, do you mind telling the court exactly how much liquor you consumed the night before the murder of Sheriff Grimes?"

"Can't rightfully remember." His tone was all smug.

"One shot? Two, three...an entire bottle, Mr. Bellpen?"

"It wasn't as if I was keeping count."

Gianna turn to the saloon owner. "Mr. Talbot was questioned earlier, and he is ready to testify just how many drinks he served you. So many in fact, he said you had to be carried out of the saloon."

"Objection, Your Honor!" Holmes was on his feet. "If the saloon owner is to give testimony then allow him to do such. Otherwise, Miss Laurel is putting words in Mr. Talbot's mouth."

Judge Patchet looked at Gianna. "He makes a valid point. Mr. Talbot able to speak for himself?"

"He certainly is, Your Honor."

“Then either call him as a witness or stop with your rendition of the accounting. It's called hearsay, and there won't be none of it in my court.”

“I'm sorry, Your Honor.” Gianna turned to Mr. Bellpen. “Perhaps I should call another witness first. Sorry to waste your time,” she said, and walked toward the table. She heard Mr. Bellpen snicker. She paused, and looked at the witness a long minute. She spoke directly to the man instead of the judge. “I intend to recall this witness later, but in the interim, Your Honor, I would like to call Miss Ruthie May to the stand.”

“Ruthie May?” Mr. Bellpen uttered. “I thought you was calling Talbot?” He squirmed about when one of the saloon girls stood up.

“Ruthie May is ready to give testimony--”

Mr. Bellpen hopped from the seat. He glanced nervously at his wife who came to the stand. Her arms were planted on ample hips. Mrs. Bellpen was a large buxom woman, who wore scowl. Mr. Bellpen's Adam's apple bobbed. And Gianna could tell he swallowed hard, sucking his mouth dry. “Alright, darn it. Ain't no cause to get nobody else involved in this here testimonial. I admit, I had enough whiskey that night I couldn't see straight let alone be up early Sunday morning. I was there, but on the street sleeping it off.” He looked at his wife. “I swear it, honey-pie. I spent the entire night in the bed of my wagon,” he confessed sheepishly.

The crowd erupted again.

Judge Patchet hit his gavel once, hard. The audience simmered down. He leaned toward the witness. “So, what you are saying is you outright lied? Perjured yourself? I could give you time for that, Mr. Bellpen, but I have the suspicion you might prefer a few days of hard labor compared to what your wife has in store for you.”

Mrs. Bellpen charged up to the stand, and grabbed her husband by the ear. “You slept in the wagon, huh? You didn't take the wagon that night, you lying cheating fool.” The wife dragged Mr. Bellpen across

the room, occasionally stopping to give him a good wallop upside the head.

The town folk broke out in ruckus laughter.

Judge Patchet let the crowd carry on a few more seconds, to break the tension in the room, and then called for order. He eyed Holmes. "You have a right to cross examine the witness, but I suspect you don't want to."

Holmes's lip curled in derision. He glared at Gianna. "No, Your Honor. I do not want to cross examine the witness."

"Fine then. Miss Laurel are you ready to call your next witness?"

"I am, Your Honor. I call Henry Lawson to the stand."

A slender boy with freckles and orange-red sunburst hair walked to the witness chair.

Gianna could see the boy was nervous.

She smiled at Henry, and then assured him it was going to be okay before the interrogation started.

"Now, Henry will you please repeat what you told me about the morning of Sheriff Grimes death."

"I was walking toward the church, Sunday school, you know. It's early. I looked over at the jailhouse, and saw two men enter. I took notice, because they were different then other town folk. Their horses were prime flesh, and looked like they cost a pretty penny. Not like the nag my pa gives me to ride."

The crowd chuckled. Judge Patchet set a stern look over the audience to silence them.

"You saw the two men enter the jailhouse. Did you see them leave?" Gianna asked.

The boy moved about in the chair as if he had ants in the pants. His eyes shifted to his pa, and then back at Gianna. "Nope. Sure didn't. Sunday school is a long time."

"So, as far as you know, Henry, the men went inside, but they could have immediately left and you wouldn't have known?"

"Didn't see them leave."

"Henry, this is very important. Did you see the men's faces?"

"Nope, ma'am, but I know it was those two," he pointed to the defendant table at Gavin and Zane. "I know it was them."

Gianna smiled. "How do you know that if you didn't see their faces? How can you be so sure? Did they wear jackets, hats?"

"They were all covered up, but like I said it was them, ma'am. They different."

"Mr. Chun who does the laundry is *different* too, isn't he, Henry? The man that helps at the stables is *different*. Even Mr. Adolph who runs the local store is *different*. So, how can you be sure the two men are the defendants just because you say they are *different*?"

The crowd started murmuring among themselves. Gianna made a valid point.

Henry sulked down in the seat. "I just knows it, that's all. It was them." He pokes a finger at Gavin and Zane.

"Thank you, Henry," Gianna said.

Judge Patchet looked at Holmes. "You want to examine the witness?"

Holmes jumped up, and strode to the witness chair with an arrogant swagger. "Differences in people shouldn't be ignored as nothing, Henry."

Gianna was on her feet instantly. "Objection, Your Honor. Mr. Holmes statement is adding prejudice."

"Sustained." Judge Patchet pointed his gavel at Mr. Holmes. "I will have none of that. Proceed, but with caution."

"How was Sunday school, Henry?"

Again, the boy squirmed about. He glanced at his pa before answering. "What do you mean? Boring."

"What lesson did you learn? What part of the bible was preached? What other children were there with you that day? How long did you attend?" Mr. Holmes fired rapid questions at the boy. "Did you stay for services afterward or immediately head for home?"

"I, ah...don't recall none of the details."

Mr. Holmes leaned forward in the boy's face. "Not even the other children who were there that day? Surely, you can recall one face of a friend? What about how long you stayed in church? If learning the Lord is as boring as you say," he scoffed. "I would remember every minute I was made to suffer."

"I was there a long time." Henry defended, slumping further in the chair.

Judge Patchet eyed the boy skeptically. "You swore to tell the truth, young man."

Mr. Holmes grinned like a Cheshire cat. "It's important for you to tell us the truth, Henry. I don't think you attended church at all. Did you?"

"Naw, I didn't attend church. I played hooky. Me, and Tommy went fishin' instead," Henry mumbled. He intentionally avoided his pa's stern look. "We caught a lot of fish that day. Enough my pa didn't have to worry 'bout putting food on the table," he said, as if that vindicated his lie about attending church, to his pa. "But, I seen the two men enter the jailhouse, and I still say it was them, because me and Tommy were sitting on the sidewalk fixin' our poles, and when I looked up they were walking inside. One of them, the Indian--"

"Objection, Your Honor. Prejudice."

"Sustained." Judge Patchet directed the boy to pick another term to describe Zane.

Henry pointed at Zane instead. "He looks right at me. Stared at me a long time. Thought fer sure I was 'bout to be scalped."

Gianna rolled her eyes, and bound to her feet. Before she could object, Judge Patchet held up his hand. "Sustained. The jury will ignore that remark."

Mr. Holmes turned to the jurors. He spoke eloquently, all pomp and circumstances, as if he performing in the pulpit. "Henry may have used, ah, what some believe unsavory terms to point out one of the defendants, but the facts are, he was present the morning of the murder. He honorably admits he lied about attending church, but the

facts remain the same. The boy did see the Banner brothers enter the jailhouse, which proves they were at least present at the crime scene. Folks, we can't dispute the truth, here. The boy's accounting can't be refuted. He saw the Banner brothers enter the jailhouse, and then," he paused for the effect. "Sheriff Grimes was found dead."

The audience nodded, whispering amongst themselves.

Judge Patchet turned to Gianna. "Redirect, Miss Laurel?"

"No, Your Honor." She could have brought up the fact the boy was a liar, on many accounts, but that would look like she harassed the child. She couldn't afford to turn the jurors off by badgering the boy.

She stood up. "However, I would like to state for the record that just because Henry witnessed Gavin and Zane Banner enter the jailhouse doesn't mean they committed the murder, as Mr. Holmes's alluded to in his statement."

"Duly noted, Miss Laurel. You can step down, Henry. Next witness."

The trial continued throughout the morning, and dragged on into the late afternoon. Several more witnesses stepped forward. Not one of them could undeniably confirm seeing Gavin or Zane present at the jailhouse, and certainly couldn't testify to witnessing either brother kill Sheriff Grimes.

Gianna believed Mr. Holmes purposely paraded person after person before the jurors to drag the trial on and make it tedious to the point she was sure a few jurors weren't even listening. One man had to be awakened several times.

None of the town folk could honestly point the finger at Gavin or Zane, but instead, character witnesses for Sheriff Grimes were presented. All the people gave detailed accountings of what an honest, and God-fearing man the sheriff was, and how it was just plain wrong to be shot down like an animal.

She could have objected to some of the statements that were clearly said to further prejudice the jury against Gavin and Zane as

outsiders, but after a continuous attempt to object, only to be overruled, she figured there was no point. Whether the town people heard it from the people on the stand or in the saloon, store, or walking down the street later, it all amounted to the same fact. Gavin and Zane were outsiders, and the town's people knew this without having to hear it out loud.

Mr. Holmes knew exactly what he did. If he couldn't get the Banner brothers on facts, he could plant the seed of suspicion in the folks mind that no one in town could have been capable of killing such a likeable man who didn't have a single enemy, so it had to be the outsiders.

After the countless accolades to Sheriff Grimes, Gianna was relieved to hear the judge call a halt to the trial for the day. They would resume tomorrow. She needed the time to think, and figure out how to get the trial back on track. Prove Gavin and Zane's innocence, and not how wonderful the sheriff had been. Not that she discounted Sheriff Grimes was a great man, but that wasn't the point.

Chapter 21

Gianna sat on the porch rocking back and forth in the chair, absorbed in her thoughts when she saw a lone rider approaching. She stood up, and squinted to see the man on horseback.

She didn't like carrying a gun, but Zane had been persistent, and he made a valid point about the unrest the trial caused. She'd reluctantly relented. Already she had received two outright threats, and crude racial slurs, tossed in her direction when she walked down the street.

Most of the town folks were amicable, even friendly toward her. Especially the women who believed she did a heroic thing acting as the defense. The women obviously into the women's movement for equality all but cheered when she walk by. She found it ironic, though, that even though being a lawyer helped their cause for equality, some shunned her because she was defending two “colored” men.

She supposed equality was specific to gender, Gianna thought cynically.

The man stopped, and dismounted. He walked up to the porch, and tipped his hat. “Ma'am, I heard you are the lawyer for Gavin and Zane Banner?”

“I am.”

“You are making quite a stir in these parts, and beyond. All the way to Arizona where I've been for the past month. The town newspaper gives a weekly accounting of the trial. When I learned it had to do with the murder of Sheriff Grimes I got real curious, and started paying attention.” The man removed his hat revealing dusty

blonde hair and dulcet gray eyes. He didn't look no more then a boy, but it was obvious he was older then Gianna believed. "I guess you're anxious to hear why I'm here?"

"I admit being curious, Mr.--"

"Oh, sorry, ma'am. My name is Davey Jackson, and I was a deputy under Sheriff Grimes for a stint."

Gianna's interest escalated.

"In fact, I worked for the sheriff up until the day I left for Arizona. The day the sheriff was killed."

This was news. Gianna's heart began to thump wildly. "Are you saying the day the sheriff was killed, you were present?"

"I wasn't actually there in the jailhouse, ma'am. But, most of the morning into the late afternoon, before I left town."

"I don't understand how this helps me, Mr. Jackson. I apologize, but I need a witness who was present either before, after, or during the time the Banner brothers visited the sheriff."

"I can't give you that, ma'am."

Gianna's shoulders deflated.

"But, when I thought about that day, and read all the news printed, I wondered why you didn't call Barley to the stand."

"Barley?" She brightened. Something good had to be about to happen.

"Barley is the town drunk, ma'am. He spent more time in jail then out, I'm afraid. Barley stayed with us plenty of nights, so much in fact we kept a cell empty just in case. The night before Sheriff Grime's murder, I hauled Barley into jail. He was there the morning of the sheriff's killing. He had to be, because when I went to say my goodbyes to Sheriff Grimes, Barley was still there sleeping it off."

What the deputy said left Gianna stunned, because she realized what this meant. Somebody might have been there when the sheriff was killed.

"Bless you, Mr. Jackson. Bless you. Bless you," Gianna said, elated with the newfound evidence. There was a witness. She just had

to find this Barley and make him come forward. Briefly, she wondered why the man hadn't step up to give his accounting without coercion, but then if he consumed as much liquor as believed, he might not recall that day. That left matters up to her to make this Barley remember, though, and Gianna set herself to do just that.

* * * *

After endless hours questioning the town residence about the mysterious Barley, Gianna's feet hurt, and the newfound cheeriness began to falter.

Every person she question knew about Barley, but not one single person could testify to his whereabouts. It was as if the man simple disappeared off the face of the earth. She considered the man might have left Dallas, but given the history of his past, she found it highly unlikely. As far as anyone knew, Barley had no family in Dallas, or outside of the town. So where did he go? A question Gianna had yet to find an answer to.

The task seemed daunting, but Gianna didn't intend to give up.

Gianna made her way to the jailhouse. She had questions for the marshal.

"Afternoon, Miss Laurel." The marshal nod.

"Good afternoon, Marshal." She glanced at Gavin and Zane a minute giving them both an assuring smile. "May I have a moment of your time, Marshal?"

The marshal leaned back in his chair, folded his hands over his lap, and nod. "What's the problem, Miss Laurel? You look rattled. Somebody been harassing you?"

"Oh, that is not the case, but I'm excited. I may have new evidence about the case, but I have a few questions I need answered."

The marshal stood up, and pulled a chair close to the desk.

Gianna sat down. She opened up the satchel, and pulled out some paper laying them on the desk. She scanned the contents, and then

looked up at the Marshal. "It has come to my attention there is a possible witness to Sheriff Grime's murder." The marshal arched his brow, but didn't comment. "A man name Barley. I'm afraid I don't have his full name. Everybody I spoke with simply referred to him by the single name. Barley apparently spent a lot of time in the jail...he favored his whiskey too much. A witness told me that day Barley had to be in the jailhouse, because he saw him there."

"I don't recall no mentioning of anybody with Grimes when his body was found."

"I know, and that is what bothers me. If Barley was present, shouldn't the records indicate such?"

The marshal said matter of fact, "I suppose that is true."

"Then I'm gravely concerned the man is not mentioned in one single accounting."

"You were given every detail of the crime, Miss Laurel. If this Barley's name isn't present, then I don't have no explanation. Maybe he wasn't there that day."

"There was a man in the jailhouse the day we visited," Gavin said. "I didn't think anything about it until now, but I do recall seeing somebody asleep on the cot in the cell we tossed the sheriff in."

Zane spoke up. "Apparently, what you are saying rings with some truth, because if I remember the man didn't budge, but snored through the entire ordeal. He didn't even flinch when we put the sheriff inside the cell, but slept through everything. He had to be in a self induced drunken stupor."

Gianna turn to the Marshal. "This proves the man exists. I just want to know where he is. I have questioned as many people as I can, but I don't know half the people in this town. I'm asking you to scour the area, even the remote places where folks lived, and find out what they might know about Barley's whereabouts. It's imperative, Marshal."

The marshal look disgruntled at the possibility he might spend a day searching the backwoods.

"I know the search sounds tedious, but it's paramount, Marshal. I need your help on this.

The Marshal sighed. "All on a whim?"

Gianna felt her ire rise, but she managed to simmer down. "Not just a whim, Marshal, but the possibility there is a witness out there who can set my clients free," she said with satisfaction.

"Seems a wild goose chase, but I suppose it's my duty." The tone held reluctance. The marshal stood up, put on his hat, and sauntered out the door.

As soon as the door closed, it opened again and in walked Jayce.

She went to the cell where Gavin was standing, and wrapped her arms around his waist when he leaned against the bars. Then she spoke to Gianna and Zane.

"What's going on? I just saw the marshal, and he didn't look pleased," Jayce said.

Gianna quickly filled Jayce in on the new information. She ended by adding she supposed the marshal didn't like the fact he had a lot of traveling to do in a short time.

"He doesn't like to be away from his pretty young wife too long," Gavin added.

Zane said. "That or there is a reason he is reluctant to help out. As a lawman you would think the marshal would be more eager to see justice served."

Jayce chewed her bottom lip. "He always seemed willing to help before. If not very gracious in his treatment of Gavin, so it is a little surprising that the marshal suddenly is reluctant to assist you, Gianna. It doesn't make any sense."

"My task is to make everything fall into place to unlink Gavin and Zane to the murder. I'm bent on doing that. If the marshal takes exception to such, I suppose eventually he will get over it. Right now, that is not my concern."

Zane looked at Gianna. "That is true, Miss Laurel, but the Marshal's reaction should be given some consideration."

“Are you saying I should have the marshal investigated?”

“I don't think it would hurt, Miss Laurel.”

“The marshal knew our mother.”

Everybody looked at Gavin when he made the comment.

Gianna's interest in learning the Marshal's background peaked.

“He told you this?”

“He did. Not until long after he apprehended me, and I thought that odd, but he said he met her a few times passing through. Before becoming lawman here, the marshal worked in a place called Kettle Rock. He told me he moved because of his wife's prompting and more wages.”

A fair brow lift. Gianna considered Gavin's words. Then she turned to Zane. “I think you are right. A little look into the marshal's background seems warranted.”

“You can't go asking around about the marshal, Gianna. Word will get back to the him.” Jayce said.

“And you are not going to Kettle Rock by yourself,” Zane said, firmly.

“No, that isn't plausible, because I need to be here for the trial.”

“I could go. I'm a fast rider, and know the territory. I've been to Kettle Rock...or at least passed through so it would be easy to find my way.”

Gavin looked at Jayce as if she just bumped her head. “You most certainly can not.” The tone said don't-even-think-about-it.

“Gavin is right, Jayce. That could be dangerous,” she said, and began thinking. Then she looked up. “I know somebody who might be willing to handle this matter for me. I met a deputy who used to work for Sheriff Grimes, and he seemed willing to assist in the case. When he came out to the house this morning, he was very eager to help. He actually came all the way from Arizona to tell me about Barley. We had a long conversation over coffee this morning, and Davey offered to do anything required to help.” She brightened. “He is a very nice

young man. I do believe I can count on Davey to keep his promise to assist me.”

“Well, then it is settled. Gianna, you need to go immediately and find the deputy, and put him on the trail of the marshal. I hope that he can find out something that might explain the lawman's sudden reluctance. Maybe, it will help with winning the case,” Jayce said.

Gianna stood up. “With haste. I know Davey is staying at the hotel. I will just hurry over there, and return shortly.” She hurried over to Zane. “This should only take a minute. As soon as I leave the hotel, I will come back here and report our conversation. God, I do hope Davey is there, as time is wasting.”

“I don't see why sending a message isn't as effective as you visiting the man alone in a hotel room?”

Gianna wondered why Zane's voice tightened. She observed him dubiously. “I prefer to visit Davey myself.”

“I prefer if you didn't, Miss Laurel.”

“Because?” It was a clear challenge. Gianna realized why Zane had gone cold. His ego had surfaced.

“Do you two need a moment alone?” Gavin said, amused.

Jayce looked back and forth between Gianna and Zane wondering what happened.

Tight-lip, Zane said, “Yes.”

Gianna quickly retorted. “No.”

Zane stepped up to the bars. He crooked his finger at Gianna to come closer. His tone deceptively level, he said, “Miss Laurel that was not a suggestion, but a strong recommendation.”

Gianna wrinkled her brows. “Perhaps, but either way I'm going to the hotel to speak with Davey myself. I think that is best under the circumstances. I apologize if that displeases you, but I can't be concerned with offending you right now, Mr. Banner.” She glanced at Gavin who had politely stepped back for a measure of privacy. Jayce walked to the other side of the jailhouse. “Now, I must be on my way. I shouldn't delay anymore then I already have. Davey needs to head to

Kettle Rock with haste.” She moved to turn away, but Zane caught her elbow. His touch did not bite, but firmly held her arm.

“I’m concerned about your safety, Miss Laurel. You can’t go about town all by yourself. There are people who aren’t too fond of you right now, and how do you know you can even trust this man?”

“He seems highly trustworthy. Besides, why did he come all the way from Arizona to help if he truly has no intention to?”

“My sentiments exactly, Miss Laurel. Think about it. What does he have to gain?”

Gianna wave her hand dismissively. “We are back to your mistrust.”

Zane’s nostrils flared. “You’re a stubborn minx, Miss Laurel. We will have a long discussion about this attribute upon my release.”

“Fine then. During our conversation you can add it to the other items you find distasteful about my person,” She bite.

Since they had worked hard to display a measure of professional decorum around others, it surprised Gianna when Zane reached through the bars, and pulled her as close as the barrier allowed.

Stunned disbelief showed on Gianna’s face when Zane crushed his mouth against her lips without warning. Not just a tease, but also a full-fledged sensual kiss that made her toes curl. Then just as abruptly, he released her.

Gianna stood there with an owlish expression.

“Go to the hotel, but take Jayce with you.” Gianna could only nod. “She is fast with a gun, and can offer assistance if someone gets out of hand.” Again, all she could do was nod. Still mesmerized by the kiss, she had yet to recover. “I would suggest if the deputy is at the hotel, you summon him below stairs. Do *not* go to his room. Understand?”

“Yes, of course,” Gianna said, quietly. She turned to leave.

“Miss Laurel?” Zane called out. He waited until she turned around and met his gaze. “I find nothing distasteful about you in the least.”

She couldn’t help herself. Gianna blushed, and then walked out the door.

Jayce asked Gianna to give her a minute. She went back to Gavin, and he welcomed her in his arms. He planted a chaste kiss on her forehead, and then slanted his mouth over and over again against Jayce's lips in a salacious kiss before finally letting go.

The door closed behind the ladies before Gavin and Zane turned to each other.

“What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?” Zane mumbled, still trying to figure out how Gianna got under his skin so fast. From the first moment he laid eyes on the little burst of sunshine, it felt like a narcotic infused into his veins.

Gavin refused to comment, because he remained baffled about his feelings for Jayce.

He said, “I suppose it as Jayce is fond of saying. 'A gambler will always gamble, but not necessarily win.'”

* * * *

Eyes followed Jayce and Gianna as they crossed the street heading toward the hotel. He wondered what the two bitches had up their sleeves, and he wanted nothing more than to follow, but knew he couldn't.

Others things had to be set into motion. More important matters that took precedence over snooping on the two women.

The elation of his task put a gait in the man's step, as he pulled down the brim of his hat to shield his face, and set out to complete his ominous task.

Chapter 22

“Miss Laurel, do you have a particular question for the witness?” Judge Patchet said. His impatience showed.

She knew she'd been rambling on a while, but for good cause.

Every time the door to the courtroom open, Gianna prayed it was either the marshal or deputy with news.

Holmes stood up, and objected when Gianna continued to stall. “Your honor, it is obvious, Miss Laurel is making a mockery of this court by continuously chattering about nothing, and hasn't posed a true question to the witness for over fifteen minutes.”

The gavel pointed at Mr. Holmes. The judge snapped sternly, “Mr. Holmes when I need you to tell me how to run my courtroom, I will let you know. Now sit down. If you interrupt again, I will hold you in contempt of court.”

Mr. Holmes sulked in his chair. He eyed Gianna, but she pretended as if the offensive man didn't sit there glaring.

Judge Patchet softened his tone. “Miss Laurel, either question the witness or let him go. We must move on.”

Gianna smiled. She chewed her bottom lip. Then said\, “I call Gavin Banner to the stand.”

Gavin and Zane exchanged glances, because it had already been decided they wouldn't take the stand, and give witness.

“Son, that means you.” Judge Patchet waved the mallet at Gavin. “Swear him in,” The judge ordered.

Walking slowly to witness chair, Gianna put a look on her face she hoped Gavin understood. She needed time. Her lists of witnesses exhausted, either Davey or the Marshal needed to show up soon with

information on somebody or she would be force to close her argument.

“Please state your name for the record.”

“Gavin Niles Banner.”

“Thank you, Mr. Banner.” A long pause. “Ah, Mr. Banner is it true Stella Banner is your mother?”

Mr. Holmes groaned inwardly, clearly disgruntled at the tactics to waste time.

Judge Patchet eyed the prosecutor.

“Yes, Stella Banner was my stepmother.”

“A good Christian woman who lived a peaceful life up until the time someone murdered her?”

“That is true.”

“Your honor...*please*.” Mr. Holmes pleaded.

“One more word, Mr. Holmes, and its contempt.”

Gianna breathed with relief.

The door to the courtroom opened, and in walked the deputy. It took everything Gianna had not to shout with elation. Then she took one look at the man's face, and knew something was terribly wrong.

“Your honor, a moment if you please? I would like to confer with someone assisting me.”

“You done with this witness, Miss Laurel?”

“Yes, you honor.”

“Step down son.” He banged the gavel. “The court will rest for a minute to allow, Miss Laurel, to confer with her legal team.”

Mr. Holmes gaffed, and then pursed his lips shut.

Gianna hurried over to the deputy. “Please tell me you have news? Anything to help me here.”

“I'm afraid nothing much to tell. I rode to Kettle Rock, and inquired, but nobody had anything to say bad about the marshal. Said he was a tad bit overly possessive of his new wife. One woman alluded to he might be keeping her hidden, because no one in Kettle Rock saw the woman after the day they got married. That is odd, but I

hear she is pretty. Maybe the older man doesn't like his wife out by herself."

"Being overly protective is not a crime. Thank you, Davey," she said deflated.

"Miss Laurel, I feel awful, but there was another person at the jailhouse that day I forgot to mention. Foley Banner came in earlier to talk to the sheriff."

"I know. It is in the accounting. Mr. Holmes has him on the witness list for the prosecution, and I can't cross examine until he is called to the stand."

"Sorry, Miss Laurel. Wish I had more for you. What about Barley?"

"Nobody has seen or heard from the man since that day. It's as if he disappeared."

Davey scratched his head perplexed. "Barley lived here most of his life. I never knew him to go anywhere except back and forth from the saloon and the jailhouse. It's odd he'd just leave now."

Gianna was thinking the same thing, but didn't say as much.

"Miss Laurel, your conferring time is up."

"I'm done, Your Honor, but I would like to call another witness. Deputy Davey Jackson."

Her last hope of all hope was that the deputy would at least put reasonable doubt in the juror's heads when he mentioned Barley, but she never got a chance. Mr. Holmes continuously objected.

She just had to get Barley's name mentioned some kind of way. The jurors had to hear the deputy's story. Gianna asked an insignificant question, and then sat down.

She allowed Mr. Holmes his chance to rip the deputy's story to shreds. She knew he would. The man made her nauseous, but from one professional to another, she had to credit Mr. Holmes with not being as stupid as he appeared.

Maybe. Perhaps not.

Mr. Holmes walked in front of the jury and stood facing them.
“He is an ex-lawman.”

“Objection. Relevance?”

“Sustained.”

“But, Your Honor the jury has a right to know why Mr. Jackson left town in such a hasty--”

“Objection. Hearsay. Mr. Jackson never testified he left town in haste, as you claim, Mr. Holmes. Is that a question or not?” Gianna said.

“Sustained.”

The man was temporarily delayed, but not thwarted, Gianna thought. She could see the lawyer's thoughts swirling, and frankly, she questioned whether he would fall for the trap. Mr. Holmes wouldn't allow the deputy to talk about Barley when she tried that tactic. She hope her other assumption worked.

“Okay, I have no problem redirecting my comment to a question. Mr. Jackson, did you leave town in haste?”

“Objection!” Gianna stood up. “Once again what is the relevance of this line of questioning? Mr. Jackson is not on trial, here.”

“Perhaps not, Miss Laurel, but you put him on the stand,” Judge Patchet said. Then he turned to Mr. Holmes. “I'm going to allow the line of questioning, but I warn caution. Answer the question, son.”

With a smug grin, Mr. Holmes said. “Thank you, Your Honor.”

“No, can't say I left in haste, but planned it for months.”

Gianna smiled. Things were moving in her direction. Just like every other nosey person in town who wanted to know why the young man left a lucrative wage for no job in Arizona, so did Mr. Holmes. People tended to make assumption when they didn't know the truth. She relied on it. She heard a lot of reasons why the deputy left town. None of them true, because over coffee the young man had explained matters.

“You planned it? That is not what I heard,” Mr. Holmes interjected his opinion, and then looked at Gianna when she didn't

object. Lord knows, she knew he wanted her to. She sat silently, and let things play out.

“No, sir, I left on the date I told Sheriff Grimes I would. It happen to be the day the sheriff was killed. ”

“Ah--Mr. Jackson? You’re sworn in, you know?” Why he felt compelled to remind the deputy was beyond Gianna, but she didn’t care. Things were preceding as planned.

“You have a question for Mr. Jackson? If not, release the witness.”

“What time did you leave?”

“Early morning, sir, around ten o’clock. About the time I saw the Banner brother’s enter the jail.”

A smug grin of satisfaction curled Mr. Holmes’s mouth. “So, you can say without a doubt you did see Gavin and Zane Banner enter the jailhouse?”

The deputy nod. “Yes, sir. I did witness the two enter the jailhouse, but I can’t undeniably say how long they stayed, because I left for Arizona shortly after. My fiancé was waiting, and you don’t keep a pretty thing like that alone at the train depot too long. But, I had to say my goodbyes, and see if the sheriff needed any last minute duties done sense his hand were full... like get Barley home or something.”

“Barley?”

“The town drunk, sir. He was in jail the day of Sheriff Grimes murder. Didn’t nobody tell you that, sir?”

Mr. Holmes turn beet red. “Your Honor, may we approach the bench? This is newfound evidence I wasn’t aware of until now. I need time to process a possible witness to the crime.”

“No need to approach, Mr. Holmes. The witness was introduced by Miss Laurel, and you held no objection. You had to be aware what the deputy said may or may not help your case.”

“But, Your Honor...” Mr. Holmes, pleaded.

“Either continue cross examining the witness or release him to Miss Laurel,” The judge said, sternly.

Inwardly, Gianna smiled, but kept a poker face, as Jayce would say. Abruptly. “No more questions for the witness, Your Honor.”

“Miss Laurel, I suspect you want to redirect?”

Gianna put a totally innocence look on her face. "Of course. If Mr. Jackson was there the day of Sheriff Grimes's death, and knows of a possible witness, then I most certainly want to hear his accounting."

Judge Patchet set a stern look on Gianna. "Next time, I won't allow no shenanigans, Miss Laurel." There was no vinegar behind his tone.

Gianna questioned the deputy about the day he left for Arizona. He told his full accounting again, just as he did earlier over coffee, not a single word changed.

Mr. Holmes objected to the testimony being hearsay--one man's accounting--until he turned blue in the face.

Judge Patchet overruled each one.

She smiled with satisfaction, and then took her seat. The fact Mr. Holmes shot daggers at her meant nothing. Barley's name had now been mentioned, and that meant the jurors knew for sure he'd been present. She could have simply put Gavin or Zane on the stand to attest to such, but she thought it better coming from a man the town knew and trusted.

What piqued Gianna, though, was that Barley still hadn't been found.

Nor had the marshal returned, and that made Gianna concerned, too. She wondered to his delay.

* * * *

The men lay in bed together with the mute girl in between. They talked openly and freely about their plans.

"I didn't like the way that bitch was able to sneak in Jackson's testimony about Barley being present," Foley said, derisively.

The man smiled, but didn't respond. He had learned a long time ago not to underestimate anyone. Not even a woman. Stella taught him that the hard way.

"I heard folks talking, and they are beginning to have doubts about my brothers' involvement in the murder. I don't like that. I need them to hang." Venom drip from Foley's tone.

"Calm down. If the Banner brothers do not hang for the murder, they will still die. You needn't worry," the man, said, and then reached up to pinch a pert nipple. He rubbed his hand over Foley's chest, and then moved lower to the V of his thighs that the pawn obediently opened.

"We both know I can't pick a fight with my brothers and hope to come out alive," Foley said, shifting his eyes suspiciously to his partner. "Is that what you are hoping for?"

The man chuckled, instead of calling Foley a fool. "Now, what would that gain me? With Stella and you dead, where does that leave me, huh? Out in the cold empty handed."

Foley thought about it, and reasoned the man spoke the truth. With his mother dead, the man had no chance of getting his hands on the money except through him. He brightened considerably. His partner wasn't hoping to see him conveniently dead. At least not yet, he thought. But, he wasn't foolish enough to believe once his partner got his hands on the money a target wouldn't be on his back.

His mother--the ungrateful bitch--if only she had listened to him, things wouldn't have gone as far as they did. Not that he shed one tear that Stella had died a cruel death. But, if she hadn't refused his partner's attention, the money would be in their hands by now. Of course, Stella would still have had to die. That was the only way his partner would get full control of the money, and he his share. They had worked all that out, though. If the ungrateful bitch had cooperated.

A wry grin crossed Foley's face. One good shove and the old crow was down the well. Never to be seen or heard from again. Of course, as the son and husband, they would have openly grieved.

"Tomorrow I go on the witness stand. I don't think it's a good idea, but the prosecutor thinks the compassion a jury will show for a

son who brutally lost his mother will go over very well. Especially a full-bloodied white man who cries pitifully on the stand for his lost. More so then the half-breeds who are sitting there like stone, so unemotional. That, and they are outsiders, and I will testify to that. While I was constantly at my mother's home."

"To try and coerce her to change the will?"

Foley waved his hand through the air. "Neither the prosecutor nor the jury are aware of this. Thank goodness, Stella was as private as stupid. She didn't tell anyone about my little visits."

"She told me. Insisted I do something about your harassment." The man smiled. "Of course, I told her I would take care of you."

A giddiness showed in Foley's expression. Perhaps even admiration, as he looked at his partner turn lover. "You are a man of your word."

"Of course, I'm a lawman." The lawman reached across the girl, and stroked Foley's thigh. Then his touch became bolder, moving downward until the hard length filled his palm. "Lawmen are sworn to keep their promises to protect the citizens of the town they reside over." Foley grinned, watching the man intensely as his fingers leisurely massaged the shaft that swelled under the expert administration.

"Now, how could I not keep my promise to your mother. I will take care of you, Foley." The man smirked, and then covered the rigid cock with his mouth. He swirled his tongue over the crown, nibbled at the shaft, licking, teasing.

Foley grunted in satisfaction feeling two fingers ride up his ass.

"That's what I'm here for." The man grinned. Foley was too enthralled with what he was doing to realize the smile was more like a sneer. "You do want me to take care of you, don't you, Foley?" The fingers churned higher.

"Ah--yes," Foley groaned.

The man rose up, moved into position, and gave the wiggling ass a firm pat. He grip Foley's ass cheeks, widened the portal, and then

careened hips forward and delved pass the flex ring. When he was buried to the max, he washed his tongue over the pawn's back, before withdrawing, and then slamming his cock forward again.

Foley gasped, but pushed back for more.

The man willingly gave Foley what he wanted. He closed his eyes, and blocked out the sound of the pawn's voice, as he squealed with appreciation. The trembling form went down like a bitch, and screamed with glee, as the man made the ultimate sacrifice he felt was necessary.

He plundered, ravaged the willing ass, driving with untamed vigor, and ignored Foley's endless coos. As far as he was concerned, he was alone in his own thoughts. Far far away--lost in the abyss of thoughts that all centered around Foley's demise. The girl would have to go, too. But, what drove his arousal to unbound heights and made his cock stiffer, and caused the man to erupt hard was the pure elation of being a wealthy man.

Chapter 23

Gavin ran his fingertips gingerly over Jayce's cheek, and whispered sweet-nothings coupled with all the wicked things they would do once Gianna set him free.

Jayce giggled like a little girl. Continuously, she rubbed up against Gavin like a cat, purring, holding tightly.

When he kissed her, eager reciprocation met the hungry searching of moist lips that seared flesh, and made her hunger for more. But, that wasn't to be. Not yet, anyway, until the damn bars were no longer between them.

Gavin pulled back frustrated. "God, I want you, and the waiting is driving me to an early grave. My cock is so hard..." He let his voice trail off when Jayce looked over a shoulder at Gianna who sat at the marshal's desk.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Zane spoke up, setting aside the newspaper he'd been reading. "Miss Laurel tends to be very focused. I doubt she heard your inappropriate comment. And even if she did, Gianna would considerably act as if she hadn't. Isn't that right, Miss Laurel?" He asked to prove his point.

Gianna didn't budge. She continued to remain submerged in the papers strewn all over the desk.

"She's been at it for hours. I even offered food, but she merely shooed me away," Jayce said. "What is so consuming?"

"Damn if I know," Zane mumbled. He walked to the back of his cell and stared out into the night.

“Why are you separated?” Jayce asked, noticing when she came in this morning that Zane laid on the cot in the next cell.

“Our request. Or more so Zane's then mine,” Gavin said.

“Why?”

“So, my brother doesn't have to witness me fondle you.”

“I'm serious, Gavin.”

“I am too, darling. I'm not sure if I liked it more or less when Zane wasn't here. At least before when the marshal left we had a little love-nest...if you care to call this twelve by ten entrapment such. We could be alone.”

“Are you getting all romantic on me, cowboy?”

“It's deplorable, and very ungentlemanly to say, darling, but romance is the furthest thing on my mind. I'm thinking about pure fucking. After I have satisfied my animalistic lust that I probably shouldn't admit exists, then by all means, I intend to be as extremely amorous in my attention as your heart desires.”

Jayce rose up, and Gavin leaned forward for the kiss she offered.

Their mouths meshed, searching, a wicked parlay of hot lashes that left both of them panting.

Gavin brushed his mouth over Jayce's, and then stepped back. “Unless you wish to experiment with voyeurism I suggest we stop this or I swear our audience be damned. I will have that nice ass of yours in my hands in a matter of seconds. And not just to fondle it, darling.” He winked at her.

Jayce whispered, keeping her voice as low as Gavin had been. “You, sir, are a very naughty man.”

“Thank you, darling.” He grinned.

The door to the jailhouse opened, and in walked the marshal.

Gianna looked up. “Good Morning. I thought you would never return. Do you have news about Barley?” She asked, praying.

“These parts stretch far and wide, Miss Laurel. Some folks live in places so remote it's all rough terrain to get there. I traveled a lot at night. Had to move slowly or fear my horse coming up lame by

making a misstep. The paths into the far locations aren't well traveled. Mostly overgrown brush and what little trails existed are hard to see in the dark." The marshal took off his hat, and slapped it against a thigh to shake the dust free. "Didn't learn a darn thing about Barley, I'm afraid."

Gianna immediately felt contrite. "I didn't intend to sound ungrateful. I apologize. I know you did your best, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

The marshal walked over to the cabinet, and poured himself a hefty glass of whiskey. He swallowed the contents in one gulp, and then put the bottle away. "No harm done, Miss Laurel. Lawmen are sworn to keep their promises to protect the citizens of the town they reside over, and do what they must to assist in the pursuit of justice. It's my job, Miss Laurel. From what I heard about the trial the other day, Judge Patchet would have gotten around to sending me on the mission, anyway, since Barley's name came up. Glad it's over with. The misses ain't too pleased, me being away from her and all, though. Suppose I have a lot of making up to do."

Gavin was curious about the elusive wife the man claimed to have, but never surfaced. "Your wife has been wonderful. Sending over meals and all when she didn't have to. I would like to meet, and thank her personally," Gavin said.

"I will tell the Misses, but she ain't one to get out much these days." The marshal said, noncommittally.

Gavin and Zane exchanged glances.

Why move to Dallas for a social life when the lady refused to show herself? Gavin thought.

"I'm more weary then a hound in pursuit of the elusive rabbit. But, Judge Patchet met me when I entered town. The trial is reconvening in thirty minutes. I need to escort you to court."

Everybody stood at the door waiting for Gianna. She sat numb staring at a piece of paper.

"Miss Laurel, I suppose you are to join us?" Zane said.

Gianna looked up. "Oh, of course," she said, and then glanced at the case file she'd been reading. Then she gathered her things, and joined them at the door.

"Find something interesting in all those files, Miss Laurel?"

Gianna looked up at Zane, trying to ignore the cuffs on his wrist that she thought were unnecessary. She smiled warmly. "In fact, I think I might have just found some information that the judge or Mr. Holmes will find hard pressed to refute." A cheeriness entered her tone.

* * * *

"Order. Everybody simmer down." Judge Patchet ordered, and waited for the crowd to settle before he continued. He looked at Mr. Holmes. "Are you ready to call your first witness?"

"I am, Your Honor."

"Then let's get started."

Mr. Holmes stood up and addressed the jury. "I call Foley Banner to the stand."

A feverish murmur of voices sounded in the courtroom, as Foley stood up, and walked to the witness chair. He walked with an arrogant swagger, and held a smug grin on his lips. The fact he shot both Gavin and Zane a contemptuous look didn't go unnoticed.

As usual, Mr. Holmes played to the audience. He started with all Foley's accolades--a doting, grieving, considerate son--he rambled on a full five minutes.

Not once did Gianna object. She allowed the ridiculous rhetoric to continue, because she still poured over her files. Not that she didn't listen to what Mr. Holmes had to say. Every word was absorbed inside her conscious. She even thought the lawyer's words were more of an closing argument, but not one objection sounded in the courtroom. The illustrious, albeit untrue accolades Mr. Holmes spewed so easily meant absolutely nothing in the scheme of things.

Gianna allowed the annoying man to carry on, because she had the cross examination in mind.

That was the key to end this entire farce of a case.

Mr. Holmes did an excellent job of painting Foley as the victim in the entire case. And Foley played his role eloquently. Eyes watered on cue, and even one time when Mr. Holmes talked about his mother's death the man actually broke down in sobs.

Gavin leaned over to Zane, whispering, "He deserves applause for his theatrics." He fumed.

"I agree, but what is really deplorable are the town people and the jurors seem to be falling for Foley's nonsense. I swear there isn't a dry eye amongst the women," Zane said.

"And then tell us what happened after that, Mr. Banner?" Mr. Holmes said, coercing Foley's statement.

But, again Gianna didn't object. She sat mutely, and waited for the entire fiasco to end.

Foley dabbed at his eyes with the tissue, and then struggled to control himself. "When I arrived at my mother's house the entire structure was in flames. At first I tried to put out the fire, but..." his voice caught emotionally. "It was too late."

"So, then what did you do, Mr. Banner?"

"I went for help, of course," Foley lied.

"You returned a short time later. Is that correct?"

"Half way to seek help I realized there wasn't a thing anybody could do at this point. I immediately turned around, and went back to the house in hopes...oh God, I prayed somehow my poor dear mother had made it from the house before it went up in flames."

Mr. Holmes's voice dropped. He was shaking his head, as if the entire testimony was even too much for him to bear. "What happened next?"

Foley surprisingly regained composure, and turned to Gavin and Zane. His eyes narrowed, and lips pinched. "I witnessed them--"

She couldn't allow this. Gianna bound to her feet. "Objection!"

“On what grounds, Miss Laurel,” the judge demanded to know.

“This is a clear attempt of the prosecutor to prejudice the jurors, Your Honor.”

The judge leaned back in his chair, as if considering the matter, and then called both lawyers forward. He directed attention to Gianna first. “I’m not clear the statement that Mr. Banner was about to give is prejudice when I didn’t hear the actual words.”

“The witness is clearly being lead to bring up the fact my clients were present when Mrs. Banner died.”

“It is already a known fact.” Mr. Holmes protested.

Judge Patchet pointed the mallet. “I will be the judge of that. No pun intended.” He shifted attention to Gianna again. “The town is buzzing with that knowledge, Miss Laurel, I can’t refute that.”

“Perhaps, but unless an eye witness confirms such, it’s purely speculation at this point.”

The judge scratched his head. He rubbed his chin, and then shooed both lawyers away.

“Sustained.”

Gianna could see Foley didn’t look pleased, but she didn’t give one wit.

“What just happened?” Zane asked.

“Mr. Holmes tried, underhandedly, of course, to get Foley to say you two happened be there when your mother died. That is the truth, but I couldn’t allow the jurors to hear such from a direct eyewitness. Even though I could have challenged on a redirect, the jurors would have let the fact sink in, and probably wouldn’t pay any heed to what I said later. Mr. Holmes did a good job of having Foley act the victim before he tried to sneak that one in. That’s all the jurors will remember.”

“Did you do anything after you realized your mother wasn’t to be found?” Mr. Holmes said.

“I immediately went to tell Sheriff Grimes what I witnessed. I told him about the fire, and the fact my mother was missing. The

devastation of it all overwhelmed me, but I felt there might still be the possibility mother was alive. Some kind of way she escaped, but that wasn't the case. She-she was dead," Foley said, his shoulder's slumping. He sniffled.

Mr. Holmes offered his condolences. "I apologize, Mr. Banner. I know having recently lost your mother this is difficult for you. Just one more question." Foley nod. "You are Stella Banner's legitimate son?"

"Yes."

"What type of relationship did Gavin and Zane have with their step mother?"

"Objection. Hearsay." Interjected forcibly. "What is the relevance?"

"To prove what type of sons Gavin and Zane appeared to be, Your Honor," Mr. Holmes said, refusing to address Gianna directly.

"That would be left to Mr. Banner's interpretation. Nothing more." Judge Patchet allowed the back and forth banter. He allowed the lawyers to talk amongst themselves for whatever reason. Probably, because he wasn't ready to rule on Miss Laurel's objection.

"Unless you have something concrete, like letters, or conversations that can be collaborated by other parties who heard Mrs. Banner speak about her relationship with either Gavin or Zane Banner, it's purely Foley Banner's words against my clients." Gianna leaned forward, locking her elbows. She pressed into the desk. Her eyes set on Mr. Holmes who'd she had just about enough of. "Do you have such, Mr. Holmes?"

Mr. Holmes blistered with indignation that went totally over Gianna's head.

"Well, do you?" The judge finally spoke up.

"No, I do not." Mr. Holmes relented.

"Objection sustained. Find another line of questioning, Mr. Holmes or release the witness to redirect."

Obviously, Mr. Holmes had another question, and it piqued Gianna, because no reason that she could think of warranted an objection. She had to let it stand.

“How many times did Gavin and/or Zane Banner visit their stepmother over the course of a year that you witnessed?”

A sly grin cross Foley's features. “Gavin and Zane reside in Europe. As far as I know...I mean if they visited, I never saw them. Not once.”

Mr. Holmes smiled triumphantly. “Thank you. No more questions, Your Honor.”

“Redirect, Miss Laurel?”

Gavin and Zane waited for Gianna to refute Foley's testimony about their relationship with their mother, because they not only told her about the communications that went back and forth, but she had the letters to prove it.

Gianna didn't disappoint.

She opened up her satchel, and made a dramatic display of pulling out a stack of letters. She tried to gather them in all in her hands, and then purposely let some fall and scatter on the floor to prove a point to the jurors. The visual of letters too many for one person to carry was a great gimmick too, and very effective.

The letters were collected from the floor with the aid of Gavin and Zane to point out so many stacks existed it took several people to hold them all.

“Thank you,” Gianna whispered. She carried one stack of letters over to the judge's table. Then walked back for another...and more until five stacks of letters were piled on the table for the jurors to see.

She handed a letter to Foley to read. He resisted, but with the judge's insistence, he began reading.

Foley's tone low, tight-lipped, “...we miss you dearly, and can't wait to visit again when we are next able. In the meantime, we wish all is well.”

“Please finish, Mr. Banner.”

“With our care and love, Gavin and Zane.” Foley tossed the letter on the floor.

Gianna forced another and another letter on Foley until Mr. Holmes abruptly took a stand. “Your Honor, I think we get the point, Miss Laurel, is attempting to belabor. However, these letters prove nothing.”

“On the contrary, it proves Gavin and Zane may not have been physically with their mother as much as their brother, but they did have a loving relationship with Stella Banner.”

“We are to believe that based on letters anybody could have written?” Mr. Holmes scoffs, absurdly.

“I have a signed affidavit from a handwriting expert who swears the letters penned are that of either Gavin or Zane Banner.”

“Miss Laurel entered the letters into evidence, and you reviewed them along with the affidavit, Mr. Holmes. You agreed to allow the notes into evidence. Sit...down.”

“At the time, I wasn't aware Stella Banner's house burned to the ground. These letters couldn't have possibly survived the fire.” Mr. Holmes objected.

“They were not at the house, Mr. Holmes, but kept at the bank in the vault. Where Stella Banner contained things she felt precious,” Gianna said.

“Objection! Miss Laurel is not only giving testimony for her clients, but it is hearsay.”

“Sustained. Miss Laurel, people put the oddest things in a vault. You can't unequivocally say why the letters remained behind such security measures.” He looked at the jurors. “Jurors, you will ignore Miss Laurel's last comment.”

Gianna smiled, as if the judge's statement didn't deflate some of the momentum.

She turned to the jurors. “This trial really isn't about whether my clients had a good relationship with their mother or not. The entirety of the trial should be about whether or not Gavin or Zane Banner are

responsible for the crime for which they are accused. Sheriff Grimes's death." The jurors nodded. Good, she hadn't lost them. Gianna walked back and forth in front of the jury, and then turned to the townspeople. "That is why we are in court today. To identify the real murderer of Sheriff Grimes and I believe I know who that person is." She shifted her attention to Foley, and started a rapid fire of questions.

"Were you present the day of Sheriff Grimes's murder?"

"When you last saw Sheriff Grimes was he alive and well?"

"Was Barley present at the jailhouse the morning Sheriff was murdered?"

"Did you kill Sheriff Grimes?"

The room erupted in pandemonium.

Mr. Holmes came to his feet. "Your Honor, she is clearly harassing the witness."

"Your Honor, please direct the witness to answer the questions," Gianna insisted.

"Which question would that be, Miss Laurel?"

"The last one, Your Honor."

"Son."

Foley puffed out his chest, squared shoulders, and rose to unimpressive height. "I did not."

"You swear before this court you are telling the truth?"

"Unequivocally," Foley protested.

"Mr. Foley Banner is not on trial, here," Mr. Holmes objected.

"No, he is not, but perhaps he should be," Gianna quickly retorted. "This trial is about who killed Sheriff Grimes, and just because my clients have been accused of such doesn't make them guilty. A court of law is to find the truth."

Every eye in the courtroom watched Gianna, as she walked back to the defense table. She searched through the satchel again, and pulled out a gun.

"Miss Laurel?" Judge Patchet cautioned, eyebrow twitching.

Without a word of explanation, she aimed at a barrel in the corner of the room and fired.

The wood popped, and then the liquid content spilled all over the floor.

Judge Patchet jump to his feet. "Miss Laurel!"

"What is this nonsense? She's insane!" Mr. Holmes shouted, bounding to his feet. He started across the room toward Gianna, but when Zane stood up, he froze. "Your Honor, please. It's apparent the lady is-is...not dealing with a full deck."

The entire courtroom went silent. Stunned. Then the buzz of whispers escalated to a feverish pitch, so intense Gianna couldn't herself think.

She's gone and done it now. There was no turning back.

Unable to help herself, she stole a moment and glanced at Zane to see if he thought insanity ran through her veins. It gave her measure of relief when he just sat back, calm as you please, and looked at her.

Gavin's eyebrows slanted heavily downward, and occasionally she saw him glance at Zane as if to ask is-she-insane?

Gianna was convinced Foley Banner was guilty, and willing to do anything to prove it.

Even at the risk of going to jail or more appropriately a place for destitute people who'd lost their sanity.

Chapter 24

It took a full thirty minutes to calm everyone down, and afterward Judge Patchet called a recess to settle nerves.

Nobody left the courtroom, though. Not one soul wanted to miss a second of what happened when court reconvened.

“Miss Laurel in all my years in court I have never witnessed such a...ah,” he waved his hands wildly in the air. “I can't even describe what just occurred here today. Now, I'm close to tossing you in jail for your overly dramatic display, but my curiosity has gotten the better of me. You had better pray, Miss Laurel, that your explanation doesn't land you in contempt of court. Do you mind explaining why you shot off that gun?”

“I apologize, Your Honor, but I find my extreme actions necessary.” Gianna walked over to the barrel and retrieved the bullet. Then she went back to the table, and pulled a magnifying glass out. She examined the bullet closely, and then walked to the judge, handing out both articles. “Take a look for yourself.”

The judge reluctantly took the glass and bullets, and studied them a long minute before handing the things back.

Gianna asked. “Do you believe the bullets are the same, Your Honor?”

The judge appeared skeptical, as if mulling it over before he finally said. “I do. Same markings and everything. Identical.”

“Then this is proof the bullet that killed the sheriff is the same as the one I just fired from this gun?”

“Can't dispute that, Miss Laurel.”

Gianna turned to the jurors. "It's called ballistics, a technique used in courts all over New York and other states to prove a single weapon is responsible for murder. When bullets, even knife wounds, can be matched to a single weapon." She said, and then paused for the effect. She stood directly in front of Foley. "Is this your gun, sir?"

Foley reared back, glaring at the gun as if it had fangs and a rattler for a tail.

"Well?" Gianna insisted.

"Objection," Mr. Holmes roared. "This is nonsense, and I protest."

"Duly noted. Overruled. Answer the question, son."

Foley squirmed for a considerable amount of time. He kept glancing at Mr. Holmes, who merely looks back. Apparently, the lawyer hadn't a clue what to do either.

"I'm not sure," Foley said.

I knew he would try such shenanigans!

She leaned forward, and turned the handle toward Foley so he could clearly see the initials F.T.B inscribed in the handle. "What do these initials stand for, Mr. Banner?"

This time Mr. Holmes roared. "This is prosperous. Are we to believe this...ridiculous claim of ba-ballistic simply because Miss Laurel said so? Who ever heard of such? How do we know this isn't some tall tale of her overwrought imagination?"

"I assure you the technique is sound," Gianna said.

"Maybe in New York, but we can't substantiate the courts there accept this flim-flam excuse. Except on *your* word." He scoffed.

"It's not flim-flam, but scientific," Gianna protested, again.

Goodness everybody, including the judge, is staring like I'm an oddity.

Mr. Holmes grandstanded for the audience. "Your Honor, *please*. Are we to stand here and allow Miss Laurel to make a mockery out of our courtroom? To believe something we can't prove, but must merely take her word? Just because she comes all the way from New York

doesn't mean she can just waltz in here and act like this is some backwards town that doesn't have sense enough to know when trickery is about."

Gianna seethed. *That's your thought, you pompous stuff suit. It's clear you're trying to prejudice the town people against me as an outsider who thinks I'm better because I'm from the city.*

Judge Patchet glared at Mr. Holmes. "This is my courtroom, not ours. Sit...down."

The Judge turned to Gianna. "I can't discount the bullets match, Miss Laurel. Nor can I accept this new-fangled scientific stuff you're introducing here is valid." Gianna's shoulders slumped. "I'm going to need some time to process this information before I can allow you to introduce this in my courtroom."

"That-that could take weeks, Your Honor," Gianna whispered.

"Possibly, but that's the way it is. It's that or I dismiss it now."

Reluctantly, Gianna nodded. "Of course, Your Honor."

"I recommend this ridiculous, however theatrical display, Miss Laurel was so kind to entertain us with be dismissed as the trickery it is," Mr. Holmes interjected, sternly that got him another scathing look from the judge.

The gavel the judge wielded like a whip pointed in the lawyer's direction. "I thought I told you to sit down, Mr. Holmes? And shut up," Judge Patchet snapped.

He settled back in the chair, and looked over the crowd a moment. Every eye in the room gave the judge their rapt attention. No one dare blink, or move a muscle.

"I admit this is the first time I have encountered such. That's not to say I believe this, ah ballistic thing, Miss Laurel is introducing is nonsense. I doubt she'd come all the way to try and put one over on me."

Gianna smiled prettily at the judge. "Of course not, Your Honor."

"I'm going to send a telegraph to New York, and get a ruling on this matter."

“But, your honor that could take weeks,” Gianna said.

“Maybe so, Miss Laurel, but that is the best I can do...or dismiss it now.”

Gianna's shoulders hung low.

The judge's attention went from person to person on the jury. He gave all the men a stern look. “Now, you are released until I get my answer back, and court reconvenes. But, don't think to get your heads together and decide the outcome of this case.” He spoke so rapidly, the judge paused to take a breath before continuing. The mallet waved back and forth in Gavin and Zane's direction. “You two are remanded to the jailhouse until court resumes.”

Gianna looked at Gavin and Zane apologetically.

Zane gave her a reassuring wink.

Next, his attention focused on Foley. “I don't have no cause to hold you, but that doesn't mean you're free to go either. When I get the ruling back, I'm thinking I want you handy, Mr. Banner. Marshal,” judge called out. “Keep your eye on Mr. Banner, and make sure he remains in town until I'm sure he is not a killer.”

The marshal nod.

The gavel pounded the table. “Court is in recess until I receive word back from New York.”

Chapter 25

Jayce laid her forehead against Gavin's. Her voice was quiet, uncertain. "I thought for sure it was over today when Gianna introduced evidence the judge didn't immediately discount. I have no idea about how it all works, but it seems compelling and believable." She sighed. "Lord, I just want this entire matter over with."

To lighten the mood, Gavin teased, strumming his thumb over a cheek. "Why, you anxious to get at me, darling?" That made Jayce smile, if only for the moment, and then she receded to sulk; a characteristic unlike Jayce. Even though he understood the trial was equally draining on Jayce, the notion it might really be getting to her didn't bode well.

A slight lift of Jayce's chin, and bold-hazel met a dulcet stare. Gavin planted a chaste kiss on the tip of the pert nose, affectionately. "I think under the circumstances you and Gianna should stay in town tonight. For your safety."

"My sentiments, exactly," Zane said. "You two should get accommodations at the hotel for the night, and stay put. No going about, and especially don't try and return to the house this evening."

"I have my guns." It was important for Jayce to remind both of the men.

"Darling, this is not up for debate," Gavin said.

Jayce relented, though reluctantly.

"Gianna?" Zane said. He waited until she stopped staring off in the distance, and turned to him. She sat at the marshal's desk, away from the others, and had a forlorn expression. Zane motioned for her to come over to the cell. She walked slowly, as if beneath the skirt

hem her ankles bared shackles. When she came closer, Zane pointed a finger; he wanted her within touching distance.

"You did an excellent job today, Miss Laurel. I am extremely proud of you. Why so dreary?"

"The town people, judge, and the jury probably think I'm insane. God, what was I thinking shooting that gun? Now, that I think about it, maybe it was an irrational thing to do just to prove a point. Perhaps it was over melodramatic."

"Not irrational and theatrical, but you did get the attention sought. Every eye in the courtroom remained on you, riveted, hanging on your every word, and therefore they were listening, which is important. I think the way you handled a gun is as impressive as hell." He winked at her. He kissed the top of Gianna's head, softly.

"Thank you," Gianna said, quietly. She looked at Jayce. "Jayce had something to do with that. If you recall, I didn't like touching a gun, but she helped me get over my fear, and showed me how to handle it. Otherwise, God, I could have shot somebody."

"Preferably Foley," Gavin said, drolly.

"He couldn't deny the gun is his. That made a valid point."

Gavin looked at Jayce. "Yes, it does, but I'm not sure that is going to be enough. If the prosecutor has any sense, he can merely say someone could have stolen Foley's gun. It's a nice weapon. Expensive and possible someone would want it for himself or herself. The jury might believe that no matter how farfetched the idea."

"I'm hoping the judge will see through that if it comes up," Jayce said.

"He's a cantankerous sort, but contrary to what I believed, Judge Patchet appears to be impartial."

Gavin laughed. "That's because I think he is smitten with Gianna, as is every other man in the courtroom. Not to be condescending, Gianna, your ability as a lawyer aside. I do believe you have all the males in the courtroom held in rapt attention."

Gianna gave a little smile for the first time.

Zane slew his eyes at his brother for stating the obvious. He noticed it to, and it didn't sit well with him.

"Gianna, how long do you think it will take for New York to respond back?" Jayce said.

"A few days. Maybe a week. It's difficult to tell. Using scientific evidence to prove guilt in a trial is very new. There are a few cases coming up here and there in courts all over the world. That's where the idea came to me when I reviewed some past cases, but not all the rulings were in favor of it." A weary expression shrouded Gianna's features. "Maybe I have bitten off more than I can chew?" She said, and then sucked in her bottom lip. "If only I had more proof. Concrete evidence or an eyewitness. That's what the town people will believe in." Gianna second-guessed herself for the first time.

"Let's not make that assumption or any other until court resides." Zane said.

Gavin nodded

Jayce agreed, too.

Gianna continued to look as if she was in a bad dream where she might possibly end up the villain.

"You look tired, darling," Gavin said, noticing the dark circles forming under Jayce's eyes. "Maybe you should go and rest. Come back later and visit. It's not as if I'm going anywhere," he said, sarcastically. "Besides with the marshal shadowing Foley's every move, I doubt he will return tonight. If you ignore the bars, we could have supper together. With Zane and Gianna, of course."

"That sounds like an excellent idea." *Anything to get Gianna out of her slump*, Zane thought. "What do you think, Miss Laurel?"

"I think I should go to the hotel, and look over the case files again. Evidence. Testimony about Sheriff Grimes's murder. I get the distinct feeling I'm missing something," she said, and then looked sincerely contrite. "Do forgive me, Zane, but I need to be prepared just in case the judge doesn't rule in my favor. I have to be ready."

He considered insisting, but Zane could tell Gianna needed the time alone. Another affectionate kiss was placed on the top of her head, and then he stepped back.

“Promise you will go straight to the hotel?”

“I promise.”

“That includes you too, Jayce,” Gavin said. When she didn't respond, he reiterated. “I mean it, Jayce. Until matters are resolved, and I'm sure it's safe, I will not take no for an answer.”

Gavin could see Jayce's strong will brewing.

“I will walk Gianna to the hotel and then--”

“No, you will go with Gianna to the hotel, and stay put.” When she pouted, Gavin couldn't help but plant a kiss. Then he slipped a hand over the gentle swell above her butt, and gave Jayce an affectionate pat to get her moving.

As soon as the door closed, Gavin turned to his brother. “I think Gianna is actually onto something about Foley being involved in the sheriff's murder. I just can't put my finger on how or why. What did he have to gain?”

“Does insanity need a reason?” Zane said. “No,” he answered his own question before Gavin could respond. “But, my instincts tell me you are correct.”

Gavin seemed to be thinking, and then he looked at Zane. “Remember mother mentioned a lawman getting too *friendly*, to the point she felt overwhelmed by his attention? Mother occasionally mentioned it in letters. Or am I delusional? Wishful thinking that there is a connection between Sheriff Grimes and Foley?”

Zane rub his chin, reflecting. “No, I recall you telling me about that particular communication. I didn't read the letter myself, but mother did feel uncomfortable about the lawman. Said something about how persistent he'd become.”

“You think it was Grimes, and Foley started considering the man a threat? That is reason enough to get rid of someone. If the sheriff managed somehow to convince mother to reciprocate his affection,

Foley might have felt threatened. Because that could mean the sheriff could ultimately end up with what Foley considered rightfully his own. Or, and I hate to admit, but it's to be considered that maybe the marshal is involved somehow. Mother never named the lawman, but continuously referred to the man as sheriff." Zane didn't answer, but Gavin knew that didn't mean his brother didn't agree.

* * * *

Walking toward the hotel Jayce did the best she could to appear upbeat, as Gianna walked slowly with belabored steps. A few times, she feared losing Gianna's attention.

Every attempt was made to pull Gianna out of the forlorn abyss, but nothing Jayce said or did helped.

Finally, after long moments of silence, Gianna turned to Jayce. "I didn't want to say anything in front of Gavin or Zane, but I'm fearful perhaps I have bitten off more than I can chew."

Jayce had no idea if Gianna cared for a response, a confirmation, or denial, but she felt it important Gianna know where her trust lay.

"No matter what you think, I for one have to tell you how proud I felt in the courtroom today. I know that Gavin and Zane trust you to win so don't go and start doubting yourself, Gianna. Not now. Not when you are so close to setting them free. That and proving Foley should hang like he deserves."

Gianna gave a reassuring smile, but Jayce doubted the well intended accolades penetrated.

Though they got along nicely, Jayce didn't feel as if she and Gianna had forged a connection that would surpass the outcome of the trial, either way.

Like Gavin, Gianna came from another world Jayce knew existed, but left whimsical dreams of ever entering such to young girls. Her life included going from town to town, from one card game to the

next, and a win. Everything outside of that was something a gambler didn't think about.

"Thank you, Jayce. I appreciate your support. Lord knows I need it. I'm going to be on pins and needles the entire time until we are back in court, and Judge Patchet gives a ruling."

"But, I thought you gave compelling evidence, and you said yourself that there are cases using the same evidence that have succeeded."

Gianna tugged at her bottom lip. "I know, but what I didn't say to Gavin and Zane is that a majority of the rulings are against. I didn't want to get their hopes up, and that is probably a terrible thing to do, but, I felt compelled to give as much hope as possible. I probably shouldn't even be telling you the truth of the matter, but it's highly likely Judge Patchet will rule against me. Of course, that doesn't mean it's the end, but it certainly puts a damper on the entire case. I almost have to start from scratch."

Jayce smiled at Gianna assuredly. "I put my money on you, Gianna."

Gianna chuckled softly, and then said, "From what I hear of your gambling success that gives me an enormous boost of confidence."

They talked of mundane matters that didn't include the trial, because Jayce wanted to keep Gianna from worrying. If only for the moment, she was convinced every little bit helped.

In no time, and before Gianna realized it, they were standing in front of the hotel.

Jayce made sure Gianna checked in, and then made sure everything was secure before she turned to leave.

"You aren't staying?" Gianna asked, the worry obvious.

"Maybe in a few hours, but right now I need to settle my nerves." A slight smile curve Jayce's lips. "Gambling does that for me." The admission clearly made Gianna nervous. Jayce could tell, but that didn't mean she intended to elaborate or go into how gambling with a strong shot of whiskey, helped take her mind off matters. She would

be required to forgo the whiskey, but around or two of cards would help the jitters she felt.

“Perhaps if you are not staying I should go with you.”

Jayce's eyebrow lifted, surprised. Gianna didn't seem the type of woman who would dare go into the gaming hall. A lady's propriety, if nothing else, forbids such gauche actions.

A little laugh bubbled from Gianna's look. “We have both entered into unconventional worlds for women. Even though I'm a lawyer, and you a gambler, we are looked upon as the same. Daring the constrictors society places on woman, Jayce.”

“But, a lawyer is a prestigious position. I'm not so sure a gun tooting female gambler is held in the same regard.”

“Depending on the audience, I assure you. Once you have crossed over the line of what is considered disreputable for a woman, I'm afraid little else matters. At least not to me. We have strong will, and gumption to do the things that please us most. What others think about us, be damned.” The mischievousness of it all apparently amused Gianna.

Unable to help herself, Jayce laughed to, at Gianna's spirit. A newfound fondness for Gianna surfaced at seeing something of herself in Gianna. A spirited adventurer, with the desire to control her own destiny, and Jayce liked that.

“I like you, Gianna, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do something rash and allow you to go with me to the hall.” Jayce was shaking her head no. “If something happened, and you got in harms way, not only Zane, but Gavin would have conniptions.”

“You say that as if your life is any less important to the brothers than mine?”

Jayce remained silent a long moment. She pondered the question, and knew the answer, but a response never materialized. Gianna didn't need to know the inner most thoughts that dwelled inside when she lay alone at night. Dreaming, hopeful, telling herself that she meant anything more to the brothers than the relationship between them.

Zane accepted her readily, but commonsense told Jayce it all had to do with lust, and nothing more. While she could clearly see that Zane and Gianna bonded on an entirely different level that included emotions. She suspected intimacy played a role in their relationship, but it really wasn't proper to meddle to find out the truth.

It seemed odd, but Jayce thought jealousy would rear its ugly head, but the thought of Zane moving onto Gianna or any other woman didn't faze her in the least. Instead, she felt a sense of happiness for them both, and honestly, relief.

Her conscience made Jayce honestly admit the truth about the entire situation with the brothers. And for the first time, if only to herself, Jayce confessed Gavin Banner entered the neat, secure, and emotionless world she harbored, like an adrenaline rush. It was like a high-stake poker game with her heart as the highest stake laid on the table. The risk was evident, but as with any gamble, Jayce felt willing to take a chance regardless of the possible outcome.

A good gambler knew when a bluff failed--she loved Gavin Banner.

That thought alone didn't bother Jayce. She forged into a forbidden wanton act with both brothers, and because of this, nothing would come out of the deep-rooted feelings for Gavin, even if she confessed such. She knew this, like a gambler knows when to toss in a bad hand.

"You love Gavin?"

Hearing Gianna's voice jolted Jayce out of the reverie.

"I do," Jayce said, quietly.

Gianna genuinely offered, "I think he has great affection for you too, but I sense you have reservations about the entire matter?"

Jayce chuckled softly. She looked at Gianna. "I'm a gambler. My thoughts are not supposed to be so transparent."

"Jayce when you two are together, the way you interact with each other and the admiration in your eyes and Gavin's," she laughed,

“only a fool couldn't see the sparks flying. It's like lightening,” She teased, giggling.

What Gianna said might be true, but Jayce also knew lust and desire could drive such emotions. Unfortunately, Gavin could bluff as well, and she wasn't sure how he felt. She told herself it didn't matter. *So, she lied.*

Chapter 26

Eyes watched the lone female emerge from the saloon.

The figure moved further back in the alcove, and let the darkness of the shrouded area keep him hidden. He focused on Jayce, as she stepped across the street, and headed toward the hotel.

Jayce started walking, and the ominous shadow followed.

The hotel and saloon were on opposite ends of the street, but little distance separated the two establishments. That meant there was little time to act, and the man knew it was now or never.

The man moved swiftly, and jumped out in front of Jayce. He used the element of surprise to his advantage. Jayce froze. Her hesitation, the brief second-pause, allowed an opportunity to pounce.

Before Jayce realized what happened, the man stepped out of the dark, and covered her mouth to prevent a scream. He seized her guns, and tossed the weapons aside.

The man's grip was Herculean. He dragged Jayce kicking and fighting into the alley. She continued to struggle, arms and legs flailing in the air desperately in an attempt to break free.

Jayce refused to give up, but realized how perilous the situation was when she saw the man raise his hand.

She whimpered when the force of a fist struck her cheek.

The man watched unemotional as Jayce crumpled, and then lost consciousness.

* * * *

Gavin immediately stood up when he saw the door to the jailhouse open, and Gianna hurry inside. He took one look at the expression on her face and knew. The burn in his stomach intensified when Gianna came closer, and he saw tears clouding her eyes.

Gavin's voice strained under the attempt to throttle the agitation building. He gripped the bars so tight his knuckles turned white. "Where is Jayce?" His tone tight, clipped.

Gianna swallowed, and then tried to speak. She stammered, gathered her composure, and then spoke rapidly.

"How long has Jayce been missing?" Zane ask, stepping forward.

"I shouldn't have let her go alone." Gianna's words faltered. She took a deep breath, and then told Gavin and Zane what happened. "I insisted on going too, but Jayce wouldn't hear of it. She refused to allow me to accompany her to the saloon. I insisted, but..." the thread of words trailed off, as Gianna's emotions overwhelmed the need to speak. Then she cried pitifully, and feeling responsible, she said, "It's all my fault."

"No, that is not true," Zane said, and then looked at Gavin. "Whoever took Jayce couldn't have gotten very far. If we ride hard and fast there is the possibility of catching up to them."

Gavin gave his brother a hard nod. He heard Zane, but unable to find a voice he couldn't respond. All his concentration centered on settling the wave of fury frothing to the surface.

The marshal was lacks about the security of the jailhouse, and on more than one occasion, Gavin observed the man putting an extra set of keys in the desk drawer. He instructed Gianna where to find them, and then waited impatiently while she struggled working the heavy iron in the stubborn lock.

As soon as the click sounded, Gavin pushed the door open, and then freed his brother.

They found their weapons in the gun case along with some rifles.

By the time they reached their horses both brothers were heavily armed, and ready to take on a posse.

Gianna was instructed to find Judge Patchet and the marshal, and tell them what happened. Then Zane gave her stern instructions to go back to the hotel, and stay put.

Chapter 27

Voices whispered conspiratorially, but Jayce couldn't understand what the men talked about. She listened, and recognized Foley's voice, but the other man was foreign to her.

They were arguing about something. That was obvious. Foley pleaded, and spoke with a hint of hysterics the more the man seemed bent on wrath, continuously berating him. The pitch of the man's voice made it evident he was furious at Foley.

Then there was a long moment of silence. A disquiet surfaced. Jayce could hear movement, and then the two men talking again. She strained to make out the conversation, but it was impossible to understand, because the two had moved further away.

After a few more minutes passed, Jayce heard the sound of horse hooves.

The heaviness of boot-steps reached Jayce's ears, as one of the men walked in the direction of where she sat huddled in the corner.

As the man drew closer, Jayce pressed into the hard surface of worn and splintered wood planks behind her. She held her breath, waiting.

The scarf the man used to cover her eyes was untied roughly, and then tossed away.

Jayce blinked against the sudden light.

Foley leaned forward leering. His smile defied devious, and the sinister expression sent a cold chill racing up Jayce's spine.

She tried to scoot further back, but there was nowhere for Jayce to go. On all sides, four solid walls enclosed the small area, and beneath she felt the coldness of the dirt floor.

The rope used to bind her wrists bite her into tender flesh. The rag stuffed in her mouth was dusty, and Jayce struggled to breathe. When Foley removed the cloth, she sucked in fresh air.

“Hello, Jayce. It's good to finally meet you personally.”

“What do you want, Foley?” Jayce watched Foley wearily, as he moved about.

Foley leaned over and picked up a lantern full of oil and clothe, and carried the items back to where Jayce sat. Without a word, he opened the lantern and proceeded to pour the oil all around the floor in front of her until the slick residue seeped into Jayce's boots. Then he stepped back, and sat the lantern down.

“I hate that it has come to this, but I fear I have no other choice. You see, my brothers have force my hand on matters. The selfish bastards are responsible for all this. If only they had listened to me, none of this would be necessary. Then, that bitch from New York, oh, how I wanted to strangle that woman right there in the courtroom, but...” He paused to snicker. He tsk-tsk, and then continued. “That would have been a mistake, of course.”

“You blame others for your actions. Now, if that isn't a surprise I don't know what is,” she said, sarcastically. Foley's eyes narrowed, but Jayce continued ignoring the glower. “Nobody is forcing you to do anything, Foley. At least have the decency to admit you are doing this because you are insane.”

Foley's attack was abrupt, and vicious. He slapped Jayce across the cheek. He snarled like an animal, nostrils flared. “Shut up!”

Jayce wiped the blood away by rubbing her mouth against a shoulder. She glared at Foley. “You killed your mother, didn't you? You set your mother's house on fire just like you are about to do now. And you killed Sheriff Grimes, too.”

A menacing smile curled Foley's lips, and then he shrugged nonchalantly. His voice void of emotion, he spoke. “It was a necessary evil, I'm afraid. I tried to talk some sense into mother, but then the bitch repeatedly refused to listen to anything I had to say. She

insisted on seeing my father's last dying wishes come to fruition. God, that bastard was as stupid as the woman he married." Foley spit, viciously. "He used his cock indiscriminately. Fucking colored bitches, and begetting bastards on them, and if that wasn't enough, he insisted on seeing the half-breed brothers of mine have rights to a fortune I consider mine."

"Gavin is not a bastard. Your father was married to his mother."

An unsettling coldness darkened Foley's eyes. Jayce held firm, ready to receive another slap, but then Foley just started to chuckle; a low, nefarious sound that was manic. "Does it really matter at this point, Jayce? I'm afraid not, because you see neither Gavin nor Zane will see a penny of my father's money. I put a plan into motion to ensure this."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Oh, it's quite simple. I know Gavin will come for you when he realizes you are missing. I'm counting on it. And that savage brother of his will be right there as well. The two are inseparable, but then you already know this, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" Not that she cared, but Jayce needed time to think, so she attempted to keep Foley occupied by talking.

Foley wagged a finger at Jayce, as if to call her a naughty child. "You fuck both of them," he said, nastily.

Jayce tensed, hearing the crude words.

"I followed the three of you for some time, and I watched from my hidey-hole, as the three of you fucked like animals. You're a whore, Jayce." He laughed, and then continued. "You act like a saloon girl, but I have to give you accolades for your performance, which far outdo any whore I've come across." He leaned into Jayce's face, sneering. "The things you allowed my brothers to do to you are deplorable, but then I admit quite exciting, too." Foley snickered. "A few times while I spied on the three of you performing I lost my seed. The thought of having that delicious mouth on my cock, even now makes me hard." Foley rubbed his crotch suggestively. He

glanced at Jayce, a pure wicked glint in his eyes. "But, we will get to that in due time."

"Never," Jayce seethed.

"Oh, I beg to differ. I would prove you wrong now, but anticipations heighten the excitement."

"You're insane, Foley."

Foley lunged at Jayce, and she cringed. He chuckled, and then stepped back. A fingernail raked over Jayce's cheek digging into her tender flesh. "You like Gavin, don't you?" Jayce remained mute. "There is no need to pretend. I could tell by the way you act around my brother. It is obvious you prefer the mix-breed over the savage. That is encouraging, because it tells me you aren't as sick as I first believed. No woman in her right mind wants a redskin, but I suppose you allowing the Injun to fuck you added to your sense of sick excitement."

"Zane is more of a man than you will ever be."

Foley flinched. He turned cool, unwavering eyes on Jayce. "I'm going to fuck you, Jayce. Use your mouth, cunt, and ass as you so readily allowed my brothers. But, whether I'm as accommodating is to be decided. Continue to force the issue, and I'll make you feel pain unlike you have ever known. Don't...force my hand."

"You're disgusting!" Jayce fumed. She refused to allow Foley to make what she did seem sordid and dirty.

"Perhaps, but no more than you. God, you are stupid. Did you actually think Gavin would ever forgive you for fucking his brother? That is what you believed, isn't it. That you and Gavin would ride off in the sunrise happily ever after. That isn't going to happen, Jayce. Sorry," he said, but was clearly unapologetic.

"What I think about Gavin is none of your business." She refused to let Foley know he hit a sore spot.

Foley waved his hand dismissively. "Does it really matter at this point? Not really, because if Gavin is foolish enough to want you after what you did. I guarantee you when he finds you sprawled out like the

whore you are with my cum all over and in your body, he will leave you high and dry.

Men use women like you, Jayce. Don't be stupid and think otherwise."

The pain of his words, that there might be some truth in them, struck Jayce like a chord. She fought back, wanting to vent her anger. She kicked out, slamming her foot in Foley's shin.

He grunted, and then quickly recovered. His fingers twisted in her hair, he yanked hard until Jayce cried out. Then he grabbed her ankles, and pulled until she lay flat on her back.

Jayce glared at him, as Foley worked on the opening of his pants. He pulled his cock free, and then straddled her. "I was hoping to have Gavin and Zane see you feast on my cock, but I suppose now is a good of time as any to teach you a lesson. Besides, when they finally arrive, if they come for you, seeing my cock up your ass will be just as effective. Especially when they can't do anything about it."

Jayce struggled like a wildcat when Foley tried to force his cock into her mouth. With her hands tied, and little room to move, she could do very little. But, she was determined not to allow Foley to win.

"Bitch!" Foley growled, feeling the sharp teeth dig hard. He jumped back, and glared at Jayce. "You will regret that!"

The distant sound of horses beating a path toward the barn could be heard. Riders rode fast and furious, and Jayce prayed that Gavin would be there within seconds. She knew it was him. It had to be.

Foley hurried to the barn and opened the door. He was furious to see Gavin and Zane approaching alone. *Where was his partner! Damn the double crossing bastard!*

Foley ranted and raved like a lunatic. He moved furiously about gathering this and that before he stormed back to Jayce. "It seems my plans have changed. I don't have time to waste on you, Jayce. So, instead of dealing with Gavin and Zane as I planned, the brothers seeing you burn will have to suffice."

Another lantern full of oil was tossed carelessly into the first spill. Within seconds, a burst of fire ignited, and the area around Jayce filled with smoke and flames.

* * * *

The door to the barn burst open, and Gavin stepped past the threshold into the room. He spotted Foley trying to escape, but his attention centered on the flames all around Jayce.

“Gavin!” Jayce cried out.

Gavin stormed toward Jayce knowing Zane wasn't about to let Foley get away.

Ignoring the heat and fire, making a way through the building inferno, Gavin grabbed Jayce around the waist, effortlessly picking her up in his arms, and then carried her outside to safety.

By the time Gavin reached where Zane had Foley pinned, his anger combusted as furiously as the fire destroying the building.

Gavin didn't waste time with Foley. He wrapped his fingers around the man's neck, and jerked him forward and lifted until Foley's feet dangled above the ground. Then he slammed Foley to the ground, and pounced. The brute of his knee dug into Foley's chest, knocking the wind out so that it escaped with a whoosh.

Foley grunted, and groaned aloud. “You bastard! Sonofabitch!” He roared.

All manner of control lost, Gavin pulled his gun and press it to Foley's forehead. “I should have done this a long time ago.” He cocked the weapon...

Jayce screamed.

Somehow, Foley managed to pull a gun.

Gavin maneuvered in time to divert the shot fired, rolling to the side, but felt the heat of the bullet shred cloth. A stinging burn went through his upper chest. Blood quickly soaked the material of the shirt, but Gavin ignored it as nothing.

Foley's hysterical pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears. He crawled on all fours, trying to scramble away, but Zane stepped in front of him. He put his boot on Foley's neck holding him still. Then Gavin caught him around the nape and yanked hard. Sniveling, and struggling, Foley fought at Gavin, but his attempt to escape was impossible.

"Please...I-I had to kill mother! I didn't want to, but she refused to listen! If she had just headed my warning--he force me to do it!" Foley shrieked.

A rush of something animalistic escalated inside Gavin like an animal on the scent of blood. His entire stance turned rigid, as hard as Gavin's stare. Eyes remained void of emotion, as he moved up behind Foley. A powerful arm wrapped around the man's throat--an abrupt jerk upward snapped Foley's neck.

"My God, you are bleeding to death," Jayce said. She tried to press the scarf against the wound, but Gavin moved her hand away.

Gavin cupped Jayce's cheeks, and pulled until she lay against the raging heartbeat thumping erratically inside his chest. His head fell gently against her forehead. He suffocated a breath. His entire body shuddered a release, and then he brushed his lips against Jayce's just before collapsing.

Chapter 28

Watching the days and weeks roll by, vigilante and praying, Jayce sat by Gavin's side the entire time. Though the doctor's words were meant to be encouraging--no vital damage occurred from the gunshot--a stubborn refusal remained not to leave his side.

The nights were difficult, as she was forced to listen and watch the heavy rise and fall of Gavin's labored breaths. Jayce became increasingly worried that no signs of recovery surfaced.

During the daytime, she kept a steady audience on Gavin, tending to his needs...sponge baths, and nourishing food she had to force him to accept. Jayce finally began to feel encouraged as paleness gave way to some color. On this morning, when Gavin actually opened his eyes and stared, she began to believe all prayers would be answered.

Jayce soothingly moved a strand of hair away from the damp forehead, testing to assure herself the fever was gone.

She ran her fingers along the shadow of beard on his jaw line and downward, stopping to relish the feel of a strong pulse beating beneath her searching fingertips.

Satisfied that Gavin grew stronger each day, Jayce started her normal routine. Cool water and a soft cloth ran over the expansive shoulders, down and across the hard planes of stomach, as attentive as a nurse seeing to a patient, she cleansed him.

Jayce stepped back tossing the cloth in the basin.

His voice hoarse, but audible, Gavin said, "Don't...stop."

She jumped in surprise hearing how strong Gavin's voice had become since the first day of convalescence. But even more heartening, when she turned, his full attention and a warm smile were

displayed. He said, "I like the feel of your hands all over me. Those sponge baths were thoroughly enjoyable--it's been a long time, darling."

Wild flutters sent the inside of Jayce's belly flip-flopping. Hurrying back, Jayce dropped to her knees beside the bed. She held his hand. Comforted in the feel of a strong grip, Jayce pressed a palm against her breast. "Welcome back." Perceptively, checking the condition of the patient, she watched the light behind Gavin's eyes brighten. The warmth of a smile radiated the room, as she said, "I thought you were sleeping while I bathed you?"

Gavin winked, but said nothing.

A glow settled in the bottom of Jayce's belly at the teasing, as an enormous relief flowed through her that he felt good enough to jest. That and he'd obviously been more recovered than first believed if he was aware of her presence.

"I'm starving."

Another true sign he was on the way to recovery, another wave relaxed the tenseness away, as Jayce thanked God for answering all her feverish prayers.

"What would you like first?"

A burst of sunlight filtered in the room from the open curtains, the rays high and bright, and denoting early morning.

It seemed to aid Gavin's decision. "Eggs, slices of ham, biscuit--plenty of butter and honey."

She smiled, thrilled at the healthy appetite. "Coffee? Milk?"

"Both--three sugars, and heavily creamed."

Dashing to the door, a renewed sense of giddiness surfaced inside Jayce.

"Darling?"

She turned around, and said, "Yes, Gavin?"

There was an effort to move that didn't go unnoticed, and momentarily a strain was evident, but then Gavin managed to sit upright. Jayce felt the blush rise in her cheeks, as devilish eyes roved

appreciatively covering head to toe, as he stared. "It is morning, or am I mistaken?"

"Very early I'm afraid." Jayce said, fearful of waking him from resting.

"Then don't I at least get a good morning kiss?"

Hurrying over, she planted a chaste kiss on his lips.

Surprised at the strength of his hold, she fell against him careful of his wound, and waited with bated breath seeing the lips move forward.

His kiss was consuming, and demanding. Hot lashes of moist heat, devoured greedily, leaving her breathless before being released. Soft pants created a rise and fall of her breasts, as she sat there folded in a protective embrace.

"That is a kiss, darling."

Jayce giggled sounding like a schoolgirl. She scooted away, and then burst into laughter feeling the affectionate pat on her behind.

"Hurry back...I'm ravenous." She looked over her shoulder at his salacious stare. "I need my strength. Food first, you little minx--then we make up for lost time."

The heat of his words, and insinuation left ripples of pleasure exploding beneath her veins. "The doctor said you should sleep as much as possible. Even though you are recovering, he insisted you need rest to mend completely.

"I intend to rest after I finish my meal--then you, Jayce. We can sleep the entire day away...night--weeks, whatever is your heart's desire."

"My dreams have come true already. You are here...alive," she said, quietly. Fighting the overwhelming urge to go back and fling herself shamelessly into his arms, Jayce left the room.

Chapter 29

Two weeks later Gavin made good on his promise to fulfill what he considered Jayce's desire, because even though he insistently assured her that he was well and capable of making love, she flatly refused.

The long awaited time finally there, he felt an insatiable urge to suffocate in the luscious form standing in the doorway until he died from the pleasure.

"Are you going to stand there all night, and force me to come and get you?" A cool gaze raked over Jayce, a vivacious hint perceptive in his stare. "I don't mind." He went to remove the covers, and make good on his word, but she moved toward him.

Wrapping an arm around the slender waist, anxiously he pulled the delight onto the bed. Not willing to be deterred by the clothing between them, he gathered the hem, and slowly drew the skirt up until it was bunched around Jayce's waist. Without preamble, he felt that rapacious, he covered her, settling the strength of cock centered between her thighs.

Hungrily searching, he found the slippery bud. "Ah--there. Just how I remembered," he said, husky and low. Slowly, encircling the tight nubbin of flesh. Delicate nips took tiny bites out of tender flesh. "So moist, searing...deliciously inviting." A finger traced along the curvature of her ripe breast, as if mapping the territory, a claiming gesture. "I'm afraid I haven't the patience to be gentlemanly, and take my time bringing your body to the height of desire and beyond--too many nights have past with this thought in mind."

An equally impatient thought of having Gavin inside her, counted his apology, as unnecessary. Instead, she reached down between them to the swollen crest of erection, lightly creating flutters against the flaring crown. She licked her lips, looked up, and grinned at the carnivorous intent that was obvious in his expression. "I'm just as eager to have--this," she said, raising her hips to the burgeoning tip. She breathed a sigh of relief feeling the head submerge the tiniest bit, and whispered. "Inside--me."

He chuckled, a sound that gave way to a low moan, as the entirety of his cock slipped into the juicy cavern. An animalistic growl escaped, feeling her full hips force his rigid length deeper, as her legs lifted and entwined his hard flanks. Pushing deep on the first downstroke, all manner of what little control he held evaporated in that instance.

Without delicacy, and a lack of prurient consideration, he placed his palms beneath her ass, jerked forward, and plunged into the soaking womanly flesh. The feel of snugness, raw heat, and suckling drawing over cock drove the untamed tempo to escalate. Repeatedly, driven by some unseen force to possess, he found himself unable to resist...movements became uncontrolled, ravishing, and almost savage in nature. His need too great--lost in the inviting succulent pussy that called to his cock like a siren--the power of each thrust and the receptive welcome, his desire heightened with each plunge and retreat...capitulation seemed increasingly close.

He refused to dissect the revelation of his thoughts--*this wasn't simple fucking anymore*--as the licentious assault continued.

The phrase *die of pleasure* surfaced in Jayce's mind, as wave after wave of ripe heat awakened her body, leaving quivers racing amuck, every nerve ending tingling, feeling the hardness delve. The cock filled on each stroke, and then slightly withdrew before making another descent. Each thrust more complete, and exquisite than the one before, a shimmer of unbound rapture awakened senses to the point of blissful delirium.

The feel of hot spurs ignited deep within the walls of her pussy, causing it to clench and spasm, as the hard beat of enormity repeatedly forged. Distending, forcing the slit wider, she could feel herself gape open and accept the piston of the dick's greedy plunder.

Digging her nails into his back, softly she cried "Gavin." Her chin buried in the crook of warm flesh, she wrapped her arms around the strong chords of his neck, holding on for dear life during the ride of pure wickedness that left shallow pants escaping. Breathless, she said, "Oh Gavin, I have missed this." Then, unable to stop the next words-- "I love you."

She forgot herself in the splendor of the moment, and didn't care if he knew.

He heard the declaration, but mindless to anything except the pure hedonistic feeling of being awash in delicious pussy driving him to the brink of insanity and beyond, no response came. Instead, lifting, driving, into the folds of pussy, he lost all train of thought. The moment seem to spin on its axle before coming to a sudden halt.

The feel of constricting tightness evaded drawing his sacs firmly into his groin. A rush of sensations ran along the shaft...an indescribable feel of shattering made him shudder as seed erupted, filling an already juicy crevice to overload, and seeped down between thighs.

Gavin blew out air, shivered a final time, and then withdrew. He rolled to the side, taking Jayce too. Holding on, he lay back against the bed and waited for his heart to ease back inside his chest.

The disquiet in the room obvious, he felt as if he should say something about her admission, but for whatever reason he remained silent.

Stupid. Stupid, Jayce. The thought rung like a bell toll. How she let herself get lost in the moment, and utter the irreversible endearment still baffled Jayce. Like an idiot, all cards were on the table, but Gavin had yet to reveal his hand. Unsure about his

reluctance to respond, either way, she too figured the best thing to do was remain quiet, as well.

As if both were emerged in daunting thoughts, neither stirred nor made a sound.

The pounding of Jayce's heart drummed loudly in her ears, so intense she swore Gavin could hear it.

Gavin lay still against the tense frame concentrating on the strong steady beat of pulses, least the conscious thoughts--*he should say something*--swirling inside forged to the forefront.

No one said anything for a very uncomfortable moment until Jayce had just about enough. On pins and needles, she lifted slightly to rest on an elbow. Gavin had laid an arm as a shield over his eyes, but an instinct told her even in the darkened room, he stared at her.

Her voice ultra low, she said, "I'm sorry if wha-what I said has made things uncomfortable between us." There, it came out, and even though she didn't feel an ounce of regret...*God, how she loved him*...that is the best she could manage under the circumstances.

For a fleeting moment, pure panic escalated when not a single syllable was spoken. She held tense, and then unsure what else to do, Jayce moved away.

His touch simple, fingertips caught her arm gingerly, a wild racing of sensations started inside that made Jayce tremble.

"Zane and Gianna are getting married." It was said matter of fact, as if the thought suddenly materialized, and Jayce needed to know.

Not sure why he felt compelled to tell this now, no response came. *What exactly did he want her to say?* Jayce forced her lips tight, and waited through the awkward moment.

"How does that make you feel?"

She did wish to see his eyes, perhaps it would help read the thoughts he refused to speak aloud. "Happy," she finally said, honestly. "Gianna is nice...they deserve each other."

Gavin remained mute, pondering, deciphering the minimal words that left doubt surfacing inside as to how Jayce really felt. He

supposed if he openly asked the more prevalent question, he might get the response desired.

“Are you really okay with that, darling, or are you saying what you think I wish to hear?”

Jayce rested on her knees, arms akimbo to her hips, glaring down at him. “I answered your question, Gavin, now what more do you want from me?” She demanded. Nervousness and the unknown made tension swell.

He moved, and Jayce leaned back. He loomed forward like a towering precipice, invading personal space. The room dark, but not enough that she couldn't see the set features now that Gavin came closer. His eyes scrutinized her briefly, and then an arm came close and his hands captured the slender column of her throat. Lightly, as gentle as a breeze, his fingers traced the outline of flesh. The gesture slight, but telling of possessiveness, evident in the stroke that firmed at each pass.

“Gavin?” she whispered. “What do you want me to say?”

She needed to know. She was desperate to hear. Holding still, daring to breathe, as all sorts of fearful thoughts surface, because she hadn't a clue to the sudden shift in dynamics between them that bordered on distance even though he remained very close.

She swore to pull hair out by the strands. His disquiet, and stoic mannerisms, a recession back inside the emotionless shell he wore like armor when warranted, made her that crazy. A complete bundle of nerves, and thoroughly ignorant to what he thought, and didn't care to reveal, made Jayce jittery. Not bothering to be considerate, he remained quiet, refusing to answer a question.

When fingers reached for the bodice, she swept his hand away. The question put bluntly, because a blunt inquisition required an equally frank response, Jayce asked, “Do you love me or not?”

“I love the feel of your full lips against mine.” The fingers returned to the bodice, and swiftly unfastened the ribbons, before the blouse was cast aside.

"I love the feel of your thighs pressing into my flanks." The waistband of the skirt was captured, and tugged downward past her hips.

Gavin pressed forward until she had no recourse, but to surrender. Jayce fell backward against the bed. The skirt was removed, and tossed to join the shirt on the floor.

"I love the alluring scent of you that drives me wild." The undergarments were dispatched with equal swiftness.

Before she could think to object, the softness of the blanket rubbed across her belly when he maneuvered her into the desired position. She felt the heat of his breath fan over a shoulder. Fingers traced the outline of her ass, kneading wickedly. The weight of maleness pressed her further into the bed.

Intangible words, sweet-nothings perhaps, there was no way to be sure, hummed over a shoulder, down the back, to the swell of creamy globes. She felt the coolness of air wash over skin, as the crevice opened when the hardness slide along the puckered flesh, teasing.

Then as quick as the feeling began, it ended abruptly when the cock moved away.

"Don't...move."

She took issue with the demand, as if she were there to perform, no more than a puppet to appease desires. The thought being deferentially ignored, leaving him high and dry was seriously considered.

Within seconds, he returned. The coolness of something slick glided over the crease of ass, delved between the folds, and a finger entered past the flex ring. Then another joined the first, scissoring, opening the portal to relax, before both were removed.

Jayce obliging submit feeling his hands spread her thighs wider. She knew better then to allow him to continue. Her inner conscience said be strong, and deny what Gavin obviously thought inevitable--a surrender. But, the mixed emotions of need versus right and wrong conveniently erased any thought not to succumb.

The full heaviness and heat only a man could provide was back, as he lay horizontal in alignment. His fingers gripped her hips, and then she felt the pressure of being distended as his cock rocked against her snug anus. Each thrust was more daring than the next until the fullness invaded past the tightness before he froze.

Gavin licked his tongue over an earlobe, and then tugged gently at the spot. His tone throaty, guttural, he said, "I demand required resignation."

"Is that what you feel me allowing you to fuck my ass is?"

He chuckled, rearing back, and then forged ahead to bury more of the stiffness home. He dropped a light kiss on the center of back. "At the expense of sounding aplomb, and duly inappropriate, Cheri. My wanting to fuck your ass has nothing to do with it, but an insane desire I have had since you entered the room." He back drew, and then slowly entered the slick, but snug passage that created a wicked-crazy friction over the nerve endings of his cock. "For weeks, while in recovery, I fantasized about how delicious my dick buried in the recess of ass would feel...to the point of uncontrollably spilling my seed one night."

The heat of the explicit words sent tremors rippling between her thighs straight to her pussy. She felt the clit swell, and a fresh coat of wetness cover inner thighs.

"Perhaps it's an obtuse thought to share with you, albeit the truth of the matter. Up on your knees."

"What if I say no?"

"What if I say I don't take no for an answer?" He said, casually, as if the thought of pressing the issue didn't abhor him, even though it did. He would never consider forcing anything upon a woman. He withdrew, and waited.

The flat palm patted the ass. "Thank you, darling." When Jayce did as instructed.

The thought of plunging into the depths of the ass in plain view made Gavin think insane thoughts, but years of gentlemen tutelage,

and a stronger measure of inbred conscience required he consider feelings. With a sense of obligation to please, he asked, "Do you want my cock here?" he murmured, rubbing the bulb over the wrinkled hole.

"Do you love me?" She retorted, and knew the thought flippant, but she had no qualms about insisting on a response to an earlier question, as if the thought holding ass hostage would force Gavin to speak the truth.

Right, wrong, or indifferent, she needed to know.

"If I say no, does that mean I can't fuck your ass?"

"Jesus, you're insufferable."

"Well, answer my question." He had the nerve to insist, after all his refusals.

"When you answer mine." Jayce snapped back.

"I love everything about you, darling." The answer seemed speculative, and he knew it, but he refused to allow the matter to be pushed. *He would say he loved her when he damn well pleased.* The thought was gauche, Gavin knew. But, endless, and unquestionable obedience of females that graced his bed, and an upbringing that spurred the belief of entitlement-- submission of a female had always been a practicality in his mind.

As far as his concern, the matter resolved, the cock forged ahead burying completely before he held still to give the invasion a moment to process. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Uh-huh..." There needed to be more said, but what under the circumstances? The pleasure-pain of feeling the devious feel of the hard piercing rod didn't go unnoticed. She relished in it, and ignored the possibility of what an easy relent meant. "Fuck me," she gasped, as the cock rode higher, deeper. "I want it. You. This," she moaned, falling forward. Then she pushed back working the huge breadth in more. Almost demanding, wiggling, she swayed her hips to the measured churns of each stroke.

Slowly, methodically, ever so gentle, Gavin penetrated the depths in a precise tempo to tantalize and please. Rocking forward, slicing between her globes, taking them to heights of rapture that surpassed anything either of them had ever experienced in the arms of another.

Feeling the clench and release, he reached around and found the slit. His fingers eased the labia apart, and the thickness of two fingers invaded at once.

Jayce cried out feeling the simultaneous beat of the cock in her ass, and the finger-fucking he delivered with an art of experience and adeptness she knew would result in mind-numbing pleasure.

The climax built to a crest, then came swiftly, and left her quaking. She cried out, and collapsed under the hedonistic assault.

Gavin was there. So close to losing it, it took all he could do not to follow the tumultuous orgasm he felt awaken and bring Jayce alive beneath him. She squirmed, pleading for more, pumping his cock in the sheath, riding out the end of her release.

He withdrew, grabbed his cock, and squeezed to stop the flow.

Unceremoniously, there was no time for consideration, he flipped Jayce to her back, and shoved her thighs aside. With a satisfied grunt, he was back full mast, but buried in sweltering pussy.

An eager mouth sought a kiss. Lips crushed tender fullness, tongue slipped past moist folds, and delved inside. Their mouths melded in a feverish dual...teeth clashing, tongues tangled, as thirst that seemed ravenous became unleashed.

Gavin tore his mouth away at the last moment. The palms of hands captured her face, and eyes bore intensely--she was a gambler, and could read expressions--she would know how strong the emotions raged inside him.

"Ah--darling," he murmured. All rationality aside, and tossed to the wind, he said, "I love you, Jayce. God, how I love you so completely it's impossible for me to fathom."

"I love you...more," she whispered.

The words were given, and then silence ensued as the world around them disintegrated fully, as a renewed excitement cursed through Jayce's body. The powerful force of strokes, coupled by the endearing admission, gave way to another orgasm that mingled with Gavin's eruption.

Their bodies shuddered...Jayce clinging while Gavin held firmly...rapture overwhelmed the senses, as the totality of surrender--both physical and emotional--brought them to the cusp of fulfillment.

* * * *

After four orgasms, all brought about with Gavin's skillful tongue, fingers, and cock, Jayce pleaded for a reprieve. They lay in splendor repose after an insatiable, and what seemed an endless amount of loving.

Gavin was on his side with Jayce in front, spoon fashion, and so close not a slip of air could pass between them. Occasionally, his lips sought the sweated flesh on the nape, and nibbled. She murmured with appreciation. She welcomed the hands that sought her breasts, holding the large fingers against a consistent heartbeat.

Her voice quiet, uncertain. "Gavin, how can you love me after what I did with you...and Zane?" It was probably best to leave well enough alone, but curiosity sometimes overrode common sense.

"Unconditional love requires no explanation, darling."

Jayce's heart swelled with admiration. Then another thought surfaced, and she struggled with keeping it to herself, but blunt honesty, no matter the consequences, had always been a required attribute of self worth in her mind. She had to tell him.

"I'm carrying a...child," she said, ultra low, reticent.

"I know." Then, before she could get out the next question forming, he said, "It doesn't matter if it is mine or my brothers, Jayce. It won't change how I feel."

She turned, moving into welcoming arms. A soft kiss brushed over Gavin's lips. "I love you," she whispered.

A wolfish grin covered Gavin's mouth making him look even sexier if that was possible. "Even though you continuously tell me so, and I believe you, I require that you show me as well." A hand slipped around the lithe waist for balance, as he moved onto his back. He straddled Jayce's thighs over his waist. "I'm demanding like that, darling. Do you mind?"

Jayce tossed back her head laughing, causing streamers of silk to fall down the back, and then brush his chest when she leaned forward. A wicked glint, full of mischief brightened her eyes. "Do you care if I mind?" It was a playful bantering between them she'd learn to enjoy.

"I might mind, but frankly, he," Gavin motioned to the tower of strength standing erect between them, "doesn't give a damn." He moaned, feeling the moist heat envelope his cock.

* * * *

The lone figure stood outside peering through the open window at the two forms entwined in wicked embrace.

A rueful grin surfaced, as he watch the pair go at it as if there would be no tomorrow. Then a thought emerged, and an evil smile curled the man's mouth making him appear dark, and more ominous then sin.

The man's voice filtered in the wind, and carried away into the depths of night. "Enjoy, lovebirds, for this is your last night to appease your lust. For tomorrow is another day, and with it comes the quiet before the wrath." He chuckled, menacingly.

He watched the two fucking with a renewed excitement, and then finally tore away from the enticing vision that left his cock strained. There was work to be done. Preparations to be made. He turned and the illumination of the moon caused the tin star affixed to the man's shirt to glint in the night, as he walk away.

Chapter 30

Gavin worked the tightness that still occasionally annoyed the shoulder where Foley shot him by moving it back and forth, and rotating until the discomfort eased.

He dismounted, and then led the horse into the barn. He rode long and hard, needing the exercise as much as the animal, so both were covered with sweat and full of adrenaline that had yet to wane, by the time he finished canvassing the landscape.

A full bucket of oats, and a soothing brush-down was given to the devoted Black before Gavin walked from the stall. As soon as the door came into view, he saw the note nailed to a post. A white slip of paper with writing drew undivided attention.

At first he thought Jayce left a note about her whereabouts, but when he ripped the paper free, and read the contents a raw wave of fear wash through Gavin's body.

He read the note. *I have your whore. If you don't want a bullet in her pretty little head, bring a bag of gold coins. Old Mill Creek. Don't delay.*

"I was just about to come looking for you. I saw the note when Gianna and I returned from town," Zane said. He entered the barn. "I can't believe the audacity of that bastard."

His tone was low, lethal, but deceptively calm. "That makes two of us." Gavin murmured.

The weight of the badge pinned to the note made it dangle from the paper's edge. Gavin ripped it free, and tossed the thing aside. He crumpled the paper between his fingers.

When he went to gain a fresh horse, Zane was on his heels. “No, you should stay with Gianna. What if there is another accomplice? She might be in jeopardy if left alone, Zane. I can handle this myself.”

Zane apparently determined, mounted a horse. He slide a rifle in the holder, before looking up. “First off, Gianna has already threatened me if we don't find Jayce.” He grinned. Then said, “Secondly, you might need me. There could be other cohorts, and if that is the case, I will be there to watch your back. Gianna is safe.”

They rode over the expanse of landscape toward Old Mill Creek. Gavin was driven, spurring the horse faster and faster, intent on covering a great distance in a short amount of time. His features set in determination, and concentrated on one thing.

The bastard who stole Jayce was a dead man.

* * * *

Gavin walked into the clearing. His attention shifted from the lawman to Jayce. Swiftly, he assessed her condition, and then satisfied she was okay, he turned to the unlikely nemesis.

A calculated coldness shifted to the man standing beside Jayce with a gun aimed at the woman he loved. Not good. A detrimental mistake that he intended to make known with swift justice and brute force.

“For a second, I wondered if you would come for your cunt. Apparently, she is well worth the gold. I'm almost sorry I didn't have time to sample the fare. Maybe another time.” The lawman motioned to the bag. “Toss the money to me.”

Gavin glared at Sheriff Grimes a long hard minute. “I kept telling myself you were dead, but then an eerie revelation kept surfacing when Barley couldn't be found. I'm curious about the turn of events, if you don't mind. Your little ploy is ingenious even if I have to say so myself.” He fed the sheriff's ego. He banked on the innate sense everyone had to talk about themselves when they felt a sense of

accomplishment. Though, he thought the sheriff an idiot, he gambled on the fact the man wanted nothing more than to reveal the entire detail of how things happened.

Sheriff Grimes grinned, and tilted back the hat away from his forehead. "I attempted to court Stella, figured it was the easiest way to get my hands on the money, but your mother resisted my attention. Now, that infuriated me, and I considered forcing the issue. Put her in a comprising situation where she would be forced to wed me. Being Christian and all, if I did that, and all the town people were made aware, Stella would accept me simply to keep the gossip down." A sneer curled thick lips. "That meant I intended to fuck the little lady whether she wanted me or not."

"In the letters she wrote it was clear she despised the very air you breathed. So much in fact, she prayed for the sin of loathing that she felt for you." The comment was made to elicit a reaction, which Gavin got. The sheriff tensed, and then the controlled composure began to fade. "In fact, if I'm not mistaken, perhaps hatred is a better term to use. She called you a bumbling backwards idiot."

"The bitch died screaming for mercy. I didn't have any, of course. Nor did your brother the spineless ass, because he sat there and watched me choke the life out of Stella just before we set the house on fire to cover up the crime."

Gavin's eyes narrowed to dark slits. He fought to settle the fury simmering to the surface. "What relationship did you have with Foley? Once again, my curiosity has gotten the better of me, I'm afraid."

"He wanted all the wealth your father left, but he hadn't a clue how to convince Stella to turn it over to him. When we crossed paths, and I learned of his desire for...well, there is no need to go into details, but your brother is a deviant. There were rumors from the girls at the saloon that he favored a cowboy as much as females. I fed into that sick lust, by not only befriending, but becoming a close confidante. If you know what I mean? Foley needed someone strong

to help gain what he wanted. Our joint venture was inevitable. I can be very handy when need be.”

“But, Foley almost destroyed everything when he captured Jayce the first time?”

Gavin moved forward, gradually, as the sheriff rattled on with self-accolades.

“He panicked when that lawyer bitch accused him of my murder in front of the entire town.” Sheriff Grimes shrugged nonchalantly, and then grinned. “I had intentions of killing Foley myself. Thanks for taking care of the nuisance for me.”

Gavin edged closer, then stopped when the sheriff raised the gun back at Jayce's temple, and pressed the barrel close. He froze.

A figure moving through the overgrown brush caught Gavin's attention, and then he ignored it believing Zane had moved into position behind the sheriff.

“You were fucking Foley.” Sheriff Grimes flinched. He hit a nerve. Gavin continued, as if he hadn't noticed. “Then you and my brother killed my mother. Have I gotten the facts straight so far?” He didn't wait for a response. “Barley is the man found with his face blown off. After my brother and me were found guilty of murder and hanged, you and Foley intended to take control of my father's estate, but things went sour. Now, we are at an impasse, because Foley isn't alive to give you the money, and if you think I will, you are sadly mistaken.”

“I will kill her. I swear it.”

Cold unwavering eyes settled on the sheriff. “If you do, then I will have no recourse other than to put a bullet between your eyes. You still lose, Grimes.” With that said, Gavin withdrew his gun. He started walking toward the sheriff, because he knew Grimes wouldn't kill Jayce. Not until he had his greedy hands on the bag of coins, which he intentionally left a distance away.

Gavin saw the warning in Jayce's eyes, and then heard the click of the rifle behind him, but it was too late.

“Don't move, Mr. Banner. Not an inch or I'll splatter your brains all over that pretty little woman of yours.” The man stepped forward, and bent, picking up the bag. “Don't want to do that, but I will.”

“I wondered why you suddenly, albeit conveniently materialized in the pretense of offering your help with the case,” Gavin said, turning around to face Deputy Jackson. “You didn't come to assist, but you got antsy when you read about the details of the trial, and assumed the worst outcome. You came to ensure the promised wealth didn't slip through your fingers. How quaint...and loathsome.” The derision evident and strong.

Sheriff Grimes stepped forward with an arrogant swagger. “This is all entertaining, but I'm afraid we must be on our way. The train leaves the depot shortly, and I and the deputy intend to be on it.”

“What about the girl?” Deputy Jackson asked.

“Oh,” Sheriff Grimes turned as if he forgotten Jayce's presence.

Gavin knew he hadn't, but intended to taunt. Perhaps hear him beg, which he had no intentions of doing. It wasn't necessary.

The shot rang out, and the deputy dropped to his knees. He clutched a shoulder, and then looked up. Stun disbelief cross features, and then he collapsed.

Sheriff Grimes whirled around and aimed his gun at Jayce, but didn't get a shot off before Gavin fired. The bullet hit the back of his head splattering the sheriff's brains.

Zane walked from the trees into the clearing with the rifle flung over his shoulder.

Jayce hurried over to Gavin and shamelessly flung her arms around his neck. She held tight, refusing to let go. She smothered his face with a rain of kisses that Gavin obliging accepted.

A low moan sounded.

“What do we do with the deputy?” Zane asked. He kicked the gun out of reach. “He's still alive. Damn, I must be losing my touch.”

“If he lives I say allow the man to feel the tightness of a rope around the neck,” Gavin said, and then with Jayce entwined around his side they walked to the horse without a backward glance.

Epilogue

Europe

The Banner Manor

Gavin beat a well-worn path over the rug. He paced back and forth, and ignored the conversation of the others in the room. Undivided attention remained on the sounds coming from above the stairs, he listened to every noise, no matter how miniscule, trying to detect if there was any hint of distress in Jayce's tone.

The pitch of the physician attending the birth of his child could be heard. Gavin listened to ensure the tone didn't indicate a need for worry before continuing the pacing. Hours past, but it seemed all was well. That didn't stop the increasing concern felt for Jayce and whether or not she suffered unnecessarily trying to birth the child.

Zane walked up to his brother, and put a brandy in his hand. He slapped Gavin on the back assuredly. "These things take time, brother. If you continue wearing the rug bare, I'm afraid by the time your child is born you will be too exhausted to enjoy the moment."

Gianna called from the settee where she was sitting. "I know it seems like a long time has passed, Gavin, but from what I know the first birth always takes a measure of time that seems forever. I checked on Jayce only moments ago, and all is going as well as expected according to the physician. It should be any time now."

A high-pitch cry sounded, and then Gavin heard Jayce call out for him.

He raced from the room, and bound up the steps taking them two at a time. Within seconds, he burst into the room like a runaway bull.

The physician looked over the rim of glasses, and wrinkled his brow. "Mr. Banner, most fathers prefer to wait below stairs with a strong whiskey in their hand, and have patience until called. Not be present during this delicate time."

"I'm not like most men," Gavin said, and then went to the bedside. Taking the hand offered, he squeezed gently. "I heard you call for me. Are you okay, darling?"

Jayce inhaled sharply, and slowly blew out the breath. She looked at Gavin, and gave a reassuring smile. "Uh-huh...whew, that last discomfort, I'm afraid took its toll. I apologize if I frightened you. I'm almost embarrassed by my lack of composure." She smiled sheepishly. "It's not as if I'm the first woman to bare the pains of labor."

A tender kiss was planted against the damp forehead. Tendrils of hair were moved aside, and Gavin gingerly ran his fingers over the dewy cheek. "Au contraire...perhaps not the first woman to give birth, but you are *my* first woman. And for that I adore you."

Jayce lifted a cheek for another kiss, which he willingly obliged. "The first and the last," she reminded him.

Gavin chuckled, knowing she meant as a wife, too. Cupping the chin, he strummed the flatness of a thumb over her bottom full lip. "I hope my daughter is a fiery whip just like the mother. Full of sass, and an adorably cute mouth," he said, leaning in for a kiss.

Another intense moment passed before Jayce could speak again. "You don't want a son? Most men do?"

A mischievous grin surfaced. His voice dropped conspiratorially, for Jayce's ears only. "Darling, this time hopefully we have a daughter, and then think of all the fun we can have working on our son." He winked.

"You're impossible," she teased.

"I know, but you love me anyway."

"What if I say I might not? Not this instance when I think of what you have done to me. This by far is the most difficult chore I have

ever been faced with.” The strain of fighting against the pain showed even though she tried to hide it from Gavin. “I lied,” she said, grinning when the discomfort passed. “I will always love you. No matter what?”

“Promise?”

“Do you promise to love me always? Remember I still have my guns,” she said, playfully.

Gavin bowed gracefully, in mock surrender. “Until I take my last dying breathe.”

“Gavin!” Jayce couldn't help it. She bit down on her bottom lip, waiting for the pain to pass. Her hold tightened on Gavin's hand, squeezing.

“I'm here, darling.”

The physician looked up, and announced gleefully. “It's only a matter of time now, Mrs. Banner. I can see the crown,” he said, and then a disapproving pair of eyes shifted to Gavin. “Sir, if you please. Perhaps you would care to wait outside.”

He didn't say it, but the look on Gavin's face clearly said 'hell-no'.

The physician rolled his eyes, shaking his head, and then went back to task of delivering the child.

The time it took for Jayce to birth the baby seemed like an eternity to Gavin even though only a few minutes past from the time the doctor announced the arrival to the actual second his child entered the world.

The continuous pacing started again, but this time Gavin kept to the back of the room. He walked a path, hands clasped behind his back, a concentrated expression of concern etched in his brow, as he waited anxiously.

Relief flooded through him when the high-pitched squeal announced the arrival of his child. Within seconds, he went to Jayce's side, and knelt down. He glanced at the physician holding the squirming bundle, and once the silent acknowledgement was received

that everything with the child bode well, his attention returned to his wife. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Gavin, but, I'm afraid pleasantly exhausted. Very happy the baby has come, though."

The doctor wrapped the baby in clean cloth, and then walked over to the bed and handed Jayce the bundle. "He is a fine boy. Appears healthy, and very fit, Mr. and Mrs. Banner. Congratulations."

Jayce quivered with emotion. Overwrought with joy, she started crying.

"What's the matter? Tell me those are tears of enjoyment."

She sniffled, wiping her cheeks with the back of one hand. "I'm deliriously happy, but I had high hopes for a girl, to give you what you wanted," Jayce said, and then clutched her belly and looked at Gavin with an indescribable expression. "Oh...something is wrong? I feel..."

Gavin turned furious eyes on the physician, as if he was the sole cause of his wife's discomfort. "What's the problem?"

The doctor chuckled knowingly, and then said cheerfully, "Ah, Mrs. Banner, don't give up hope for a girl yet. It's possible your wish will come true. Relax, Mrs. Banner...that feeling is another baby wanting to be born."

Eyebrows shot upward. "Two? There are two of them?" Gavin asked, stunned.

"I have been in my profession many years, Mr. Banner, and I assure you there is another child coming. Just one good push, Mrs. Banner."

* * * *

The thought still left Gavin reeling that he had two babies. He stood cradling his daughter, softly cooing, whispering to the child that they decided to name Capri. He repeated the name, planted a kiss on

the smooth cherub cheek, and then sat down beside Jayce who held his son.

“I see you are still as mesmerized as me about the two of them?”

“Does it show?”

Jayce smiled, and nodded. “Uh-huh,” she said, and then nuzzled the round cheek of her son. “Isn't he...both of them exquisite?”

Gavin leaned forward and planted a light kiss on the round cheek. “Dante and Capri are not just exquisite...” He fingered the tiny fingers of his daughter, and then ran his fingers over the son who gurgled, sucking the bottom lip and started making odd noises the parents found amusing. “They are perfect,” he said, quietly. “Absolutely enchanting as their mother, but then I'm not surprised.”

Jayce cooed softly to Dante, and then looked at Gavin. He beamed with delight, and she thought moisture collected brightening the dulcet gold-browns to sparkling. She felt the same, feeling tears pool in her own eyelids. “Are you happy, cowboy? You are potent. Two,” she said, grinning. “Who would have thought?”

“Twice the pleasure, darling, if I recall I said as much to you in the beginning.” He smiled. “I do make good on my promises.”

“That you do, Gavin. I'm so very happy.”

He smiled warmly, and then looked over the babies again, because he still had a hard time believing the little miracles. His eyes washed affectionately over Capri, taking in the almond shaped eyes that slanted slightly at the ends. The color close to his own, but more gold-green then brown. Next, his gaze fell on his son, an exact replica of the daughter except for the eyes. A brilliant sky-blue that surpassed the sky in clarity watched Gavin when he leaned down and kissed the forehead. Capri received a kiss, as well, and made slurping noises that he decided was a form of communication that said 'hello father'.

“What about me, cowboy?”

“Ah...never fear. I saved the best for last.”

The kiss melded their lips together, a gentle brush of lips that spoke volumes--a tender, endearing assault that brought fresh tears to Jayce's eyes.

Her breath whispered over the open mouth poised, as she spoke, "I love you, cowboy."

Gavin whispered. "What if I tell you I believe I'm in a dream, and fear waking up?"

"What if I tell you I had that very same dream, but I figured out dreams can be forever. Would you believe me?"

"Would you believe me if I said I love you more than I thought possible?"

"What if I said that is impossible?" Jayce asked, stroking the strong contour of jaw line, affectionately.

"I would say all things are possible, darling, when love is unconditional."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolina Barbour grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she spent her youth before moving to Texas, which has been her current residence for 20-odd years. Texas is a place she now calls home, but she still has Hoosier blood running in her veins that often makes her yearn for family, the White Castle burger at 3:00 a.m., and the vibrant splashes of colors on display when seasons change.

Carolina enjoys warm summer months of Texas that extend into the fall and even later into winter months, making it feel like an extended summer vacation for her family and her two miniature schnauzers who enjoy time outdoors.

Carolina enjoys writing a good novel with believable characters, suspenseful plots—suspense genre is her first love. When creating the story, she does not have a qualm about stepping outside the box to bring her readers a page-turner. Her characters must make you laugh, eyes swelling with tears, or even feel anger—all types of emotions—before Carolina feels she has done justice by her readers.

Carolina found her love for writing when she attended an English course at the community college where creative writing was the professor's niche. Her teacher made the students write story after story, always challenging them to go further. Carolina was clueless then about her love for writing, or that she was even capable of penning a good story, until her professor suggested she take up writing as a career.

Pure Distraction was Carolina's first published novel; an erotic sci-fi thriller. Carolina had such fun writing this story, she cannot wait to bring her readers more of the Pure Series, along with other interesting stories and characters.

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