



DCL Publications



*An  
Everlasting  
Love*

*Anna Volk*



# An Everlasting Love

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## Prologue

1876 Montana

He was finally returning home. Home to the woman and the land which he loved. He'd ridden hard after receiving the telegram calling him home to his step-father's sick bed. He'd been sickened and scared at the thought of losing someone so close to him.

The two people in this valley meant everything to him. He could only imagine the hell Salina was going through.

He was tired, the burning in his eyes reminding him that he had slept very little in the past days. Worry for Silas had kept him pushing himself and his horse toward home. But Rory couldn't resist sitting upon the ridge and looking down on the flickering lights coming from the ranch below.

He soaked in the feel of the warm Montana air hitting him in the face with the sweet smells and sounds drifting up from the valley below that could only be found at home.

Listening to the beebes bawling in the distance reminded him how much he had missed this place.

A lone coyote calling for its mate only added to his reasons for returning now to the ranch.

He remembered how his heart had ached on the day he had left this special place and the people who lived here. Brushing back his hair, he smiled. The memories of home always had that effect. It was the dreams and plans that had kept him going these last years. The time had come to claim his beautiful sunshine girl.

Salina. He couldn't wait to gaze into her beautiful, blue eyes and run his hands tenderly across her silky blonde hair.

She had been such a petite little thing when he had left the ranch. Only sixteen, her body had just begun to ripen. She'd been turning into a beautiful young lady and he'd been right leaving home to give her the room to grow. He wondered how much she had changed in the time that he had been gone.

One thing had not changed. Salina was still unmarried. He would have heard had such an event taken place and he would have put a stop to it. Salina was his and it was only a matter of time before that dream became a reality.

He'd missed being home but couldn't be sorry for the time in which he had been away. He had learned many things to improve the running of the ranch. He had also met some interesting people. He had been impressed with the knowledge he had gained. The grand plans that some men had still surprised and intrigued him; but his family had his heart.

Rory had his own plans. He had returned to the ranch after hearing the news of Silas's illness from the telegram, but that was not his only reason. He had also returned to marry the only woman he would ever love.

She was waiting for him in the valley below and so, spurring his horse, he raced to the twinkling lights that seemed to be welcoming him home.

## Chapter 1

“No, no, no,” Salina cried as she ran blindly into the barn. “He’s dying and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.” She sobbed, fiercely wiping at the tears rolling down her face as she dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the dog that had been following behind her. “What are we going to do, Queenie?” she asked her old friend. “Daddy’s not getting any better. Nothing makes him smile,” she said. “He never even knew that I was in his room today.” She choked back another sob, remembering how scared she had been, thinking him gone until she had heard his raspy breath. She felt foolish now for running scared from his room. “Today was just another day of days that just seem to be going from bad to worse. “It seems, girl, like I have more bad days than good lately. What do you think?” she asked.

Sitting herself down on a mound of hay, she picked at the stalks and tried to soak up comfort where she had always gotten it. “Why is it that you and Duchess make me feel so much better? Mama has been gone twelve years now but still I come here to do my thinkin’. Daddy said that I started comin’ here right after she died.” She patted the old dog and smiled. Queenie had always been a good listener even now with her passel of puppies rooting for something to eat.

She had continued to seek her comfort here even after her father remarried and brought a stepmother and stepbrother into the family. The horses still offered Salina the comfort she needed.

Rory. She smiled as she thought about him. Her very best friend was coming home. It seemed he had been gone forever, instead of just the two years he’d been gone, looking for livestock to expand their ranch.

“I wonder when he’ll get here, girl. Do you think he’s changed? Big brother was always so handsome with all that beautiful brown hair and deep brown eyes to match.” She smiled, remembering how she’d teased him about making the girls giggle with his pretty looks. For some reason, he’d never cared what the girls in town thought.

“I wonder if he’ll notice how I’ve grown.” Two years had changed her somewhat. She looked down at the soft mounds where her breasts pressed against the fabric of her dress. She’d grown into a woman in the time that he’d been away.

“Not that anyone’s noticed.” She grumbled. She never saw anyone but Daddy, Agnes and a few of the ranch hands. All of whom had watched her grow.

Two years was a long time. But it was the last six months that had been the worst.

“Daddy doesn’t seem to be gettin’ any better. What’ll we do if he dies?” she whispered in a trembling voice. She was not going to give into her tears. If she started, she might never stop. She needed to be strong, especially now. Daddy’s sudden sickening six months ago had taken the strength right out of him. “He doesn’t even get out of his sick bed. I have to stay strong to keep the ranch running.” She sniffled.

“Feeling useless has taken the sunshine and laughter out of him. I don’t feel much like smiling myself,” she said as she ruffled the old dog behind the ears and bent to pick up a puppy.

“I wish Rory would hurry,” she whispered to herself. Worrying for Daddy and worrying about the ranch were draining her. “I could really use his help around here.”

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, Princess, What’s a pretty thing like you doing sitting in a drafty barn talking to an old mutt when you could be spending time with me?”

Salina looked up with dread. “Oh, no, not now,” she muttered under her breath. Just what she did not need today was a visit from Josh Randall. He only added to her worries with his insistence that they marry and join their two properties to build a Ranching Dynasty. She’d refused his romantic gestures many times, but maybe it was time she gave him a chance. She had to marry some day and was already well past the marrying age. She wanted a family like many of her already-married friends.

She didn’t know why she wasn’t attracted to Josh. He was a very handsome man, with his glittering green eyes and close-cut, soft wavy auburn hair. Josh also had a smile that could melt most girls’ hearts if he wanted, just not hers.

He had been acting very possessive towards her lately. She was careful never to be alone with him, not being sure that she wanted his attentions. But things had changed with Daddy’s being sick. She was tired of being tired and alone.

Rory's being home would help. It would give her some time to spend with Josh and get to know him better. Although Rory would have to learn to control his protectiveness and understand that she was a woman grown and able to make up her own mind.

She pasted a smile on her face. "Hi, Josh. What brings you by this late?"

"Just thought I'd come and see my favorite girl." Josh smiled. "You've been keeping away from me and I wanted to check that things were okay here with your brother gone so long and all," Josh replied as he took the speckled pup out of her hands and tossed it down on the loose hay where the bitch dog was growling.

"It's alright, Queenie," Salina soothed the growling dog.

"You didn't have to throw her baby, Josh," Salina scolded, not caring for the way he had handled the pup.

"It's just an old mutt, Salina, nothing to get yourself all upset over. Now tell me, Princess, how are you?" he tried to soothe her.

"Things are fine, Josh; I've just been real busy here on the ranch. Daddy's still feeling poorly and I haven't had time to get away."

"That's not true, Princess. I can see that you've been crying. Tell me what happened so I can make it better," he crooned while wiping at the tears on her face.

"That's right nice of you, Josh, but there's nothing you can do to make it better. I'm tired is all," she sniffled.

Josh sat down beside her on the hay. "Marry me, Princess. I'll help you take care of this place. You won't have any worries. I promise you." He pleaded as he held her hands.

"I can't, Josh, not now. Please understand there's just too much for me to do to think about marrying now," she answered. It felt good to have someone offer her some comfort. Josh was being awfully good to her; maybe they could make it work.

Running a ranch the size of the Triple H took up all of her time. They owned the land as far as the eye could see. The flat plains offered the grazing that the beeves needed to grow fat. The high rocks offered shelter from storms but also posed problems when it came to rounding them up before winter.

"It's going to get even busier. It's almost time to bring the beeves in. I don't have time to go visitin' let alone starting a family."



Too soon the time was coming when she would have to begin rounding them up and bringing the herd in closer to the buildings for feeding. The weather could make or break a ranch and the Triple H would not be caught unaware.

“We can’t have that now, Princess. How’s about you come riding with me tomorrow?” he asked. “We’ll talk some more on it. A pretty little thing like you needs to get away and have some fun.”

Salina let Josh hold her hand. She leaned her head against his chest, enjoying the feel of the warmth of his skin against her forehead, the hairs of his chest brushing against her. It felt good to lean on his strength.

“You’re being awful good to me, Josh. Why? I’ve never been so kind to you. I’m sorry about that,” she apologized. It was time for her to make a change and that change would involve giving Josh a chance to prove himself. Their families had known each other for years even though Salina and Josh had never been close. As a young boy, he’d always been hurtful to her, pulling her hair, and he’d once beaten a puppy almost to death for wetting itself on him. If Rory hadn’t stepped in, it surely would have died. People changed as they got older and she hoped that Josh had outgrown some of his meanness.

Nodding her head, Salina agreed to his earlier question. “That sounds like a fine idea, Josh; I’d be happy to come riding with you tomorrow.”

Josh grinned wickedly. “Well, that’s just fine,” he said and jumped up from the mound of hay brushing at the loose stems clinging to his jeans. “I’ll be taking my leave now so as you can get rested up for our visit tomorrow.” He leaned down and ran his lips softly across her cheek. “Bye, Princess,” he whispered as he began whistling on his way out of the barn.

Salina reached up and touched the spot where she’d been kissed. She didn’t feel any tickles or see any stars. Wasn’t she supposed to feel differently? Maybe she had to be kissed on the lips to feel those feelings that her friends spoke of.

\* \* \* \*

He stood quietly in the shadows and watched the cowboy mount his horse and ride away. His chest felt tight. He’d come straight to the barn hoping to find Salina. He’d found her, but she was kissing another man. Turning, he gazed at her sitting curled up on

a stack of hay with her lap full of puppies from the cow dog that lay protectively at her feet.

“She’s even prettier than I could have guessed,” he whispered as he stood in the doorway waiting for her to notice him.

“Hey, Rory, Welcome Home.” A shout came from the shadows.

Rory turned and held his finger to his lips to silence the man walking toward him. “Thanks, Jim,” he answered quietly. “It’s good to be back.”

Jim looked around the corner of the barn to see what had drawn the attention of the boss’s son. He should have guessed that nothing had changed. “She’s still a beauty, ain’t she?” he asked with a wicked grin.

“She sure is.” Rory answered as he turned to the other man. “How’ve things been around here while I was gone?” he asked, looking for answers to questions that he didn’t want to ask.

Jim grinned. “You mean how has she been?” He sobered as he thought of the last few months. “It’s been hard on her, Rory. She works nonstop from light to dark. She tries to hide it, but she’s scared and hurtin’. I gotta warn you, too, that you might have some competin’ to do to win her. That Randall has been hangin’ around and word has it in town that he’s set on courtin’ Salina.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Rory growled. “He’s not good enough for her.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on that,” Jim agreed. He’d never liked Josh and had heard some stories that turned his stomach, but if Miss Salina married up with him, she would have his blessing. He had great respect for Miss Salina and would do nothing to hurt her.

“I’m home now.” Rory continued. “She can lean on me. He won’t be comin’ around anymore. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Jim. I best be lettin’ her know I’m here.” Rory said, already turning from the man to watch Salina. He felt himself smile as he watched her innocently playing with the pups. How he loved this woman, for that’s what she was, a very beautiful woman.

He had watched her grow from a gangly girl, all legs and arms, to a vibrant woman. She still had unstoppable long legs, not to mention how the rest of her had developed in the ten years that he had known her. He had always treated her as a little sister.

She had tagged along behind him much as those pups now did to her. He'd taught her how to ride her first pony. He'd picked her up when she had fallen and set her right back up on its back.

He'd loved her even then. But she was eighteen now to his twenty-five. He could no longer hide his feelings. He knew that she must be hurting and scared. Silas was her only family. Her mother had been gone for years.

He, too, knew of losing a loved one, having lost his mother (Salina's stepmother) two years earlier in a riding accident. But an illness such as Silas's that seemed to be slowly draining the life out of a man that had once been so invincible--it was such a meaningless waste. He knew Salina was going to need him in the weeks and months to come and he was going to be there for her. Not as a loving brother; their relationship was about to change. It was time she saw him not as her brother, but as a man.

He stood as still as he could and knew the moment that she noticed him. Salina raised her head from the small pup she was holding in her lap and he saw the silent tears glistening on her cheek. He did the one thing that he had been waiting for two years to do.

"Come here, Sunshine," he called. Opening his arms wide, he caught Salina close as she ran into them.

She wrapped her own arms around him, saying, "Oh Rory, I'm so glad to have you home. I have missed you so much."

When she laid her head on his chest, he felt like he was finally home. She was where she belonged; after years of waiting, he had her wrapped in his arms.

He knew that she was only looking for comfort and for now it was enough just to be holding her.

He enjoyed the peace of holding her and knew that it would not last. She would break the silence with her endless questions. Questions that she knew he wouldn't be able to answer, but he would let her ask them anyway. This was his Salina; she was always full of questions. That part of her would never change.

“Why, Rory? Daddy has always been so strong. Why does he have to suffer so?” She pulled back to look at him with her tear-filled eyes. “I don’t want him to leave us.”

Rory held her tightly in his arms. He rubbed his hands up and down as if warming her. The feel of her smooth skin under her light dress sent chills on his skin. Just being able to hold her, to touch her, left him so moved.

He wanted to offer her what words of comfort he could, but he had never lied to her and would not start now.

“Oh, Sunshine, I don’t have the answers. I wish to God I did,” he said sadly as he brushed the blond hair from her face and placed a gentle kiss on her temple. “Your daddy’s a tough old bird. He brought cattle into this valley when no one else had the courage. Let’s give it some time.”

“I don’t know if we have that time, Rory, he’s so weak.” Salina confessed.

“I wish I could take away all of your pain. If it was at all possible, I would,” Rory crooned as he pushed her head back to his shoulder.

Rory sat gently rocking Salina in his strong arms for hours, which still to him was not long enough. They didn’t need to talk. They had always been comfortable in each other’s company. As Salina’s tears faded, he reluctantly let her pull away from him. He’d had her to himself for hours. But after seeing the man riding away on horse back, he had his own questions that needed answering.

“Was that Josh Randall I saw riding away?” he asked as he stood and reached down to draw Salina to her feet. He knew the answer, but needed to hear it from her lips.

“Yeah, that was Josh. Do you remember him?” Salina asked, but of course didn’t wait for an answer. “He’s decided to start courting me and I’ve decided to let him.”

Rory felt like someone had just landed a blow to his stomach. Never did he expect to come home and find Salina interested in another man. But to hear it from her own lips just about tore him in two.

“Salina, honey, are you sure about this?” he whispered. He didn’t trust his voice not to break. It was too early to give away his feelings.

“Rory, I’m a woman, not a little girl. I want someone to love and care for me. I want babies, Rory. I can’t have them if I don’t start courting,” Salina snapped, her hands fisted on her slender hips.

“I understand that, Sunshine, but Randall...don’t you remember the awful things he used to do?”

Salina didn’t let him finish. “That was years ago and you know it. People change and I’m sure Josh is sorry for all those mean things he did as a boy. I’m willing to give him a chance to prove it and I want you to be nice, too.”

Not Damn Likely. No way was he going to say his thoughts out loud because if there was one thing Salina had it was one hell of a temper and a foul mouth to go with it. Of course, he had no one to blame but himself for that. He’d let her get away with almost anything when she was little. Him and her daddy both. He decided to let things rest for the time being.

“I’m not going to talk about this anymore. You’re a grown woman and you’re smart. Just please be careful. I love you, Salina, and don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I love you too, Rory,” she said as she wrapped her arms around him. “Welcome Home.”

Rory swallowed the lump in his throat as they started toward the ranch house. This was not exactly the homecoming he’d been expecting, but he wasn’t giving up. He’d left his home, his life to give Salina the time to grow. He was not going to lose her now.

Tomorrow was another day. He needed to see his stepfather before talking anymore to Salina. He wanted to do things right by her and he didn’t want to disappoint the man who had been such a big part of the man that he had grown into.

## Chapter 2

Rory knocked on Silas's bedroom door early the next morning. Without waiting for a reply, he went in.

He stood breathlessly in the doorway. Silas didn't look at all like the man he had last seen. The once well-muscled, handsome man no longer existed. In his place lay a shrunken body.

Silas's skin, once so tanned from the hours of being outdoors, now was a dull white, like days-old milk left too long before turning it to cream. What had happened to the man he remembered?

Seeing how sickly Silas looked had him worrying about how to bring up his love for Salina.

Silas Houston had treated him as his own son. How would he feel when he told the man of his feelings for his little girl? How, too, would Salina feel? Would she be disgusted? Would she hate him? He prayed not. Rory knew he would not be able to live with her hatred or disgust.

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Silas lay in his bed watching Rory pace. The young boy he had known was gone and in his place stood a man.

He watched as the shoulder-length dark hair so much like the boy's mama's swung loosely as he paced. Saw, too, the troubled deep brown eyes. He hated to see the worry in his son's eyes, knowing what was pressing on his mind. He had known for years of the boy's growing feelings for Salina and he couldn't be happier.

Never had he seen two people more suited for each other. Even as young ones, the two of them had been inseparable.

If he was honest with himself, he'd had the idea for the two of them to settle down together even then. It looked like at least one of the young ones was of the same mind. With a little help, maybe his dreams would soon come to light.

Now if he could rid himself of this damn weakness and cough that was taking all of the strength from his body. His doctor and children had him as good as dead and buried. But Silas had news for them. He was going to live to see his grandbabies run and play on this land he loved. First, he had to get these two stubborn people to get themselves off alone together.

He didn't think Rory was going to find the courage to bring up what was weighing so heavily on him. Being an old man, Silas figured he had earned the right to speak his mind.

"Boy, stop that pacing. You are plum tuckerin' me out just watchin' you. Besides, I already know what's troubling you. Its Salina, isn't it? Son, I've known for years about your feelings for her. I know that it was your whole reason for leaving home. It's why you stayed away for such a long time. I can't tell you how happy it makes me that you've decided to finally bring it out in the open."

Shocked by what he had just heard, Rory stood openmouthed. He'd been so worried about Silas's feelings.

Even before he'd left home two years ago he'd wondered if his feelings had begun to show. He'd tried to be careful in how he had looked or touched Salina. He hadn't wanted anyone to now how his feelings had changed.

He knew now that he had not hidden his feelings, at least not from the man who had raised him.

"But, Silas, we're family. Doesn't it disgust you that I'm in love with your daughter? Doesn't it disgust you that I want to make babies with her? Silas, I just...I love her with all my heart." Rory felt his face heat up, embarrassed to realize that he was stuttering.

Silas shook his head and with a sparkle in his eyes. "Rory, I may think of you as my son and I have always treated you as such, but the bare fact remains you are no blood kin to me or to Salina. Nothing would make me happier than to see the two people I love most in the world be together happily raising their own family."

He drew in a frustrated breath. "But, son, it's not me you have to convince. It's that beautiful yet stubborn daughter of mine. You need to take Salina away from this sad, dreary house where everyone is waiting for me to draw my last breath. You'll never be able to get her to see things our way if she is constantly pampering and fussing over me."

He knew that he spoke the truth. There was no one more stubborn than Salina when she set her mind to something. It was a trait that he respected and even expected in a man, but in his beautiful daughter, he wished at times that he would have tanned her little backside for her willfulness.

He chuckled to himself, knowing that such an act would have never happened. Soon as that sweet baby girl had been born, with her pretty blue eyes and that angel soft white hair, she had had her daddy wrapped around her every word, action and thought.

Even now eighteen years later that same girl still had the power to charm this old man. All it took was one of her beautiful smiles. Smiles that had been missing from her young face as of late and it was time for some changes to be made.

Silas took hold of Rory's hand and looked him straight in the eye. He wanted to be sure the young man understood that he meant every word he was about to preach. "I give you my promise; I'm not ready to cock up my heels just yet. You take my daughter away for a while."

"I know how people may think at first. But once they remember how things really are, they'll be as happy for you as I am. You can't let what other people may think control your life. You and Salina belong together and I know in my heart that if your beautiful mother were still with us she would feel the same way. Now you go find that girl and tell her to pack up her saddlebags. Don't you come back until you can make me your father-in-law."

"There's nothing I'd like more than to have Salina for my wife," Rory stated as he pulled a chair up to the bed. He ran his hands through his hair. It was a habit he'd never been able to overcome.

"Christ, Silas, when did she grow up? Her blue eyes are even more beautiful than I remembered; her hair is like corn silk, so shiny and smooth." He got to his feet, unable to sit still.

"I should have never left. I wanted to give her time." Rory knew that his voice was breaking, giving away his feelings. "I should have come back sooner. It's probably too late now." Feeling defeated, he slumped back down in the chair with his face in his hands. He tried to get his emotions under control, embarrassed to be bawling like a small child in nappies.



“What has your tail in a knot boy? Too late for what?” Silas pushed himself up higher on the pillows, worried over the words Rory had spoken. Never had he seen his boy so upset.

“What’s happening that I don’t know about in my own house?”

Rory looked up at the man who had raised him. Was it possible that Silas knew nothing about the scene he’d witnessed in the barn last night?

“I’m talking about Josh Randall calling on Salina. I heard it straight from her that he was a courtin’. She’s accepting of his attentions.”

“That’s plain hog wash, boy. She’s just been lonely is all; that’ll change now that you’re home where you belong.”

Rory looked deeply into Silas’s eyes. He knew that he was opening himself wide, all his hurt and fears there for the old man to see. “I can’t lose her. Not now,” he said on a whisper.

“You’re not going to lose nothing. You do as I say and take that girl away from here and away from that young scoundrel she’s thinking to spark with.” Silas gripped Rory’s hand tightly, offering support. “You’ll win her over, boy. Have faith.”

\* \* \* \*

Salina was worrying about her own changing feelings for both Rory and Josh. She thought back to last night and the feel of being held in Rory’s arms. The feel of his lips on her skin and how he had gently cradled her caused a warm tingly feeling low in her stomach. When had her feelings for Rory changed? Or had they always been there and she was just now realizing them? With her mind in turmoil, she decided what she needed was a long ride on her chestnut mare.

She’d promised to meet Josh for a ride. Maybe he’d hold her in his arms and she’d get that warm tingly feeling. She’d like to explore those feeling some more. By this time next year, she might be starting her own family as Mrs. Josh Randall.

“Let’s ride, Duchess,” she said as she mounted her mare. She set off at a slow steady pace. She thought about nothing, wanting to enjoy the peace and quiet. She listened to the frogs and crickets singing and the gentle snuffling of the deer searching for the choicest pieces of clover. This was her favorite time to ride. Nudging Duchess into a gentle gallop,

she was unprepared for the startled rabbit that crossed her path. Duchess reared. “Whoa, girl, easy does it,” Salina crooned to calm the scared horse. She held her seat and had her under control when a pair of gloved hands grabbed her reins.

She glanced up to see a grinning Josh Randall. Quick of temper, she snapped at him. “Damn it, Josh, you scared the hell out of me.” She didn’t bother to control her temper or the curse words coming out of her mouth. Growing up, Daddy and Rory had neither one corrected her and she was too old to change her ways now.” Turn loose of my reins. What are you doing sneaking up on me, anyway?”

Still mounted on their horses, Josh gave her an innocent smile. “Calm down there, sweetheart. I’m just watching out for what’s mine.” His eyes roamed up and down her body as if he owned her. “Once we’re married, honey, I think I’ll be keeping you on a tighter rein, wouldn’t want anything to happen to this pretty little neck of yours,” Josh said as he slid his hand behind Salina’s nape, drawing her lips to his where he mashed them together with a branding ruthlessness.

She didn’t have time to see if she’d enjoy the feel of his lips against hers or the feel of his tongue brushing against her lips because his next words had her pulling away.

“Come on, Salina. You know that we’d be good together. When you and I marry, we’ll be the biggest ranchers around,” Josh pleaded as he grabbed her hand.

He was moving much too fast. She wasn’t sure of her feelings yet. He scared her with the way he was looking at her and her lips felt bruised from his kisses. Not warm and tingly like she’d expected.

“Josh, I’ve told you time and again, I’m not ready to get married. My daddy needs me here; with Rory gone and him sick, I have to see to the running of the ranch.”

She didn’t know why she didn’t tell Josh that Rory had come home, but it was something she kept to herself.

“You wouldn’t have to see to anything if we were married. I’d take care of all the men’s work and you could just sit back and look pretty. Rory has no say in what you do or what happens at the ranch. He’s not even related to you or your Pa. He was already half grown when your Pa married his Ma,” Josh stated.

“I need time, Josh. I’ve just decided to let you court me; I’m not ready to say yes to marrying you just yet.”

“Don’t take too long, Princess. I won’t wait forever,” Josh snapped, losing his patience. He’d been more than patient with her. The time had come to make his move. She had fire; he liked that in a woman. But she would have to learn that he was the master; he looked forward to taming her.

“You should watch yourself, Princess. This is a dangerous territory. Accidents happen out here all of the time. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to that old man of yours, would you? Keep that thought in mind the next time you turn down my offer.”

Salina turned in her saddle, her fury close to bursting. He’d never taken such liberties with her before and she couldn’t believe that he was speaking to her in such a way.

“Are you threatening me, Josh, or my father?” Was she wrong to trust Josh? She wanted so much to have someone to raise a family with, but maybe Rory was right and Josh hadn’t changed.

“No, not at all, Salina, I only want to keep you safe. You and your father will be my family; I would never wish to see either of you hurt. Think no more about it; once we are married, I’ll take care of everything.” He smiled at her so sincerely that Salina was sure she’d only misread the meaning of his earlier words.

“I’m sorry, Josh; my temper gets the best of me sometimes and rules my mouth. Why don’t you come by the house one night this week and have dinner with us? You know what a great cook Agnes is.” The invitation would give Josh and Rory a chance to get to know one another.

“I’ll be there. Not just for the food, but to look at your beautiful face.”

“It’s a date. I’ll see you then,” Salina called as she kicked Duchess into a gallop and rode back towards the ranch.

Josh watched as the ice princess galloped away, her blonde hair flying out behind her. The site of her riding a horse always made his sex harden. If she could ride a horse so well, he wondered how she would be at riding a man. She’d put up a fight to be sure and he could hardly wait.

He had plans and little Miss Salina better learn that she belonged to him, as would her precious ranch. The road was clear for him to make his interests known; the old man was of no concern, being sick and all, and with that free loading step-brother out of the picture Josh figured he’d soon be moving into the big house.

\* \* \* \*

21

Rory again found her in the barn with the pups. She looked like an angel sitting there. The dust moats swirling around her head as the sun shone through the open door. The smell of the hay and outdoors only added to the naturalness.

“You’re going to spoil those pups,” he called. He’d better tell Agnes to start passing the word in town that they had pups ready or they’d be keeping all of them if Salina had her say. “They won’t be any good for anything except lying in someone’s lap. Who’ll want them then?”

“That’s the idea,” she said. “You know how much I love having babies around the ranch.”

“I remember and that’s the problem. Left up to you, this place would be over run with strays,” he teased. “Have you been here all morning wasting time?”

Salina looked up at him, smiling. “No, big brother, I’ll have you know that I just got back from a wonderful ride on Duchess. You’ll have to ride out with me soon, Rory, and see what you’ve been missing.”

Christ, did she only think of him as a brother? He hoped the hell not. He knew damn good and well what he’d been missing and it had nothing to do with the scenery. “I’m going to take you up on that offer. I hope you didn’t wear your little butt out with your ride because we’re going on a long ride tomorrow. I want you to pack for at least a week, maybe longer,” he said as he walked toward her.

He was prepared when Salina jumped up from the hay, shaking her head.

“No, there is no way I’m leaving the ranch with Daddy so sickly. What’s wrong that you want to leave now when you’ve just returned home?” Oh, no, maybe Rory had the wanderlust and would be leaving the ranch again, maybe forever this time. “Don’t you like staying in one spot, Rory. Are you going to be leaving again?”

Rory smiled at her tenderly as he took her hands in his. Trust Salina to only hear half of what is said. He had known that she would be against going, but he knew her and she’d eventually give in to his wishes.

“Salina, listen to me. We are going. The two of us, together. I love the Ranch and am never leaving it or you again.” He smiled. Let her stew on that for a while; he continued

before she could start arguing him to death. “We’ll be back. The ranch hands will know where to find us if something happens. Only God can determine when it’s someone’s time. The two of us going away is not going to make a difference.”

Tapping her on the end of the nose, he smiled as he said, “Besides, you need some fun. It’s been too long since I’ve seen a smile on that beautiful face.”

Knowing he was going to have to invent a reason for them to leave the ranch, he told her, “We’re also going to be working on this little getaway. I figured we’d ride to the Southwest corner and see if we could find any strays. Don’t want you to get lazy and forget everything I taught you,” he teased.

There were no worries that that would happen. Salina was one of the best riders he’d ever seen, man or woman. She was a great cowhand, too and he was proud of her.

“Oh, cowboy, I can ride and rope as good as you or better and don’t you ever forget it,” she called back as she punched him playfully in the shoulder. Without even thinking about it, Salina laid her head on Rory’s shoulder. “I miss times like this. Remember all the laughter we had in the house?” Gazing up at him wishfully, she asked, “Will we ever have that again?”

Rory put his arm around her shoulder. “You can bet on it. This ranch is going to be full of love and laughter. You and I will see to that.” He lifted her chin with the tip of his finger. “No matter what else happens we will make this a happy place to live again. Now,” he said, giving her a gentle squeeze, “you go in and get rested up for that ride we’re taking tomorrow. Your daddy wanted to see you before he turned in for the night. Maybe you should go up to see him now.”

Rory watched her walk away. It was getting harder all of the time to keep from touching her the way that he wanted. Brotherly hugs and innocent kisses only made him ache that much more to give in to his feelings. What if he was too late and Salina was in love with Randall? No way would he stand by and watch her give herself to another man.

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Salina knocked softly on her father’s bedroom door. When he called, “Enter,” she cautiously went in. He was sitting up in bed waiting for her. He looked so old and worn out. Salina wanted to see a smile on the face that was showing age. Her daddy was still a

handsome man with his full head of snow-white hair. Salina smiled; she bet her daddy had given the girls hell in his younger days. But now his usual tanned complexion was pale and she worried that he wouldn't be with them much longer.

"What are you fretting about, girl? Come on over here and keep this old man company," Silas called. Not at all ashamed that his voice sounded weak, sometimes an old man had to be sly to get his young ones to see things his way.

Salina, as she had done since she was a little girl, curled up beside him as he ran his fingers through her hair. He knew that he wouldn't have long to wait. Salina, never one to be short on words, started the conversation.

"Rory said you wanted to see me, Daddy. Is something the matter?" Salina raised her head, alarmed that her father could be worse. "Are you feeling poorly? Do you want me to send for Doc?"

Silas shook his head and pressed Salina back down next to him. "Now, calm down, girl. There's nothing wrong with me that a little time and rest won't cure. As much as that quack of a doctor says differently."

Gesturing with his hands and running at the mouth, Silas realized this was yet another trait his beautiful daughter had inherited from him.

"I know my body. It's worked hard for me for years. I guess if it wants to take a longer rest than we deem necessary it's certainly earned it. So stop your fussing. I just wanted to see how you felt about going away with Rory in the morning."

"I can't go with Rory tomorrow, Daddy. I invited Josh Randall over to visit." She hadn't told Rory, not wanting to argue with him yet again.

"What is this I hear that you're letting that man court you?" he asked as he tipped her head up. He needed to see her face when she gave her answer. He had never liked the boy much, but if his little girl had given her heart to the man then he would give his blessing.

"Josh cares for me daddy. I know you don't much like him but please give him a chance. He wants to marry me.

"Salina, honey, does he want to marry you or is it this ranch he's wanting?" Silas asked.

"Daddy!" Salina shrieked, hurt that he would think such a thing. Could it be true? Did Josh only want her for the ranch?

“I’m sorry, honey. You are worth much more than this piece of land. He doesn’t deserve you. I’m only asking that you give yourself some time. Go with Rory. Be sure that Josh is the right man.”

Silas continued, looking her straight in the eye. “Rory’s a good man Salina. You could do a lot worse. I want you to listen to him. Listen good with your head as well as your heart. He’ll do well by you and I couldn’t ask for anything more for you. If, when you come back, your heart is still set on young Randall, I’ll give my blessing and throw the biggest darn party the valley has ever seen.”

Salina gazed into her father’s eyes, wondering what in the world he was talking about. Of course, Rory was a good man. He was her best friend and she usually always listened to him, unless he was treating her like a child. Salina thought he sometimes forgot that she was all grown up.

“Thank you Daddy, though I don’t understand why you’re telling me what a good man Rory is. I already know this.”

“You don’t need to understand right now. You’ll understand better after talking to Rory. Just promise me that you’ll listen to what the boy says to you. Don’t wrestle things around so. I know you, girl. You have to plan everything out.” Feeling his heart getting heavy and a lump forming in his throat, he decided to end the conversation.

“Follow your heart, Salina. It won’t steer you wrong. I followed mine twice in my lifetime and had the honor of marrying two beautiful, loyal women. God rest their souls.” He gave her a final squeeze and gruffly, because he felt like he, too, would soon be blubbering, told her, “Scoot on out of here so your old Pa can get some rest.”

## Chapter 3

Heading out early the next morning, Rory chuckled as Salina started in on her endless questions. One thing about being with Salina, he would never be bored.

“I don’t know why we have to leave the ranch to hunt strays. We could spare some of the ranch hands for the job.”

He laughed aloud at her annoyed look. “Calm down, little girl, I promise not to work you too hard.”

“Hah, you know how much I hate hunting strays. And I don’t feel right leaving Daddy.”

“Silas will be fine. Agnes is there with him,” he reminded her. There was something else bothering Salina. He knew it. “Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind besides leaving your daddy?”

Salina cast him a shy look. “I invited Josh over to the ranch for supper. I feel just awful leaving so suddenly. I didn’t even have time to send someone to his place to let him know I’d be gone.”

From the looks she cast his way, he knew that she blamed him for rushing off this morning. It was the truth; after Silas had told him of her plans for a dinner with Randall, he had kept her too busy to make any new ones.

“I’m sure your daddy and Agnes will feed young Randall fine without you,” he said with a grin.

“Rory, that’s so unfair. You know he was coming to see me. I wish you’d give him a chance.”

“I’ll give him a chance after we get back from the cabin,” he said sincerely, knowing that he was going to try his damndest to make her love him in the little time they would have alone. Josh Randall did not stand a chance in hell of getting Salina.

“Let’s stop up ahead and rest.” He had done all the talking about Josh Randall that he could take.

Stopping by a stream, Rory rested his hands on Salina’s waist to help her down from her horse. He knew that she could do it alone, but this gave him a reason to touch her.



He enfolded her softly in his arms. “How you doing, Sunshine? I don’t want to argue about Josh Randall. Can we just forget about him? Let’s think of this as a vacation.” Maybe a little pleading would bring a smile to her too-serious face. “Please, for me, a welcome home present. Your daddy will be fine. There are plenty of people on the ranch to keep an eye on him. Let’s you and I have some fun.”

Rory gazed down at Salina tenderly. He hoped he wasn’t giving his feelings away as he whispered, “I want us to spend some time alone together. I missed you.” Slowly, he brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek and looked into her sky blue eyes. He followed the path with his lips. He stood motionless for a time just staring into her face and then, after a reassuring squeeze, he released her to tend the horses.

Someone else had watched as the couple rode out in the early morning. “So the prodigal ‘son’ has returned,” Josh whispered to himself. “He’d just better watch his step because when the old crippled-up man in the house draws his last breath, the ranch and the Princess are going to be mine. No stepbrother bastard is going to stand in my way.”

Salina would come to want him. He had worked long and hard to gain her trust. No one was going to ruin his plans. After all, all women loved him. He never had problems with the whores at the pleasure house in town. If they gave him any trouble, all it took was a backhand or two. They soon learned who the boss was. Yes, Salina would soon come running to Josh Randall; it was only a matter of time and while he waited, he’d just keep a close eye on that so-called brother of hers.

Josh wondered where the happy couple was headed. Salina wouldn’t be gone long. After all, she’d invited him for dinner. Maybe he should mosey on down to the Houston ranch and see just what was going on there. That old man, Silas, was a talker and after all, he (Josh Randall) was a catch for Salina Houston. Any father would count himself lucky to have Josh Randall courting their daughter. Silas would probably suggest that he catch up with his two brats just so he could keep up with his courting.

As Josh rode into the Houston place, an old bitch cattle dog came running out of the barn barking and snarling. When he owned this ranch the dog would be the first thing to go. The bitch was far too loyal to Salina. He only owned things that were loyal to him, be that horse, dog or his women.

He dismounted and tied his horse to the hitching rail, the dog still nipping at his heels. Kicking at the dog, he yelled, "Get."

Hearing the commotion in the front of the house, Agnes, the Houston's housekeeper, came out onto the porch wiping her hands on her freshly laundered white apron. She brought along with her the smell of freshly baked pies. For smells such as these, Josh might be able to work for Agnes's loyalty. Her cooking sure as hell beat that slop the old cook served up over on the Randall spread.

"Hi there, Mr. Randall," Agnes said as she crossed the porch. "What can we do for you today? Salina and Rory rode off some time ago. Don't really know where those two young ones were headed."

Josh stepped up to the bottom step. Pasting a smile on his too-handsome face, he said. "That's okay. Miss Agnes. I stopped by to see your beautiful smile and to see how Mr. Houston was doing."

Agnes blushed prettily for a woman her age. She gently patted her gray, upswept hair to be sure it was in place. Her hazel eyes sparkled mischievously as she smoothed down her old gown and called out to the smiling young man. She didn't like or trust him, but he sure did have some pretty words that even charmed this old lady. If he wanted to waste time throwing them flowery words around, she would surely soak them up.

The old coot resting upstairs surely didn't know any flowery words. Let him lay up there and stew while she enjoyed herself down here listening to this handsome young man.

"Oh, get out of here, you young scamp. Find yourself some young lady to charm and think about settling down with a family."

"I'm working on that, ma'm. I reckon I'll see you later for dinner. I'm sure Salina told you I was coming."

Flustered, Agnes wiped her clean hands on her apron. Land sakes, why hadn't someone told her this scamp was comin' courtin and Salina gone off with Rory. Those two younguns were going to be her death. More than likely that Rory had cooked up this trip trying to keep Salina all to himself. Well, there was no help for it now. "Silas has been doing rather poorly. He's awake if you'd like to go on up and see him yourself," she

said, while muttering to herself, “Let that old coot fix this mess. He was probably tangled up in it, too.”

At her invitation, Josh stepped up on the porch. “Thank you kindly, Miss Agnes. I would like to go on up and see Mr. Houston.” With a concerned look on his face, he said, “I’m really sorry that he’s feeling under the weather.”

Josh opened the screen door for Agnes as she told him, “Stop by the kitchen after your visit, young man, and have a piece of my apple pie. It’s just fresh out of the oven. It should be just right for eating by then.”

Josh smiled. “Well now, how can I pass that up? Everyone knows you are surely the best cook around.

He felt nauseous as he climbed up the stairs to Silas’s room. Being so charming was hard on a man’s stomach. But as he climbed, he was taking in all the eye could see. Thinking about all of the changes he would make to the house. A man of his breeding should live extravagantly. He did have a reputation to uphold. He wanted everyone to envy him. To look at him and think, that Josh Randall is the Man.

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Silas lay in his bed waiting for the cocky young buck to make his way into the bedroom. He had heard young Randall talking with Agnes. There was no mistaking his voice or the sissy way that he talked to women.

“Cock-sure kid, wasting his time with words when any man worth his salt proves himself with actions, not meaningless gibberish,” he mumbled. “Come in.” He spoke softly, wanting to sound weak. Let Randall think that he was worse off than he actually was. The little shit might think he was some day going to own this ranch, but it would be a cold day in hell before Silas Houston let that happen. Let the young pup think he had the upper hand for now.

“Hello, sir,” Josh called as he entered the room with his hat in hand. “Miss Agnes tells me you’re feeling poorly. I’m right sorry to hear it.” The old man looked like he was going to cock up his heels at any minute. It wouldn’t be soon enough for him. Things around this ranch were going to change in a hurry when he took over.

“Hey there, young man, why don’t you pull up that there chair and sit for a spell. Don’t get many visitors this far out,” Silas said as he scooted up in bed, taking more breaths than were actually needed. The boy thought he could outsmart this old man; I’ll show him who’s who on this here ranch.

“I came by to see Miss Salina, but Agnes tells me she rode out for a spell with Rory. I didn’t know that your stepson was back on the ranch. Will he be staying long?” Sooner the bastard left the better. Salina was much too friendly with her brother. “Fellow his age will be wantin’ to settle down on a place of his own,” Josh hinted.

“Rory is home. He’s home to stay. Salina and I couldn’t be happier. That girl of mine has missed him something fierce,” Silas added. “But I’m afraid you made the trip for nothin’. Salina and Rory rode out looking for stays and will be gone for the day and most of the next.” He looked at Josh innocently. “Was there something you needed to speak to Salina about?” he questioned, knowing damn well what the man wanted.

“Oh no, sir, nothing at all, I just thought I’d stop by and visit for a bit,” Josh said as he forced a smile. Why hadn’t Salina sent word to the ranch that she was leaving? He bet any money that that damn Holloway had something to do with it. “I really best be getting on home. I have chores of my own to see to. Hope you’re feeling your old self real soon, sir,” Josh said as he got to his feet and headed to the door.

“Thanks for stopping by, young man, and I’ll be sure to tell my girl that you stopped in for a visit,” he replied. Randall sure had not wanted to admit that he had not been privy to Salina’s plans.

He grinned wickedly. I don’t know when I’ve had so much fun. Iffin’ I was a bettin man, my money would be on Rory. Odds were he’d have Salina bent to his way of thinking by the time they returned to the ranch. Maybe I’ll even have a grandbaby on the way. Wouldn’t that be something? A little bitty baby with equal parts of the two people he loved with all of his heart. There was no way he was kicking the bucket until he got those two children of his settled with a family. He wanted them to have the love that he’d once had. He knew that they would find that love only with each other. He didn’t have any worries. Rory would protect and love Salina for all time. He’d already loved her half of her life as a brother.

Now it was time to take the next step. They were both grown and the two years that they had been parted had let them realize how much they depended on one another's companionship. He wondered how much progress Rory was making in showing Salina how he truly felt.

## Chapter 4

Salina stared after Rory, swallowing the lump that had formed in the region between her throat and chest. Oh my, what was that about? He was acting so different. His behavior was making her feel funny; she had all these strange emotions roaring around in her head and heart. What had gotten into Rory lately? All the gentle cuddling he was giving her.

Nuzzling his face up against her neck, he had caused chills to form down her back. She knew it wasn't from the cold because the sun was shining warm down on them. The feelings Rory was causing were like the feelings her friends had spoken of. Feelings she'd wanted to feel with Josh.

His squeezing and hugging were so tender, not like the joking brother she was used to. Oh, Rory was always kind to her. But he had never kissed her or touched her in the way he just had. She guessed she'd just have to wait and see what happened next. As her daddy always said, "Time would tell."

So, with that in mind she called out. "Hey, Rory, tell me again why we are up here?"

Rory looked up from where he was tethering the horses. What had she been thinking about? She had stood so still and so quiet; he had the feeling she'd just reached some major decision. He hoped it was in his favor. Time would tell.

"Who better to look for strays than the two best cowboys the Triple H has?" Finishing his task, he walked towards her. "Besides, I think we need this time together alone." Giving her a gentle smile, he said, "We need to talk. This time together will give us the chance to do that."

Salina, ever the one to jump to conclusions, started with her endless questions. "Talk? What about? Is it Daddy? Is he worse?"

Rory let her continue with her tirade. After their years together, he was used to her endless questions. He patiently waited for her to run out of steam.

"You're scaring me, Rory. What do we have to talk about?" Salina began to pace anxiously, with her arms flying wildly as she talked. She finally wound down with her questions and Rory was able to answer.

“There’s nothing wrong and no reason to be scared. There are just some things that need to be said. But,” he said as he held up his hand before she could get started again, “not right at the moment. Come on,” he said as he grabbed her hand. “Let’s walk to stretch our legs.”

They walked along the stream holding hands, talking about inconsequential things.

Rory remembered foolish things that they had done as children. They used to ride horseback for endless hours through the meadows and trails that wound around the ranch. He remembered walking barefoot in the creek trying to catch the small fish that swam there with their bare hands.

He had many happy memories and all of them involved Salina. He couldn’t really remember a time when they hadn’t had each other to laugh with or to cry with.

Salina was laughing and occasionally pointing out a fox jumping at mice or at the deer drinking from a stream.

She twirled around and around, laughing up at the hawk soaring high above them. She felt so free here, as if a weight had been lifted.

There were fewer problems up here. No need to rush, unlike the worries at the ranch. Here they were carefree. Nothing to worry about except themselves and their two horses.

As they walked back to where they had left their horses, Rory decided now was as good a time as any to bring up a subject that had been bothering him. “Salina, do you have special feelings for Randall?”

Salina picked nervously at the bark on a tree. She didn’t want to talk about Josh to Rory. It made her uncomfortable. She wished her Mama was still alive. She needed to talk to a woman. But she’d always been able to talk to Rory about anything. He’d understand. He was her best friend.

“I’m not sure how I feel about Josh. I’ve only just decided on lettin’ him court me.” She felt so confused. Rory was making her nervous with the way he was touching her and looking at her. She’d never felt this way before.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel. I don’t like it when he kisses me,” She whispered with a blush on her face.

“What do you mean you don’t like his kisses? When has he been kissing on you? I saw that little peck in the barn. Tell me that’s the only time he’s touched you,” Rory roared.

“Rory Holloway! Have you been spying on me?” Salina said as she stepped toe to toe with him.

“Don’t change the subject Salina. When else has Randall been sparking with you? I thought you’d just decided on courtin’.

“I did. We went riding yesterday; that’s when I invited him to dinner. He grabbed me and kissed me. But it hurt; I didn’t think kissing was supposed to hurt,” she questioned.

“That bastard!” Rory cursed. Randall was a dead man. “Kisses aren’t supposed to hurt. They’re supposed to be soft and feel wonderful.”

Salina looked at him curiously. “Have you kissed lots of girls, Rory? Is there something wrong with me?” She felt childish. This is what she got for rarely going into town, preferring to stay on the ranch and work outdoors. Agnes usually went with one of the cowhands to purchase the supplies that they needed. If she’d visit more with her friends in town, she wouldn’t be so foolish.

Rory drew a deep breath, pacing, and talking to himself, angry that Salina was hurting. Why hadn’t someone talked to her about such feelings? Of course, no one had talked to him, either. “You’re not stupid. There is a world of difference between innocence and being stupid. I love that you are innocent.”

Salina tried not to smile. He looked like a wild man. She wondered if she looked that ridiculous with her arms flying walking back and forth, talking so fast that no one could understand. She did her best to keep up with Rory’s ranting.

Unable to keep up with his anger any longer, she reached out and unclenched his hands, rubbing her thumb soothingly against his, trying to calm his rage.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with me. Maybe I don’t like to be kissed,” Salina whispered but then stopped; for the first time, she didn’t know what to say.

Rory took over. “Look at me. Don’t feel embarrassed. You can talk about me with anything, always. There’s nothing wrong with you, Sunshine. There’s something wrong with Josh. No man should ever hurt a woman. A man should cherish the woman he’s



planning to make his wife.” Rory stepped closer and took a hold of her hands. He wanted to make her understand.

“I’ve kissed you. You never told me to stop. You didn’t say that you didn’t like it.” He waited impatiently for her to answer. She had always been so open with him. He was counting on it now.

“You’ve never kissed me the way that Josh did. You give me brother kisses. Not sparking kisses,” she replied. Rory was so easy to talk with, even about something so personal now that she had gotten over her earlier misgivings. This was Rory; how she’d missed him.

She was so sweet. How could God have created something as special as Salina? Was it too soon to make his feelings known? He didn’t have much time. Salina was his and it was time to make his intentions clear.

“Would you like me to kiss you differently?” he asked as he brushed his knuckles down her cheek. He promised himself he would go slowly. “We could see if you feel the same way about my kissing that you do about Josh’s.”

“I don’t know, Rory. Kissing you would be unfair to Josh. I done told him that I’d court with him.” What was Rory thinking? Why was he so willing to help her to like Josh’s kisses? He didn’t care nothing about Josh; matter of fact, he didn’t like Josh at all.

“It would be unfair to marry up with someone that you didn’t love. It would be fairer to find out now if you don’t have those special feelings for the man that his woman ought to have,” he pleaded. He wanted her to say yes to his kisses. He needed her to say yes. Slowly, he leaned closer, whispering. “Please Salina; let me help you to decide. Trust me.”

“You know I do,” Salina said just as his lips touched hers.

Rory didn’t give her time to explain. Not wanting her to change her mind. He swooped in and took possession of her lips. Gently he tasted her. She was so sweet. He nibbled softly, not wanting to scare her. He could feel her trembling, but she didn’t push him away. He could feel her lips returning the tiniest of pressure. It wasn’t enough. He needed to know how she was feeling, but didn’t want to stop.

“Salina”, he whispered as he left her lips to brush his own softly along her jawbone. “How does that feel?” he asked as he ran his hands along the back of her neck up into her unbound hair. It glided through his fingers, so soft, so silky.

Salina couldn’t catch her breath. She was afraid to open her eyes. What if she were dreaming? She didn’t want to wake up. Rory’s lips were so soft, yet he was strong. The kisses were gentle as if he were afraid of her breaking. The feel of his tongue along her lips caused her to tremble, but she was not afraid. This was Rory, her best friend. He would never hurt her. She could hear him talking, but didn’t want him to stop. What the hell was he talking about, anyway? She sure as shootin’ couldn’t think of talkin’ right now. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded, not wanting these feeling to end. “I’ve never felt anything like this. Is this the way it’s supposed to be between a man and a woman?” she asked as she reluctantly pulled away.

“Did it make you feel special? Did you feel like we were the only two people in all of Montana? That’s the way it’s supposed to feel.” Rory answered in all honesty. He truly felt that when you loved someone the way that he loved Salina, no one else mattered. She was his life.

“I’m so confused, Rory. What am I to do about Josh? I told him I’d let him court me. But he doesn’t make me feel special the way that you do. You’re my brother; maybe that’s why I feel this way,” she said. Surely, that’s why she felt so loved when Rory kissed her. Brotherly love. He was, after all, her best friend and brother.

Rory stepped back as if in pain. She couldn’t still think of him as a brother. Not after a kiss such as they had just shared. God could not be that cruel. “You know that I’m not your brother.”

“Are you saying that you don’t love me as a brother?” she asked. She could feel the tears threatening to fall. Hurt that Rory didn’t love her. He had always been the one person that she could count on to always be there. She slammed her hands on her hips, ready to do battle rather than show him how much his words had hurt.

Rory held up his hand to stop her tirade before she could get started. “Calm down, Sunshine. I didn’t mean to get you all riled up.” He could tell that he had hurt her and that was not what he had wanted to do. He needed to explain. “Make no mistake Salina, I do

love you. But my kiss was not a brotherly kiss. I'm a man, Salina, and I kissed you as a man kisses a woman," he stated.

"Why now? You've always treated me as a sister. Why treat me differently now?" she questioned. She needed to know, to understand what was happening.

Rory knew that what he was about to say was going to hurt her, but she needed the truth. "You're the reason I left the ranch." He could read the shock on her face and continued before she could interrupt him. "I stopped seeing you as my little sister and started seeing you as the beautiful woman you were becoming. I wanted to give you time to grow. I figured two years was long enough. I came back, Salina, for you." He forced a chuckle. "What a surprise I had to walk in on you and Randall in the barn. Not exactly the homecoming I had envisioned."

"Oh, Rory, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me? I never knew that you felt that way." How could she not have known his feelings? They shared everything.

"I didn't want you to know. I wanted you to have a choice. Have you made a choice?" He asked the question, but didn't know if he was strong enough to hear the answer.

"No, I haven't. I'm sorr," she replied.

His heart was breaking. She didn't love him. The thought of never having her in his life was unthinkable. She'd always been there. "Salina, wait..."

"No, Rory. you wait." She shook her head as he tried to interrupt. "Let me finish. I'm going to take this time that we have together to explore these feelings. I've thought of you as a brother for my whole life. Give me the chance to think of you as something more. You've had years, I've had only minutes," she pleaded.

Thank you God, I still have a chance. He wrapped his arms around her as he shook with relief. "You take all of the time you need." The thought of any man putting his hands or his lips on Salina made him sick. He'd never been so relieved as when she said she wanted a chance. He hadn't lost her. He would convince her that they were meant to be together.

"I love you, Salina," he whispered and bent down to gently brush his lips across hers. Oh, how he wanted to deepen the kiss, wanted to run his tongue lightly across her lips. He wanted to find the entrance inside to taste her. But she wasn't ready yet and neither

was he. All these years he'd saved himself and protected her, waiting for the right time for the two of them to be one.

"God, girl, how you tempt me. No one has made me feel this way in two years. But the last couple of days have been both heaven and hell." He chuckled as he kissed her once more to feel her response before he forced himself to finally pull away.

"I'm sorry, Rory. I don't mean to make this hard for you," she replied.

Sunshine, you have no idea..." He mumbled to himself while adjusting his jeans. "Come on, Cowgirl, let's get us some grub."

Rory picked up a bite of cheese and watched as Salina unloaded the rest of the lunch Agnes had packed from their saddlebags. He pulled her down beside him and held the small chunk to her opened lips.

"Rory, what are...?"

"Shhh, just try some, Sunshine."

He coaxed as he popped it into her mouth and lightly brushed his finger along her bottom lip, watching as she chewed and then swallowed his offering.

Opening the canteen of water, he drank before offering it to her. He watched greedily as spilled drops trickled down her chin and groaned as she flicked out her tongue to try to catch them.

Just watching her eat and drink was making his member harden. He had to get away before he took things too far.

"I'm going to go saddle the horses," he said as he jumped to his feet. How in the hell was he going to keep his hands to himself when they were alone in the shack? Christ! He couldn't even keep his hands and lips to himself when they stopped to water their horses. He didn't stand a chance in hell of behaving himself while spending the whole night alone with her. Not touching her, kissing her. He'd have her running scared for the ranch before they could have any kind of serious discussion. Maybe for tonight he could plead tiredness and go to bed early. But what about tomorrow or the next day? He couldn't sleep all of the time. He'd just have to take things as they came. The one thing he knew was that he loved Salina and he was going to make her his. He just hoped she had some feelings for him and could eventually come to love him half as much as he loved her.

\* \* \* \*

“What was that about?” she wondered. I don’t know why he’s in such an all fired hurry to leave. “Lord have mercy, the man has me talking to myself like someone crazed,” she mumbled as she started packing away the left over food.

They mounted their horses and set off at a leisurely pace. “There’s no need for us to hurry. We’ll be all alone up there and I’m sure as certain the strays won’t come lookin’ for us.”

Rory turned at Salina’s words and looked back at her over his shoulder. He wanted to get to the cabin. He needed to put some space between them. “It’s not that much further and we’ll make it before dark.”

“I’d forgotten how steep the rocks get up here,” Salina said just as a scream sounded.

“I see the big cat still lives up here huh?” Rory asked.

The mountain lion had raised many cubs in the higher country and unless she felt threatened they probably wouldn’t see much of her. “I hope she’s not feeding on our cattle. I’d sure hate to have to put her down.”

“She’s never been a bother before. I’m sure she’s just warning us away,” Salina called from the back of her horse.

She was extremely nervous. Rory had given her a lot to think about. She loved Rory, true. But did she love him as a brother or as a man? She liked his kisses, of that there was no doubt. She needed time to think. Above all else, she didn’t want to hurt him and she wanted to be fair to Josh. Maybe she could just plead exhaustion when they got there and go to bed early. But what about in the days to come? She couldn’t sleep all the time. Rory was right. They did need to talk. She just hoped he didn’t hate her afterwards.

## Chapter 5

Josh left the ranch, very satisfied. He had a full belly from some mighty fine-tasting pie. Why hadn't Salina told him that she was leaving? The fact that she would only be gone a day or two was not reason enough. He was courtin' her and she should have told him her plans. "I'll have to explain things to her so that she knows to ask me before she does anything like this again. I'm sure once I give her the lesson, she'll be sorry to disappoint me." He mumbled, talking aloud to no one but himself and his horse.

"Well, horse, let's us meander into town for a little enjoyment. Raven is always ready to accommodate me and I'm sure willing to be accommodated by her." A few slaps here and there and he'd have a mighty fine time to be sure. He liked to be master in all things in and out of the bedroom. Some time very soon, Miss Princess Salina Houston would learn her place. The old man wouldn't last much longer, judging by what he'd just seen, and then it would only be a matter of time before the stepson moved on. Maybe he should push up his courting duty and marry Salina before the old man kicked off; that way, he would have some claim over the ranch by being a respected son-in-law.

"Yes, that's what I'll do" he whispered. But first a little trip in to town to visit that saucy wench Raven."

\* \* \* \*

Silas chuckled as he thought of young Randall waiting around for Rory and Salina to return. He had told him that they would return in two days. It would more than likely be two weeks. Young Randall would be back, of that Silas was sure. He was equally sure that Josh would eventually make his way toward the line shack.

"I've bought you some time, son; I can do no more than that," he whispered, praying that the time alone would be enough to convince Salina that Rory was the man for her.

He only hoped that Salina didn't prove to be too difficult in listening to what Rory had to say. That girl had a real problem with being bullheaded. She couldn't have gotten that trait from her dear mother, God rest her sweet soul.

A more gentle woman he had never seen. Of all the traits to inherit from her old man, it had to be her contrariness. But her beauty; now that she got from her mother. He still remembered his beautiful Juanita and Rory's mother, Rosy. How did an old cowpoke like himself meet and fall in love not once but twice with two such wonderful women? No one should be so blessed in one lifetime. That these two fine women also left him with two such precious gifts made him even more blessed. With his time remaining on this earth, he would make these two exceptional women proud. He had plans in the works for their children and he meant to see them carried out. The anticipation was enough to make a man jump up and do a jig.

"Agnes!" he yelled, hitching himself up straighter in the bed. "Bring me some of that grub. Woman, are you trying to starve a man in his own home? That should put a burr under her saddle," he chuckled. The smells drifting up the stairway were enough to make a man's mouth water. Besides, he would need lots of energy to chase those grandbabies around. Maybe even two slices of that apple pie. No sense in letting that whippersnapper from across the way enjoy all of Agnes's fine cooking. It was time for this old fool to pull himself up out of his sick bed. He had to be ready to stand by his boy and girl when they came back to the ranch. Things were not going to be easy, but they were a family. A family that would stand together for what they believed in. And the one thing this family most definitely believed in was love.

\* \* \* \*

"I'd forgotten how rough this shack is," Rory said as they rode into camp at dusk. "It's not much, but at least it will keep the rain off and the wild animals out."

"It's not so bad," Salina said as they dismounted. "The lean-to is still standing and the horses can get in if it storms. Have you turned soft in the last two years, brother of mine?" Salina teased.

Rory winced. "Please, Salina. Don't call me that."

"I'm sorry, Rory," Salina said. "I didn't even think; the words just came natural-like to me. You know I'd never say or do anything to hurt you on purpose. I'm always talking before I think."

Rory grabbed Salina's hands to keep her from turning away. "Don't ever apologize to me, Sunshine. You've never had to before and I don't want that to change. Your honesty is what makes me love you. You have always spoken from your heart. Don't ever change. Not for anyone, not even me."

Salina flung her arms around Rory's neck. "Thanks, Rory, I'll try to do better." She sniffled, trying to get her emotions under control.

"Just be yourself. That's all I've ever wanted," he replied as he gave her a last hug.

"Let's carry our things in and get settled before dark." Their first night wasn't starting out the way he had planned. He didn't want her to be uneasy with him. He opened the door to the shack and came to such a sudden stop that Salina ran into the back of him.

"What the hell are you doin', Rory? I thought you wanted to get settled before dark," Salina cursed. The man had grown contrary in the past years. He couldn't seem to make up his mind about anything.

Rory burst into laughter. "It looks like we've had visitors of the four-legged kind." He chuckled as he stood aside to let Salina see the mess. Animal waste, old clothing, seeds and numerous leftovers lay on the floor. It would take time to clean.

"We were lucky; they didn't get any of the food tins opened. You've done good teaching the men about storing the food." He praised her, proud that she had remembered. One thing everyone knew--protecting one's food was of the utmost importance. Should someone be stuck in the shack during a snowstorm, weeks could pass before they were found. Without food, they would be dead.

"I had a good teacher." She smiled, stepping around him. "I'll start cleaning up this mess. You start the fire to make supper," she ordered. They worked well together and she was not surprised when they finished at the same time.

Supper was another light fare. They ate left over biscuits from lunch and some beans warmed over the fire. Neither Rory nor Salina was very hungry.

"Why don't you tell me about some of the things you saw while you were gone? I have never been anywhere and never will," Salina said, not saddened by that fact. She loved the ranch and never wanted to leave it. She listened while he talked of the ranches he had worked on while trying to learn best how to improve the running of the Triple H.



“You should have seen some of the bigger towns, Salina. The people, I’ve never seen so many people.”

Picking up a towel to start drying the dishes, he continued. “I mostly stayed close to the ranch, only going into town occasionally for a dance or to pick up supplies.”

Salina glanced at Rory and hesitantly asked, “Rory, did you meet someone special? Two years, as you said, is a long time and a lot can happen. Was there a special girl you were courting?”

Salina quickly looked back at the dishes she was washing. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. How could she have asked him such a question? It was none of her business. Rory was a grown man and had a life of his own. It was just that the two of them had always talked about anything. She was comfortable with that and didn’t think that their bond had changed with time.

“I’m sorry, Rory. I shouldn’t have asked. I know it’s none of my business. I just wondered.”

Salina felt herself blush; for the first time ever, she felt embarrassed talking with Rory. It had never happened before and she didn’t like the feeling.

“It’s just that we’ve talked about my feelings for Josh and I wondered if there was someone special in your life.”

Rory looked up from the plate he was drying with a stunned look on his face. “Now, where would you get a fool idea like that? You know you’re my favorite girl. There are no other girls as far as I am concerned.” He said this with a secret smile just for her.

Salina returned his smile. “Oh, I know you say that to me, but you’re going to want to get married someday and have babies. I, for one, can’t wait to hold your babies in my arms,” Salina teased.

Rory laid down his towel, trying to control the anger and frustration he was feeling. That she could even think of holding his and some other woman’s baby close to her heart was unbelievable to him. Maybe she didn’t have any feelings for him. The very thought of her having some other man’s babies sickened him.

“I’m very aware that some day I’m going to want babies and you heard what I just said to you. Think about it!” Feeling hurt that she didn’t take his heartfelt words seriously, Rory turned away.

“I’m going out to check the horses. Don’t wait up. We’ve got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.

Salina watched as the door closed behind Rory and his angry words. She hadn’t meant to upset him with her questions.

It seemed that Rory had changed while he was gone. Maybe she had, too. She only hoped that they hadn’t changed so much that she’d lose the special friendship that the two of them shared.

She’d promised him a chance. She’d known Rory her whole life and knew that she loved him. She could trust him always. Did Josh deserve that same trust? He had never been a close friend. He did deserve to be told the truth. She would talk to him as soon as they returned to the ranch.

## Chapter 6

Josh rode into town anticipating the time he would spend with Raven. She was a beautiful woman; it was too bad she didn't come from a better family. She had beautiful red hair, all soft curls, and pretty green eyes. She also had very full breasts. He really enjoyed the time he spent with her. He and Raven understood one another and she knew her place. Her place was flat on her back waiting to service him.

He was glad he wouldn't be giving up that sport when he married the ice princess. If there was one thing Josh knew, it was that Salina was a frigid woman. She never responded to him. Everyone knew he was a fantastic lover. He'd teach her how to please him and keep her breeding. His plan was getting better all the time. What better way to bring the princess to her knees than to keep a babe in her belly just like a brood mare? Chasing his brats around, she wouldn't have time to stick her nose into the running of his ranch. Just thinking about it made his arousal harden. He lusted after Salina. She was a challenge; fighting him at every turn only made him want her more. It was just too bad she didn't like sex, because if there was one thing Josh Randall loved, that was it. The rougher the sex, the better he liked it.

Raven was really going to earn her money tonight. The way he felt right now, he could go at it until dawn. The whore had better be able to keep up or she would find it rougher than usual. He did not like to be disappointed, especially not in bed.

He strode into the White Dove and, seeing Raven leaning against the piano, never broke stride.

"Just the woman I've been looking for," he called as he grabbed her arm and yanked her up the stairs. He was so aroused that all he could think of was plunging himself inside of her and seeking some relief.

"Give me some of what you're hiding, honey," he leered. Unconcerned with the crowd watching, he had her dress unlaced and her breasts exposed before they reached the landing.

Raven tried to cover herself, not liking to put on a show for everyone. She might be a whore, but there were some things that should remain private.

“If Josh Randall wanted to put on a show, then he could definitely look for another girl.”

Raven heard the snickering of the men in the room below. She should have known better than to voice her thoughts aloud. All that she accomplished was a painful pinch to her right breast followed by a lick and a sharp bite on her jutting nipple.

“Don’t ever tell me what you think,” Josh said with a sneer. “You forget your place, Raven. You are a whore and I pay you well. I sure as hell don’t pay you to think. Let me remind you on what you’re paid to do.” Josh growled as he yanked her into her room and kicked the door shut with his booted foot. He was now violently aroused.

“You know that there’s nothing I like more than a good fight except, of course, rough sex. Well, honey, you’re going to offer me both tonight,” he promised.

She was a possession, something he bought and paid for. Every time he brought her to this room, he owned her. He paid her and, because he did, she would do everything he told her to. Her feelings didn’t matter. Her job was to see to his happiness in the time that he was with her.

Josh turned and flicked the lock on the door. He wanted no interruptions. No cowboys trying to play hero. Raven was his for the time he paid for and no one was going to tell him how to use his time or his possession for that time. He turned from the door and backhanded Raven across the face.

“Don’t you ever embarrass me like that again.” He grabbed the front of her dress and ripped it open. Her big breasts filled his hands and he squeezed them painfully, enjoying the fact that he knew he had to be hurting her.

Raven tried to show no emotion. Experience had taught her that if she showed either pain or fury it would just drive Josh to more violence.

He fed on the pain that he caused to women. Heaven help her, she was going to taste a bit of hell before the night was through. She stood as still as possible, but finally the pain was more than she could bear. Her breasts felt like they were on fire.

“Josh, stop it! You’re hurting me.” She cried out as he bit her viciously on the tender flesh at the top of her now painfully sore breasts. It was the opening he was looking for.

“I own you,” he said slapping her again, this time openhanded. He threw her to the bed as he removed his shirt, followed by his boots and at last his jeans.

“Are you climbing on a high horse, whore? What do you care who sees your pretty, ripe nipples?” He leered at her with flames shooting from his eyes, spittle flying from his mouth.

Raven knew he was working himself into a frenzy.

“They’ve all seen them before, after all that’s how you make your living. Are you getting greedy?” he said as he came down over the top of her with force. He grabbed the tender flesh between her snow-white thighs and yanked them wide.

“Should we call them in here? Maybe they’ll give you a little something extra if we let them watch.”

He pulled her by the hair and yanked her head back as he plunged his hardened shaft into her repeatedly. Josh didn’t care that she was not ready for his entrance. He wanted to see the pain and humiliation in her eyes. It wasn’t rape. After all, everyone knew you couldn’t rape a whore. He came to completion almost instantly. It was, of course, Raven’s fault. She had done nothing to keep him stimulated. He reared up from the bed and yanked on his pants.

“Consider this a freebee. You sure didn’t earn any money tonight.”

Josh jerked on his boots and grabbed his shirt on the way out the door. “I’ll be back, Raven, and by God you had better perform better the next time.”

\* \* \* \*

Rory slipped out into the night thinking that they had now taken a small step. He had told Salina how he felt and maybe given her something to think about. He had told her the truth when he said that there were no other women as far as he was concerned. They had all paled in comparison to Salina. She had always been and would always be the only woman for him. He eagerly awaited the time when he could talk more openly about his feelings. But, for now, he would take one step at a time and be thankful that he was edging closer to his final goal.

Salina was worth the wait and from the way she responded when he touched her; he began to feel more secure that she would come to feel the same way for him. He’d been surprised, hurt and, yes, jealous when he’d heard her and Josh Randall talking about courting.

*But he can never love you the way that I love you.* His heart was breaking with the thought of her in another man's arms. With that picture in his mind, he had decided it was time to let everyone know how he felt. He wanted everyone to know that Salina was going to marry him and start a family with him. They were going to raise their children on the Triple H. Yes, he thought to himself, Salina Holloway had a very nice ring to it.

\* \* \* \*

Salina silently finished cleaning up the supper dishes. Rory had told her to think about what he had said and that's exactly what she was doing.

He had said he loved her and that she was the only woman for him. Could that possibly be true? Did he mean that he loved her as a woman and not as a sister? It was hard to believe after all these years. But he had been so upset when she had told him about Josh and their courtin'.

She hadn't been surprised, knowing how protective he was of her. But could it have been more than protectiveness? Could Rory have been jealous? Salina knew that she loved Rory. She now realized she always had. She couldn't and wouldn't deny it.

Rory was her rock. He was always there for her. She didn't quite know what to think of the feelings being in his arms caused. Scared and confused, she decided whom better to go to for the answers she needed than to the one person she knew would always be there for her. Only this time he was at the center of her problems.

"Buck up, Salina Lynn," she scolded herself. "It's time to take the bull by the horns." In this case, the bull was Rory and their feelings for each other and the problems it was going to cause with Josh.

She didn't want to hurt Josh, but she couldn't force feelings that just weren't there.

She opened the door a bit cautiously and looked out to see if she could see Rory. He'd said that he was going to check on the horses. She knew that chore had not been necessary. The horses had been taken care of and wouldn't need anything until morning. He had just needed to get away to think and to give her the time and space to do the same.

Stepping out of the shack, she took a deep breath of the sweet mountain air. She listened to the sounds of the night animals as they hunted for prey.

An owl swooped down at the corner of the lean-to and captured an unsuspecting mouse.

She heard also the sound of a lone coyote calling for a mate. Sadly, she glanced that way, hoping that one of them found their dream on this night.

She saw Rory sitting on a rock whittling a stick with his knife. This was something she knew he only did when he was troubled and needed comfort. “Well, damn it, Rory Holloway, you stirred up all these feelings in me. We’re going to have us a talk,” she whispered with determination. She needed comfort, too, and she didn’t want it from anyone but him.

## Chapter 7

Rory heard the soft footfalls of Salina coming toward him, along with her mumblings. He shook his head and smiled. She was never quiet. Not even when there was no one else to talk to; the woman just talked to herself.

She'd always followed him, but this was one time he wished she hadn't.

"Salina, go back to the shack," he called. His mind was in such turmoil and he wanted her so badly. Now was not the time for her to be near him. He had wanted her tucked safely in her bedroll when he eventually returned to the shack. That was no longer an option.

"Rory?" she whispered in a hurt voice. "What's wrong?"

He turned just as she reached him, looking so innocent and confused. He couldn't send her back to the lonely shack. "Come here, you," he whispered as he opened his arms and drew her down on to his lap. With an exasperated sigh, he asked, "What are you doing out here, Salina? I told you to go to bed." Didn't she understand how close he was to losing control? His need of her had been growing and he didn't know how much longer he could ignore it.

"You ass!" Salina spat with an outraged cry as she sat up in his lap. He expected her to give him/them a chance. Treating her like a spoiled brat was not the way. He'd better learn right now that the time for treating her like a kid sister was long past.

"Don't treat me like a child, Rory Holloway! I'm a grown woman and it's time you started treating me like one!" she yelled. "You tell me you love me. You say I'm not your sister and then you turn around and treat me like one." She pointed her finger into his chest to get her point across. "I'm not having it. Treat me like you would any other woman you love."

Rory smiled; he loved to see her with her temper flaring. Her eyes shined so brightly. Her skin flushed. God, she was absolutely beautiful.

"Oh, believe me, honey. I know you're a woman. There is nothing I'd love more than to start treating you as one. But," he said as he trailed a finger down her nose, "are you sure you're ready for it? I want you to be very sure, Salina, because once I start treating you like a woman; you'll be treated like my woman."



Gazing at her intently, he was almost afraid to ask his next questions. Afraid of the answers she might give. Was this the right time? Was she ready? There was only one way to find out. As scared as he was to ask the questions, he was even more afraid not to.

“Is that what you want? Do you understand what I’m asking you?”

Salina glanced up at him with her beautiful sparkling eyes. Eyes so full of trust and love. Yes, that was love he was seeing; he was sure of it. She put her palms on both sides of his face.

“You asked me to think about what you were saying. I did think about it and about many other things.” She took a deep breath for courage.

“I need to talk with Josh,” Salina said, and held her hand over his mouth when he started to interrupt. “I made promises to him. Promises that I can’t keep.”

“Are you sure, sweetheart?” he asked. Please let her be sure. He didn’t think he could take it if she changed her mind.

Salina reached out and took Rory’s hand. She wanted to explain to him about her feelings. “I was lonely, Rory.” Again, she held up her hand. “Please let me get this said and then we won’t mention it again. Okay?” she asked.

“Alright, sweetheart, I’m listening,” Rory said as he enfolded her in his arms, settling her more comfortably on his lap and resting his chin on her head. They sat with her back to his front, natural-like. *A perfect fit*, he thought to himself.

Salina settled in for the telling, twining her fingers with Rory’s to lay on her stomach. “You were gone a long time. I was lonely. Daddy took sick and I worked all the time. Josh started calling on me and told me how pretty I was, how special. At first I wasn’t very nice to him. But after a while I just sort of got tired of fightin’ it. He was always there when no one else was. Do you know what I mean? It just somehow seemed like the right time,” she said and turned on his lap to look him in the eyes. She pulled her hand out of his grip and laid it on his face.

“But his kisses don’t make me warm and tingly like yours do. His kisses leave me feeling cold and scared. Kisses shouldn’t be like that, should they?” she asked.

Rory smiled and put his hand over hers. “No, darlin’, kisses shouldn’t be like that. They should be like this,” he whispered as his mouth came down over the top of hers.

Her lips were soft, warm and they tasted faintly of the coffee they'd had after supper. He ran his lips gently over the edges, wanting to enter but not sure if she'd allow it. He felt her gasp; it was all the encouragement he needed. His tongue entered, twisting and twining, nudging hers to join in the dance. He opened his eyes to see her staring back at him. He could see the warmth shining in their depths.

"Rory, stop," she gasped.

He felt her push against his chest. He didn't want to stop. He wanted to kiss her forever. Hold her close. He wanted to feel the warmth of her body settling into his.

"Rory, please. I have to talk to you," she said again as she pushed against him a little harder. "I'm still confused and need some answers. Questions that I'm scared to ask you."

Rory shook with his need to hold her. The feel of her soft body pressed against him had made his body harden. Never had he been so tempted by any woman. Only this woman, his woman, could make him feel this way. She was his life.

"You never have to be afraid of me. You can ask me anything," he said and kissed her on the end of the nose. "Now, what is this all-important question?" he teased. He could tell that she was really worried about whatever it was that was bothering her. He only hoped that she didn't want to wait until she talked to Josh before going on with his plans for them.

"I need to know, Rory, if you are saying that you love me the way a man loves a woman. I know I sound stupid. We are brother and sister, or we were. Weren't we? Damn! Listen to me babbling. Of course you don't love me that way! Do you?" Becoming upset, she dropped her hands and stepped away.

"God! I'm so dumb!" she cried out as she put her hand over her face, sobbing uncontrollably.

Rory held her tightly with one arm. He was smiling as he reached up to remove her hands from her beautiful tear-streaked face.

"Don't cry, sweetheart. Please, you're breakin' my heart. Everything is gonna be just fine." He felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Salina loved him. He now knew it for a certainty. She hadn't told him, but she'd showed him with her actions. His

Salina didn't get upset over little things. She was tougher than that. No, she loved him and he would hear the words from her before this night was over.

"Salina," he whispered. "I Love You. I have always loved you," he continued as he dropped a kiss on her the tip of her shiny red nose.

"I loved you as a brother when you were a skinny little thing, all legs running to keep up with me." He smiled affectionately, remembering those times.

"I loved you as a young girl when I saw you galloping through the meadow on your horse. The wind blowing your glorious hair out behind you with the sun kissing your cheeks." Kissing those tear-stained cheeks, he continued.

"I loved you then. I don't know when it happened. It has just always been there."

He tipped her head up with his finger below her chin and gently wiped the tears away while gazing adoringly into her eyes.

"I Love You! You are and always will be my woman." Making that vow, he slowly brought her face closer as he lowered his lips on to her slightly parted ones. Heaven. He was in heaven. Her lips were everything he had dreamed. So soft and inviting. Rory opened his own mouth and ran his tongue along Salina's oh-so-tempting mouth. Pleasure rippled through him, causing him to tremble.

Salina, equally surprised, was shocked not only by Rory's heartfelt words, but also by the amazing kiss he was giving her. Never did she think that having someone run their tongue teasingly and lovingly across your lips and then inserting it oh-so-gently into her mouth could feel so wonderful.

"Oh, Rory." She groaned as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. She stroked her own tongue against his. Loving the feel of him, the taste. She'd never thought to find herself in his arms this way. Never dreamed that Rory was the man she'd been waiting her whole life for.

Now it was Rory's turn to groan. He didn't know if he could control his feelings. He didn't know how. Christ! Maybe saving himself hadn't been such a good idea. He was just as innocent as she was. He had to touch her. He slowly ran his hand gently and soothingly down her nape and along her shoulder while deepening the kiss. Slowly, his hand traveled down to her waist, caressing her softly. Running on instincts, he worked his hand daringly back up to her right breast. Startled, Salina jumped; breaking the kiss.

“Hush, Sweetheart,” Rory crooned. “Trust me. We’ll learn together.” He trailed kisses across her face and down her jaw line to nibble softly on her ear. He then traveled back up to her lips where they once again met in a dance as old as time.

Salina once again relaxed in his embrace. Tenderly, Rory ran his hand over her breast. He trembled harder, his groin becoming painfully aroused. He had never touched a woman’s breast before. It was so soft, yet he could feel the pebbly hardness of her nipple. Oh, how he ached to see and feel her with no clothes as a barrier.

“I can’t do this,” he gasped. He wouldn’t do it this way. No way was he going to expose Salina to the elements. Their first time would not be outside on a rock. He had to try to slow things down.

“Salina, sweetheart,” he said, raining kisses along her long, beautifully arched neck. “We have to slow down. We can’t go on like this.” He again brought his hands to her face and looked into her aroused eyes. “Do you understand, darlin’? I want our first time to be special. I ache, Salina, and if we don’t stop now, I’m afraid we’ll end up making love right here beside this big old rock.”

Salina cocked her head to the side questioningly. “I don’t understand,” she said, wetting her kiss-swollen lips with her tempting tongue.

He envisioned what that tongue had just been doing to him. She didn’t realize how such an innocent act affected him. He wanted to feel those swollen lips moving over his body. He needed to feel her roughened tongue licking its way up along his neck. He shivered from the chills and knew it had nothing to do with the temperature.

He tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but had to close his eyes from the vision in front of him. He started counting silently to himself, “one, two, three...” trying to give his body time to cool down.

“Rory, what’s wrong with you. Why are your eyes closed and what are you mumbling about?” Salina asked, reaching up to check him for a fever.

“Why do you ache? Am I too heavy for you? Would you like me to sit somewhere else?” she asked as she started to slide off Rory’s lap. She didn’t think that she was that heavy. Rory had lifted her countless times and had never said anything. But if she was hurting him by just sitting on his legs, then she had better forego Agnes’s buttered biscuits in the future.

“No, Darlin’, you stay right where you are. I like you just fine sitting as you are,” Rory replied as he took hold of her hand and gently pressed it against his arousal.

“You’re not too heavy, honey. You’re perfect just the way you are.” Too perfect, if the swell in his trousers was anything to go by. He’d be crippled by the time they returned to the ranch, the way things were going. He’d never be able to ride a horse in his present condition.

Salina’s eyes rounded in surprise as he rubbed her hand against the length of him hidden in his trousers. “Oh, my...” she whispered. Not exactly her usual cocksure attitude. She’d never felt anything like it. She knew what it meant. Had heard whispers. But never had she been witness to an aroused man.

“This is why I ache. You do this to me, Salina. You, the woman I love.” Caressing the top of her hand with his thumb, he gazed into her eyes.

“I want to make love with you. Do you know what that means? I want you to have babies with me. I want it to be our babies that you hold in your arms.”

Gently he placed his hand against her breast. “I want to watch you place them against your breast to suckle. Marry me, Salina. Be My Woman. My Lover. My Best Friend, but most of all say that you will be my wife.”

Unaware that Rory had removed his hand, Salina still had hers resting against his erection. She was shocked.

Rory really and truly loved her. He wanted to marry her. The thought of having babies with him caused such a warm and wonderful feeling to run through her.

“Earlier in the shack, I talked about holding your babies to my breast.” She choked on her words, tears of happiness threatening to fall. “But never did I dream that the babies I loved, cuddled and fed would be our babies. Yours and mine, made from our love for each other.”

She gazed down to where her hand still rested. Feeling the warmth and the pulsing coming from the ridge beneath.

“Does it hurt?” she whispered as she trailed her finger along its length. She’d never seen a naked man, but living on a ranch she knew somewhat the basics of the goings-on between a male and a female. Surely it was done in much the same way. Rory would know what to do when the time came.

“No, sweetheart, it’s a sweet ache. One I wouldn’t trade for anything.” Rory answered in a husky voice.

Knowing she had the power to make Rory ache and knowing also that she could make him tremble gave her the confidence she needed. It gave her the courage to speak her mind about her feelings.

Slowly raising her head, she returned Rory’s gaze. She ran her hand once more fondly across his arousal.

“Salina, you’re killing me,” Rory groaned in appreciation.

Salina grinned. Oh, how she liked the power she had over him. She knew that he had that same power over her. They were equal and that’s what made what she had to say all the easier.

“I think I’ve waited my whole life for you to notice that I’ve grown up,” she declared. And with a wicked whisper, continued. “I would love to marry you and have your babies.”

Her smile started to dim as she remembered all the problems they still faced. Not only the problems with Josh. “Rory?” she began hesitantly.

Not liking the tremor in her voice, Rory anxiously asked, “What is it, Salina? What’s wrong?” He gripped her hands so tightly it almost hurt.

“You’ve just agreed to marry me. We should be celebrating.” Reaching up to touch her cheek, he asked, “What happened to that wicked little smile of yours? You can’t change your mind. I won’t let you.” Trying not to panic, he swallowed the scared lump in his throat. Now that she had agreed to marry him, he wasn’t letting her change her mind. He might be rushing things along, but he wouldn’t rest until they were man and wife.

Salina smiled and patted his handsome face. “I haven’t changed my mind. I just have some things to say that I know have to be said.”

She drew a breath, knowing that once she opened her mouth all of her questions and concerns would all come spilling out.

“We live in a close-knit community. What are people going to say when we tell them we are to be married? They have always thought of us as brother and sister. Now, we want to be known as Mr. and Mrs. Holloway.”

Rory interrupted her. “Oh, yeah, Mr. and Mrs. Holloway, I like the sound of that. I can’t wait until it happens.”

He knew that what she said was true and wanted to reassure her. Nothing and no one was going to stand in the way of their happiness. He’d waited for what seemed like a lifetime for this woman. His dream was about to come true.

“You’re right. We do live in a small community and for that reason our friends and neighbors should not have to be reminded that I am not your brother. I talked this over with Silas and...”

Salina now interrupted with surprise. “You talked about this with Daddy.”

She was embarrassed to think of the two men in her life talking so freely about such personal things. Just what did the two of them talk about so freely? Was nothing private?

Rory got a sly grin on his face at the sight of her beautiful blush. “Whose idea do you think it was to take this little venture?” he asked. Of course, he would have made plans of his own, but it was nice to have Silas’s approval.

“Come closer and let me cuddle you. The air up here has a cold bite to it. I don’t want you getting sick,” he scolded. The wind rippling through the leaves of the trees suggested that cold weather wasn’t far off.

“Your daddy is a sly old dog,” he continued after settling his arms around her. “I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he has the preacher waiting for us when we get back.”

Rory leaned down and placed a quick kiss on her lips. He followed with another deeper one and groaned as he pulled away. “Quit distracting me, woman,” he scolded with a smile.

“As I was saying, I had these same concerns and your daddy pointed out that the people who really care for us won’t have a problem with us being together. The others don’t really matter. We will face them as a united family.”

Salina threw her arms around Rory’s neck. “Oh, Rory, I do love you.” Rory pulled back with a sheepish look on his face and love shining in his eyes. Thank you. His life was complete with just those three wonderful words.

“Well, I should think so,” he said with a smile. “But I sure am glad to finally hear you say the words.”

Now that she had finally admitted her feelings, he felt embarrassed. What should he do now? “I don’t know about you, Minx, but I think we should head inside before you distract me again.” He rose to his feet still cradling his soon-to-be bride in his arms.



## Chapter 8

Agnes sat beside Silas's bed with a big, happy and relieved smile on her face. Having been a member of the Houston household for the last ten years, she felt like part of the family. She had been concerned when Silas had taken to his bed and had been eating next to nothing. It was with great joy that she had watched him polish off not only a big bowl of stew with biscuits, but also two slices of her homemade apple pie.

"Well Silas. I do believe you are feeling better. I declare you ate down those vittles like a man half starved."

Rising to her feet, she continued, "I wish those two young ones were here to witness this. They have been awfully worried about you. Maybe I should send one of the ranch hands out to see if they could find Rory and Salina to tell them that you're on the mend." She turned to do just that.

"No, Agnes, let them be," Silas ordered.

"Old man, those young 'uns have been worried sick. I should send someone to fetch them home," she scolded.

"You leave things be, woman. I know what I'm up to. Mind your own matters," he retorted.

"The way you've been laying around here, I thought for sure you were going to go and die on us. This is one instance when I'm happy to see that I was wrong. Don't make me sorry." Shaking her finger at Silas, she continued with her lecture.

"This here ranch wouldn't be the same without you, you old coot. I don't know what that girl of yours would do if something were to happen to you, either. The young cowboys would drive me to distraction hanging around sniffing after Salina."

She chuckled as she thought of Rory's reaction. "I doubt very much those young men would get very far with Rory standing guard. That boy is a might protective of that little girl. He always has been and I'm sure that time and distance hasn't changed him." A smile planted firmly on her face she shook her head.

"I see the way he looks at her and I think if some man so much as brushed against the hem of her dress he'd personally remove the man's fingers so he couldn't make the same mistake twice. Lord, that boy would walk through fire for that girl"

Silas waited for Agnes to finish her squawking; now he knew where Salina got the bad habit of rambling on. It was enough to drive a man out of his own house. But to be held prisoner in his own bed, it was almost too much. Agnes might talk endlessly, but the woman could cook like a dream.

“That was mighty fine eating, Agnes,” he said as he wiped his mouth and patted his stomach. “I couldn’t have you feeding that Randall kid all my prime beef and surely not all your apple pie.” Silas looked at Agnes seriously.

“You do know that the young pup is trying to worm his way in while our young ones are away.” He scowled as he said, “He wants my little girl and this ranch. I’m not giving up either one. I’m damn sure Rory won’t be giving them up, either.”

He chuckled as he remembered the conversation he and Rory had had before he and Salina had left. “Do you know, Agnes, that boy finally got the gumption to talk to me about his intentions where Salina is concerned.”

Agnes smiled fondly. Lord, she too loved those two young ones, having watched them grow from gangly children to the mature, young adults that would make any family proud. This was her family and she was extremely proud of it.

“I’m happy for the two of them Silas. They deserve to be happy. But you know the folks around here are not going to make things easy for the two of them.”

Winding up for yet another of her speeches, she started to tick things off on her fingers. “The old busy bodies will taunt them about being closely related. We know and they know, too, that it isn’t true. But that fact isn’t going to stop the talk,” she said, smiling.

“Rory would be a nice catch for one of their young ladies and they are not going to give up the prospect of catching him for a son-in-law. Who wouldn’t want that tall, tanned muscular man with his raven black shoulder length hair, not to mention those beautiful brown bedroom eyes of his?”

She chuckled and stood a little straighter. “Why, if I was thirty years younger, that man would have to run from me.”

Turning her attentions now toward Salina, she started preaching about problems that would arise with her. “Salina is also considered a great catch. The cowboys all know that

she will inherit some, if not all, of this here ranch.” Talking in earnest with her hands, Agnes kept right on talking.

“Throw in the fact that she is a beautiful young lady. The men are going to be none too happy if she’s no longer available. And, finally, let us not forget Josh Randall. He has made his intentions clear. He has a lot of say around these parts and will add fuel to the fire.”

Silas sat up a little straighter in bed as he handed Agnes his tray of empty dinner plates. “Stop your fretting. This family will stand together. Love has always been the strong foundation for this family. It will get us through this, too.”

“You know, old man, it might save us all some grief to give Josh our blessing in his courtin’. She could do worse. Randall has a big spread and could keep Salina sitting nicely,” she stated. Heaven knew that girl deserved to be pampered.

“My girl don’t need no fancy duds. She’s happy out riding the range and caring for the ranch,” Silas replied. What was this old woman going on about Randall for? Rory and Salina were meant to be and, by God, he would see that it happened. “Ain’t you got some work to do in the kitchen?”

“Damn ornery old coot,” Agnes muttered as she slammed the door on her way out.

Silas lay reclining once again in his bed, thinking about the conversation he and Agnes had just shared. “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Best mind her business in the kitchen and leave the young ’uns to me,” he muttered. He wasn’t overly concerned because he believed strongly in what he had told Agnes. He believed, also, in the love of his family. Excitedly, Silas wondered how long the kids would be gone. He wanted a wedding right away. Rory wouldn’t fail in convincing Salina to marry him. Just to be prepared, maybe he had better send for the preacher and smooth the way. Wouldn’t want to shock a man of the cloth. He wanted things to be all ready when the kids returned. Therefore, he would make sure the local preacher would perform the ceremony and support the marriage or, by God, he’d find one that would. Things were going to start out on the right foot with this marriage. He wanted the church standing behind them.

Silas closed his eyes, deciding that with all the excitement that would be happening around here he had better rest. He wanted to be standing on the front porch when Rory

and Salina rode in. He wanted to see their smiling, happy faces. No gift could be greater than witnessing the love he would see shining in their eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Rory carried Salina across the yard and into the shack. He gently laid her down on the bedrolls positioned in front of the fire.

"It's alright, sweetheart." He crooned. He could tell she was nervous; he was, too. He had been telling the truth when he had said they would learn together. And this was one lesson he was eager to learn. He eased back and brushed a kiss across her lips. Looking into her smiling eyes, some of Rory's nervousness eased. She had said she loved him. He hadn't thought they would discuss their feelings so soon after arriving up here. He was glad that they had because now they could talk freely with one another.

"Darlin'," Rory began. "Remember how I told you that you were the only one for me. I told you that there had never been any other woman?"

Rory took hold of Salina's hands. "I meant that in every way. I have never been with another woman. When we make love, Salina, it will be the first time for me, too. I'm telling you that no other woman has ever made me feel like you do. I'm as innocent as you are in the happenings between a man and a woman. I have only my instincts and feelings to guide me."

Rory brought Salina's hands to his chest and kept them covered with his own. "Will you trust me enough to guide us both? Our love will guide us. Nothing we do to each other or with each other is wrong. What we do together will be beautiful. Please trust me as I trust you."

"Oh, Rory," she said, brushing at the tears falling on her cheeks. These were not the tears of sadness or humiliation. These were the tears of happiness.

He'd been the one to teach her to ride her first horse. He'd baited her hooks when she didn't want to poke the squiggly little worms with the makeshift hooks on the fishing poles that he himself had made for them.

"Rory," she began. "You have been my teacher in most everything in my life. Who else but you can teach me all that I need to learn to be a woman?" she whispered, running her hands along his jawbone. She felt warm and could barely breathe.

“I could never trust another or give another the gift that I’m about to share with you. I’ve been saving this one moment for you,” she vowed. Now that she had admitted her feelings to Rory, she knew them to be true. He was the only one. She was sorry to have to hurt Josh, but he had to be told the truth.

She guided her hands across Rory’s muscular chest. “I am so honored that you saved yourself for me. That you waited for me to grow up.”

Sniffing and with a soft voice, she said, “I know that whatever we do will be absolutely right. Together, we will learn how to please each other.”

Taking his face in her hand, she said in a clear and strong voice, “I love you, Rory Holloway! I love you and trust you with all my heart!”

Rory again brought her hands to his chest. “I love you too sweetheart; more than words can say. I want so much to make love with you.” Nervously, he asked, “Is this something you want, too? I’ll understand if you would rather wait for us to be married. I’ll respect whatever you decide. This has to be right for both of us.”

Rory watched as Salina slid her hand down the front of his shirt until she reached the first button. She was smiling as she slipped it through the hole then moved to the next. She teased his sensitive bare skin as she continued.

Rory swallowed the lump forming in his throat and fought his own tears. All of his dreams were within his reach. Salina was going to be his wife. The woman he had always loved was returning that love.

She was driving him to distraction. He thought she’d be shy, not so bold. The feel of her hands on his bare skin teased him, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He needed to feel her bare skin pressed against him.

Not to be outdone, he reached to the back of Salina’s gown and began to gently unbutton it. Bending forward as he exposed her throat, he gently licked and suckled the tender area below her left ear.

“You taste so sweet,” he whispered.

“Salina, how many buttons are on this dress?” he asked, frustrated. “Who in the hell made such things. I’m sure it wasn’t a man,” he blustered, still struggling with the numerous buttons blocking his way to Salina’s tender skin.

Salina giggled. “You don’t like them?” she teased. “It’s one of my favorites.” She had successfully completed her task and was now sliding his shirt off his shoulders.

“Do you like this?” she asked as she leaned forward and lightly traced her tongue across the rippling muscles of his chest and worked her way up his neck to his jaw line.

“Your body’s so different from mine. So hard, I can feel your muscles ripple with every touch,” she purred.

Rory’s breath caught. “Yes, I like,” he gasped. Never had he been so aroused. Frantically, he worked to release the remainder of the buttons. Reaching the last hole, he exhaled the breath he had unknowingly been holding. “Yes,” he said triumphantly as he gently pulled her dress forward to glide it down her lily-white shoulders. He bent down to nibble on them, then soothing them with kisses. He continued to remove the top of the gown, eagerly anticipating the first look at her breasts.

Salina stopped her exploration of Rory’s chest when she felt the first of the cool air hitting her exposed skin.

“No one has ever seen me naked,” she whispered. “I hope you’re not disappointed.” She had never given any thoughts to her breasts. They were just there.

“I know no one has ever seen you, Salina, and you don’t know how happy that makes me. If it helps, no woman has ever seen me naked, either. You will be the first,” he answered, hoping it gave her back her confidence.

“Now let me look at you.” Rory eased the gown to Salina’s waist, where he stopped, awed at the site that greeted him. He looked up into Salina’s questioning eyes.

“You are absolutely beautiful.” Rory again reached for her breasts. Breasts that were now bared for his loving. He tenderly ran his palms along the underside of each tender globe and watched in awe, as her rosy nipples seemed to rise to his touch. I want to taste you. Would you mind?” he asked in a whisper. He had heard other men talk about such things but he could never imagine trying such a thing himself. Now he couldn’t wait to run his lips and tongue across her bared breast.

Salina nodded her head, afraid of what he was asking; but she trusted him. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. “I think that would be alright if it’s something you think you’d like,” she answered.

He didn't give her time to change her mind. He opened his mouth over her soft globes, nibbling and caressing as he inched his way to the pointed tip. If possible, her nipple hardened and stood more erect as if in welcome.

"Salina," he growled in sheer pleasure, sure that he heard Salina answer with a groan of her own.

Salina smiled, happy and confident, knowing that Rory thought her body was beautiful. Before she could answer him, the feel of his hands touching her breast made her tremble. Never had anyone touched her in such a way.

Adjusting to the feel of his hands, she was unprepared for the feel of his tongue and lips gliding across her skin. No wonder men paid for such a thing. But why would a woman charge for it? This feeling was much too wonderful to be considered work. Then again, it was probably so wonderful because it was her and Rory. They were meant to be. As if to prove her point, Rory's mouth closed over the tip of her nipple, causing her to moan aloud.

Slowly, oh so slowly, she slid her hands down his chest towards his flat, rippling stomach. She reached the opening of his jeans and heard him suck in a breath.

She smiled mischievously; two could play this game of seduction. She wasn't a sniveling coward and she was now very secure in her feelings for Rory and of his feelings for her. With that in mind, she released the button and slowly eased down his zipper. Bravely, she reached through the newly made opening and sought her prize. Oh, what a prize it was!

Wrapping her hand firmly around Rory's arousal, she gripped him and felt it throbbing and pulsing as if trying to rise. It reminded her of a stallion trying to rear its head. Smiling to herself, she thought it best not to mention that little tidbit to him. Although maybe he wouldn't mind being compared to a stallion. Quite a compliment indeed.

Running her hand along his shaft, she headed for the tip. Breaking the hold Rory had on her breast, she looked down and couldn't quite keep her eyes from rounding.

"My God!" she exclaimed. He is built like a stallion! And look at that beautiful drop of moisture almost like dew glistening on the tip. She could not stop herself from running her finger over the tip and catching that drop of slick nectar.

Rory just about swallowed his tongue. Where did she learn these things? She was going to kill him. He had held himself so still when he had felt her trailing her hands down his chest. He had sucked in his breath as she had released him from his now painfully tight pants. He couldn't breathe as she gripped his Johnson.

She was holding him as if he was the randiest of stallions trying to get away. Well, maybe not a stallion; but a man could think them things to himself, if never admitting them aloud. Salina running her finger over the tip of his engorged head was almost his undoing. He didn't think he could wait much longer.

"I need to be inside of you," He pleaded. "Let's get this gown off of you."

He lifted her and eased the gown down past her hips, letting it slide to the floor. "I want to make love to you in front of the fire," he whispered as he eased her back to the blankets, coming down to rest beside her.

His eyes traveled lovingly over her body, marveling in the way God had created such perfection. Her dark woman's curls glistened invitingly. It was an invitation he could not refuse. Tenderly, he touched her, running his fingers through the curly mound, seeking the entrance.

Rory was working purely on instinct. "I don't know if there's a wrong way or a right way to make love, Salina. I only know that I have to touch you," he confessed.

Her secret feminine place called out to him and he needed to answer. He glided his fingers along her opening, the dewy wetness making her ready for what was to come. Cautiously, he inserted his finger inside and felt her welcoming. "Tell me if I hurt you, Sunshine," he groaned, losing himself in his passion. "I never want to hurt you."

Salina could feel the wetness between her legs and knew only that the feelings Rory had stirred in her caused this to happen. She caught her breath as he ran his fingers through the dark curls that no one else had ever touched. She tried to contain the moan as he inserted his fingers inside of her. She was shocked at the sensations this caused. "Oh Rory, what's happening?" she asked on a moan.

"It's alright, sweetheart, just feel," he replied, kissing her swollen lips.

Rory's sweet kisses brought things back into focus. He came up over the top of her and removed his hand from her beautifully spread legs.

"Hold on tight, Sunshine. Trust me," he said, offering her his hands.



Salina trustingly joined hands with him and gladly accepted possession of his manly organ when he guided her there to urge him to the warm, wet home that waited. He was so soft, yet hard and long.

His shaft seemed to have a life all of its own. It pulsed and sprang in her hands. She was not scared; this was right. Rory loved her and they had a future together. She reluctantly released him as he pushed his way in. Her tightness gripped him as he filled her.

She could feel the blood rushing in him. The sensations were unbelievable. The pulsing of his manhood, the strength as he pushed against her. She felt him hesitate, almost as if he had hit a barrier.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded. She didn’t want him to stop now. She could see the beads of sweat pooling on Rory’s forehead and could feel him trembling; that was when she knew he was holding back, not wanting to hurt her.

“Make me yours,” she whispered as she put her hands on his firm butt, easing him forward even as she arched up against him. Her sensations were on fire as he drove his way home, settling tightly against her. There was no pain, only joy.

She bucked up against Rory and felt him retaliate and then they danced. She felt him thrusting in and out, as he brought his lips to the tender area on her neck and suckled in time to the tempo of his thrusts. She could feel herself climbing to some unseen peak. The pressure that was building in her caused a rippling in her body unlike anything she had ever felt before. These were the feelings her friends had talked about. Stars, she was in heaven...

“Rory!” She cried out as the most wonderful feeling overcame her.

Rory, too, was thrusting faster, answering her moan with one of his own and shouting her name as the ecstasy overcame him and he climaxed.

Salina felt his seed burst forth inside her. She slowly eased her hands from his buttocks and slid them up his back in a slow, gentle caress.

“I never knew that it could feel so wonderful,” she said in awe. Reaching his broad shoulders, she pulled back, smiling, and kissed the end of his nose.

“Rory,” she whispered almost shyly. “What we just did, we could have made a baby, couldn’t we?” she asked.

Rory was worried that he had hurt her. He had lost control. The intense feelings had so overwhelmed him. He had felt Salina easing away from him and was relieved to see her smiling, yet drowsy face. Served the little vixen right to be exhausted. She had almost killed him.

“Yeah, sweetheart, we could have made a baby just now. How do you feel about that?” he asked as he rolled to his side and cradled her against him where she belonged.

“I think I like the idea very much.” She smiled wickedly and brought her mouth up to meet his waiting lips.

“Me too,” he answered tenderly, returning her kiss as they drifted off to sleep. He couldn’t wait for morning and the first day of their new life as a couple.

## Chapter 9

Josh waltzed down the stairs of the Saloon as if he had not a care in the world.

“That sure didn’t take long, Randall,” yelled a cowboy.

“What’s a matter, Josh? Did she milk you dry?” called another.

He ignored the chuckles coming from the cowhands that stood in the smoking barroom. He’d let their insults pass for the time being. They were nobodies, local cowpokes that drank their earnings as fast or faster than what they earned.

He’d already forgotten the bruised and battered woman he’d left in the dark room upstairs. Walking out the door, he mounted his horse and headed home to his ranch.

It was pitch dark, but that didn’t bother him none. He and his horse had both traveled this path many times. Even after tonight’s disappointment, he knew that he’d travel it again.

Sexually unsatisfied, he was not happy. To hell with waiting for Rory and Salina to come back from their little trip. He’d make up some excuse and head in the same direction as they had set out. After all, he had beeves, too. If by chance he happened to meet up with them, it would be only neighborly if they all stuck together and helped each other out. He would pack up and head out first thing in the morning.

The sooner he and Salina were married, the better. The cowboys who had stared and snickered as he came downstairs wouldn’t be laughing when he snagged the prize of Salina Houston and her ranch. They wouldn’t dare laugh at him. He would be the owner of not one but two ranches. He was going to have the most beautiful wife, too. They would never know she was a cold fish in bed. Why, with all the brats they’d have running around, the cowboys were sure to think she was a hot little piece in bed. Only she would know different and if he slapped her around enough, she sure as hell wouldn’t talk.

He’d go into the hills. It would give Raven time to think about what he had said. He’d showed her what happened when he was disappointed and embarrassed. Raven wouldn’t be making that mistake again. She’d be hot and ready for him the next time he visited.

\* \* \* \*

Upstairs in a room at the White Dove, Raven grimaced as she touched a damp cloth to her swollen, bleeding lips. She also had a black eye, along with an open cut and a bruised cheekbone. Her breasts sported bite marks. Not the gentle love bites some over eager young cowboy would sometimes give her. But, deep raw bite marks like you would get from an animal.

That man will never touch me again, she vowed. She opened the door to her room and saw Michael Little Fox coming up the stairs.

Fox, as everyone called him, was a very quiet man who owned a small horse ranch outside of town. Being a half-breed, Fox kept pretty much to himself.

Fox was a beautiful man. He had glorious blue-black hair that brushed below his broad, muscular shoulders. His strong facial features showed his Native American heritage. His beautiful, baby blue eyes gave away his half-breed status. There was no man around that had that color of eyes. The kind of eyes that made a woman lose all sense when she gazed into them.

“Fox? What are you doing here?” she asked, surprised to see him at the Dove. “It’s been a long time.” *Another lifetime*, she thought.

She looked down to see him carrying a bucket of clean water, a basin of ice and some rags. Slowly, she stepped back to let him in. Ashamed by the way she looked; Raven bowed her head and pulled her hair over her face. Fox had never come to her room before. She really wished he hadn’t picked tonight to start. She hurt all over and right now letting a man paw her was the last thing on her mind. If she had a knife near at hand, she’d geld the lot of them.

Fox was so bashful and such a nice man that she really didn’t want to hurt his feelings. If he had come to her for a good time, she could try to oblige him. Slowly, she walked toward him while untying her sleeping gown. She had just reached the third bow when Fox set down the things he had been carrying. He put his hand over hers and looking her in the eye he reached up to brush back her hair, murmuring soothingly to her when he saw her flinch.

Michael Little Fox had been on his way home from selling some horses. He had stopped by the White Dove for a quick drink. He had just reached the bar when Josh

Randall came storming out. Gathering information, he soon learned that Josh had been upstairs with Raven. The knowledge made Fox's guts turn.

Raven was such a beautiful woman. She was much too good for a place like this or for a half-breed like him. Why did she sell herself? Her body was such a beautiful temple. Thinking of the damage Randall could have done to her, Fox went to the kitchen and asked the cook for supplies.

He mounted the stairs in full stride with such anger and determination on his face that no one dared to say a word. He reached the landing and saw Raven standing in her doorway. She stepped back and let him in. Quickly, she pulled her hair over the side of her face. But not before he saw a trickle of blood on the corner of her swollen lips.

Fox set the ice and clean rags down on a chair. He saw Raven untying her gown and immediately knew what she thought. She thought he was there to be serviced. Holy Christ! What kind of life did she live?

He reached over and placed his hands on hers to stop her from removing her clothes. "That's not what I'm here for, nina." Fox talked softly to her when he saw her jump as if afraid of being struck. He tenderly brushed her hair back so that he could see the damage done to her face. The anger and the hurt that he felt for her was so severe that it made him see red. No one had the right to do this to another human being. Looking her in the eyes, he spoke softly to her as he guided her a safe distance from the bed to a chair by the table with a light.

"Sugar, what did he do to you? Did he rape you?" he asked as he sat her in the chair. "Let me get you cleaned up. That's why I'm up here. I'm not here for any rutting like some damn animal."

He tried to speak calmly, but he was so sickened by the thoughts rolling through his head that he had to swallow the bile. "Honey, you are too good for a life like this. Why do you let men treat you this way?"

As he spoke, Fox began to clean the cut on her cheek and lips. He wrapped ice in a towel and placed it in her hand, then lifting both her trembling hand and the ice to her eye. "Hold that right there, honey," he whispered.

He wondered if she had other injuries that weren't visible and knew that he had to ask. He'd not go and leave her unattended. He thought too much of her to go home as if nothing had happened.

Raven had been married to his friend, John Walker. John had been killed in an accident. Fox had never understood why Raven had come to work here at the Dove. He'd tried to mind his own business. He couldn't do that anymore. His friend was dead, but Fox wasn't and he had left Raven on her own long enough. He wanted answers and Raven had them. He wasn't leaving without them or her.

"Raven, I need to know if you're hurt anywhere else. I need to doctor you." Patiently, he waited as Raven parted her gown, exposing her bruised and bitten breasts.

Josh Randall would die a slow, painful death. This was a promise that Fox made to himself.

He carefully cleaned her swollen, bruised and tender breasts, knowing from the viscous bite marks that she had indeed been raped. Without asking permission, he helped her to her feet and guided her over to the bed. He laid her down as gently as possible and then walked across the room to retrieve his bucket of water and dumped it into the now empty basin. He carried it and some clean rags back to the bed and the battered angel lying there. Again not asking, he opened her gown the rest of the way.

"Easy." He soothed when she jumped from his touch. The sight of the bloody scratches along with the male semen sickened him. He cleaned her, wiping away the blood, the stickiness and, he hoped, some of the emotional hurt.

As Fox worked, he began his crusade to save her. "Raven, I've never asked. Rory and I buried John after his accident. We returned and you were packing. I respected your privacy, but after tonight and what happened to you in this place. I will not be silent any longer. I have to tell you that I've always cared for you." He didn't look at her as he rinsed out the rag and started washing her again, knowing that she felt dirty.

"John was aware of my feelings for you, but he trusted me and he trusted you. My feelings for you never interfered with our friendship. I hope you and I will have that close of a relationship."

He now looked her in the eye. "I'm telling you, Raven, that I've had enough of watching you live like this. You are not a whore and I'll not have you degrading yourself anymore. I'm taking you out of here."

He didn't give her a chance to argue with him. "You're going to marry me and live on the ranch. We may never have a real marriage but that is entirely up to you. I'll not force you to lay with me." His voice grew more compelling. "I am forcing you to leave this place tonight. But first, I'm going to listen to you, Sugar, as you give me some answers to those questions I just asked."

Raven didn't try to hide the tears. No one had been kind to her in such a very long time. The way Fox had cared for her by wiping away the sex from another man. Making her feel cherished as he cleaned her injuries. Fox was right, she wasn't a whore. Would he understand if she told him the truth? Could he keep her safe? More importantly, would he be safe? She had heard rumors that Josh was going to ask Salina Houston to marry him. Maybe Salina's hell would be Raven's salvation. Surely Josh would forget about Raven with a new bride to break in. Raven prayed that would be the case. Her voice trembled as she began to speak.

"Josh Randall killed John. He had come to the house; he wanted to buy the land, but John told him it wasn't for sale. You know we wouldn't sell. It's your land and John would never have sold it."

She watched to see if he understood. When he nodded, she continued. "I went into the house figuring that Josh would soon leave. They were arguing as they walked toward the creek. I heard gunfire and ran out of the house. John was lying on the ground with the blood flowing from a hole in his chest. Josh grabbed me as I tried to get to John and told me that if I ever told anyone what had happened he would kill the half-breed that owned the place and me. He said accidents happened all of the time. One dead half-breed wouldn't be missed. I'm so sorry, Fox!"

She was sobbing openly, but once started she wanted to finish what had become a daily nightmare for her. "He told me that he had just the place where he could take care of me. A place where I'd be sure to keep my mouth shut." Drawing in a shaky breath, she said with a sneer, "He told me a whore wasn't worth much more than a breed."

Desperately, she gripped Fox's hands, pleading for his understanding. "I had to come here, Fox, or he would have killed you, too. You were one of our closest friends. I couldn't risk losing you; by staying here, I at least knew you were safe."

Fox couldn't believe the story that he had just heard from this brave woman. He wrapped her in a blanket and gathered her in his arms as he stood. "We're leaving here right now. You have sacrificed yourself for me for the last time, Sugar."

Looking down at her tenderly, with a voice full of emotion he vowed, "I guarantee you'll be safe. I won't let anything happen to you and don't you be worrying about me. I'm tough; besides, us breeds are pretty hard to kill. I know I'm not good enough for you. But I can best protect you as my wife. We'll have a good life at the ranch. I haven't changed the cabin at all since you lived there. You can make it into our home with no pressures. I want you to be safe and feel happy in your new home."

With those final words, Fox opened the door and, still holding her, walked down the stairs and through the crowd of open-mouthed cowboys. He called out on his way to the door, "Raven no longer works here. You can send her personal belongings to my ranch." Stopping, he said, "Keep the gowns. My wife will have a brand new wardrobe."

The couple left some very stunned men standing in a now very quiet room.

"I hope Randall keeps his distance from that breed," remarked one cowboy. "Michael Fox is not a man to mess with and by the looks of it no one better mess with his woman, neither."

"Yes siree," agreed another, "looked to me like he's a man that's gonna be very protective of his new bride."

\* \* \* \*

Fox didn't stop walking until he reached the preacher's house. "Open up," he called as he pounded on the door. He waited impatiently for it to open.

"Who is it? What's going on?" Preacher Wilson asked as he opened the door, still dressed in his sleeping gown. He pushed back the peak of his striped sleeping hat while trying to cover a yawn. If he was surprised to see Michael Little Fox standing on his front stoop (with his arms full of the town's very battered soiled dove), he hid it well.



Fox gave the preacher no time to question them. He announced, “We are in love and need to get married right away.”

It was the needed to get married comment that convinced Preacher Wilson to proceed without any delays. After all, a man holding the town whore could only mean one thing when he said they needed to marry. Twenty minutes later, the couple walked out the door very similarly to the way that they had entered, the difference being that they were now Mr. and Mrs. Michael Little Fox. They did leave, however, in the same way that they had arrived, with the bride cradled in the groom’s arms.

“Let’s get you home,” Fox said as he continued to carry Raven through town. He put her on his roan stallion and mounted behind her. “Hold on tight, Sugar,” he said, easing her back against his front.

Arriving at his cabin, Fox carried a sleeping Raven inside and placed her on his bed. He pulled the blankets up and around her before he turned to light a fire. Wouldn’t his friend Rory be surprised when he came back to town and found Fox with a wife? He and Rory had been friends for years, as Rory lived on a nearby ranch. He couldn’t wait to share his news with someone. Michael Little Fox, the breed, was married to a beautiful woman, though he’d meant what he’d said to Raven. If and when they had a real marriage, it would be her choice and so on Fox’s wedding night, after tending his horse; he settled down in front of the fire on a pallet alone and slept while his new bride lay slumbering in his large bed.

## Chapter 10

Rory came awake the following morning with a smile on his face and a very happy heart. He rolled over and looked at the woman sleeping beside him. She was absolutely amazing. He couldn't wait until the time he could call her his wife. They were going to have a great life together. He only hoped Silas would be around to share in their happiness.

Not being able to lay beside Salina and keep his hands to himself, he trailed his fingers down her side and across her hip. He followed the same path back up and along her collarbone down to her full breasts. Her nipples peaked as he came to rest at their sweet points, rubbing them between his fingers.

Salina had lain as quietly as possible, feigning sleep. She had been a little uneasy as to how she should act this morning. She had wondered if Rory would be sorry or feel guilty over acting out their love the night before. She put her fears to rest when she felt him following a path only he knew, a path that eventually ended at her very erect nipples.

She slowly opened her eyes and gazed into the deep brown eyes of the man who would soon be her husband. She smiled; maybe now was the time to show him that she was not going to be a passive lover. This time, she would take control of their lovemaking.

"Good morning," she said in a sleep-roughened voice as she pushed him over onto his back and pulled back the blankets to straddle him.

He was already fully aroused; she could feel him pushing against her entrance. She wasn't going to allow it just yet. Bending over him, she lightly licked his nipple, wondering if it felt the same to him as it did when he suckled at her. With her teeth, she nipped lightly, continuing up his chest and on until reaching his corded neck; she could see his pulse beating strongly as he tipped his head back, giving her greater access.

Rory was moaning and arching his body against her. His hands were now massaging both of her breasts, as she continued to lick and nip, making her own path to his lips, where she sunk her tongue inside to mate with his in a slow swirl.

Rory was not surprised when Salina had pushed him away. He thought that maybe he had been too rough on her the night before and that maybe the things that they had done

to one another embarrassed her. But when she had straddled his naked body with his Johnson standing hot and ready to wish her good morning, he was so surprised that he didn't know what to do. He decided to let her take the lead and, as her mouth settled over his pebbly male nipple, he reached for hers. His erection rose even more and, with her straddling him, it didn't take much movement on his part for the slick head to enter her equally slick warmth. Their coming together was much slower than the first time, but equally sweet. They slowly rocked together, reaching their peak at the same time. Their tears mingled, glistening on their cheeks for the wondrous feelings that they had both just shared.

\* \* \* \*

Fox didn't wake up next to a soft warm body. He woke up on a cold, hard floor. But he woke up happier than he could remember being in a long time. Rising to his feet, he added more wood to the coals left in the fireplace. He started coffee and, leaving Raven a note, went outside to do his chores. Horses didn't care if a man had just gotten married. They expected to be taken care of in the same way, regardless of what was happening around them.

Fox thought of his new wife and wondered how she would feel about their situation this morning. He hadn't given her a choice last night. He wasn't sorry for the way that he had handled things. Raven was now his wife and he'd protect her with his life.

Josh Randall thought he had won, but he'd soon learn differently. Raven had told Fox about Josh's plans to marry Salina Houston. Fox planned on riding over to the Triple H to tell Silas about Josh's treatment of women.

Salina was a strong-willed woman and could handle herself well. But after seeing the bruises on Raven's body, he wanted to make sure that they were aware of Randall's violence. He wouldn't mention Josh's connection with Raven; that part of her life was over.

\* \* \* \*

The quiet woke her. Living in the upstairs of a saloon, peacefulness was something she wasn't used to. Looking around the cabin, Raven saw that she was alone. The cabin

hadn't changed much since she'd lived there with John. Fox was telling the truth when he said he'd changed nothing. The little table still sat in the middle of the room, the fireplace along the wall. It was great to be home.

The smell of coffee drew her slowly from the bed. Her body hurt all over, but she didn't want Fox to come in and find her still laying about. He'd think her lazy. She went to the table where she found Fox's note saying that after doing chores he was riding over to the Triple H. She knew why he was going and didn't blame him for leaving her on their first day as husband and wife.

The Houstons were friends and Rory was his best friend. Fox would do all he could to protect them. Her husband was a very special man. How many men would walk into a whorehouse, clean up a beaten-up whore and then marry her? She couldn't imagine why he would do such a thing. He said he wouldn't pressure her and she knew that she could trust him.

John had always spoken highly of Fox, saying he was a man of his word. John would not have given his respect lightly and so she would be the best wife to Fox that she could be. She had always liked being married and would someday like to have children. Raven wondered how Fox felt about having a family.

\* \* \* \*

Morning found Josh on his way up the cliffs. He came alone, not telling his hired hands where he was going. He didn't want any competition from any of his men for Salina's attention. Men seemed to flock around her and he wanted her focused solely on him. *I hope that Rory approves of my courting her. If he don't, well, accidents happen on ranches all the time.* Rory's own mother had died in one. Hell, everyone believed that Walker had died in one. Josh chuckled at the thought. He decided to find the two of them and watch for a day or two before making his presence known.

He spotted a cougar lying on the rocks above him with two cubs playing beside her.

"Boy, wouldn't she make a nice trophy," he said aloud. "Hold it right there," he whispered as he aimed his rifle. "Damn," he muttered as the big cat spotted him and, with a call of warning to her young, disappeared into the rocks with them. Swearing bitterly,

he put his gun back into the scabbard and continued on his hunt. He should soon be close to where Rory and Salina were staying.

\* \* \* \*

“Wake up, beautiful,” Rory whispered as he spooned up against Salina’s side. She lay comfortably on her stomach where she’d fallen asleep after making love a second time. He knew she was only dozing and he was ready to make plans for their future.

“I want us to be married right away, Salina,” Rory stated as he drew circles on the indentation of her back.

“I can’t wait to make you Mrs. Rory Holloway. First, I want to spend at least a couple of days here alone, just you and me. I want to play and have fun.” His circles soon turned into seductive caresses that now included her nicely rounded bottom.

“I want to make love with you anytime and anywhere we want,” he continued as he palmed her backside and into the valley between her outstretched legs. “I want to love you outside, down by the stream, or inside on the kitchen table.” He continued his inspection of her unblemished skin.

“Once we get home, we’ll have the pressures of running the ranch and having to worry about someone finding us.” Smiling mischievously, he said, “I used the excuse of work to lure you up here with me so I could tell you how I felt. Truth to tell, darlin’,” he said as he pulled her to lie on top of him, “now that we’ve settled our future, I just want us to enjoy each other.”

Salina playfully pulled the hair on his chest. “Are you telling me, Mr. Holloway, that you brought me up here under false pretenses to have your wicked way with me? It sounds to me like you want to do a lot more playing than working.”

She nuzzled the side of his neck and brushed her hand up and down his chest, copying the circles he was making on her back. “I want to be married soon, too. Daddy will be so happy and this may be just what he needs to want to fight this illness”.

She kissed the end of his nose as she crawled over him. “I’m in need of coffee and some breakfast if we’re going to be doing all of this playing; then I’m going to be needing energy. After we eat, let’s walk down to the springs. I’d love a swim.”

Rory watched as she crawled across him, her little white butt so firm. “What a beautiful sight so early in the morning.” He reached out and tweaked the dimples she was flashing him, smiling as she gave out a shriek of outrage and scampered off the bed; her feet hitting the floor as she grabbed his shirt. She slid her arms in and buttoned it up even as she confidently added the coffee beans to the pot.

He was happy that they were both able to still feel comfortable with each other. He had worried that after making love things would change between them.

Things had changed, but only for the better. The two of them had always been close, but they were now bonded by a love so great that nothing but death could separate them.

Throwing off the covers, Rory slipped into his pants and walked barefoot to the fireplace. He stoked up the still red-hot coals and added more logs. Soon the smell of freshly brewed coffee and cooking bacon drew them to the table.

Rory, not wanting to be separated from Salina just yet, pulled her down onto his lap, chuckling at her surprised expression.

“Sit with me,” he pleaded. “I promise to share. Have a bite of this?” he said, offering her the bacon off his plate.

“Rory,” Salina said, drinking from his coffee cup. “I can eat off my own plate.”

“I know you can, sweetheart, but it’s much more fun this way.” He grinned and gave her a kiss while his hand palmed the naked breast beneath his shirt.

“I think, Mr. Holloway,” she grinned jumping up from his lap, “that we had better hurry and dress or we won’t make it from the shack today.”

Rory snagged the back of her shirttail. “That sounds like a good idea to me...I don’t mind staying inside.”

“Well, I do, cowboy.” She giggled as she tore away from him and ran to the bed and the clothes laying scattered on the floor.

## Chapter 11

“Well, my land sakes,” Agnes said as she once again met a good-looking young man at the front stoop of the ranch house--the difference being that she liked and respected the man who now stooped on the ground playing with the litter of pups.

“Mornin’, Miss Agnes,” Fox said as he removed the hat from his head.

She watched as Michael Little Fox reached down and picked up one of the pups that the ranch dog was weaning.

“When you go home, Fox, you take that young one home with you. That pup will make you a mighty fine dog.” Gesturing with her hands, she said, “Salina’s been spoiling them pups something fierce. You’d be doing us a favor by taking one of them off of our hands. That girl’s liable to want to keep them all.”

Fox looked up, smiling. “I think I might just do that, Miss Agnes,” he said as he set the pup back down. “I have just the person to give this little girl to. But first I’d like to talk with Silas and Salina about some personal business.” He looked up anxiously. “Are they around?”

Agnes shook her head. “I’m sorry, Fox, but Salina’s off someplace with that scamp Rory. I don’t know when they’ll be back.” She gestured with her hands towards the house. “Silas has been a bit under the weather, but he’s on the mend now. You can go on up and see him if you’re of a mind to.”

Picking the pup up again, Fox now shook his head. “No, if Silas has been unwell, what I have to say will keep. I didn’t know Rory was back.” He started to turn, but stopped and said, “I’ll be back in a week or so and speak to all of them together.” What he had to say was too important to keep, but he felt better knowing that Rory was back home. He rubbed the pup behind the ears. “I’ll just take this little girl and be on my way. Thank you kindly, Ma’am.” Fox mounted his horse and headed toward home. He had a wedding present to deliver.

\* \* \* \*

Raven was sitting on the front porch of the cabin, slowly sipping a cup of hot coffee when Fox rode up. She had seen him coming and had known right away that it was her husband. No one could sit a horse like Michael Little Fox. He rode a horse as if they were one, body and soul. The town's people said that he spoke with the horses to tame them. She believed it. He was so gentle with her and she was sure he used that same gentleness when working with the horses. As Fox dismounted, Raven noticed he was carrying something. She got up from her chair and set down her cup, walking curiously to the top step.

Fox walked toward Raven, looking far more confident than he felt. He smiled tenderly; his new bride sure looked a mess. Her face was all different colors, ranging from red to blue, purple and yellow. She sure shouldn't be up and around yet, but he was happy to see her on the porch as if waiting for him to come home. He hoped his present would make her feel even more welcome and give her something to care for. Reaching the bottom step brought him eye to eye with her and, as he held the pup out to her, he said from the heart, "I brought you a little wedding present. Welcome home, Raven. I truly hope you'll be happy living here with me."

Tears glistened in Raven's eyes. No one had ever given her a present. Not even John, who had been a wonderful husband, had ever thought to give her a gift. She held out her hands as Fox placed the tiny black and white pup into her arms. She rubbed her cheek against its soft fur and gazed at her husband. She took a step closer and leaned into him to place a kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you so much, Fox. I have always wanted a dog; now I have something to take care of." She smiled sheepishly. "I've never received a present before. I'm a little embarrassed I don't have anything for you. How about I fix us a wedding supper tonight? I always did love to cook."

Fox reached up to touch the spot on his cheek as he replied a bit gruffly, "That'd be just fine, but don't you overdo it today. I have to go work with some yearlings in the corral. If you need anything, you just give a holler."

Raven watched as he rushed off toward his horses. She smiled when she thought of the blush that had graced his cheeks and the tender way he had touched the spot where she had kissed him. It was nice to know that her husband was as unsure of their marriage



as she was. In her mind, she planned out the simple yet delicious meal she would serve. She hugged her new friend and they went back to the chair on the porch. The pup curled in her lap as if she had lain there before.

## Chapter 12

Rory and Salina left the shack hand in hand. They linked their fingers and walked along the path leading to the springs. This had always been a favorite place to come when they were up here. But both knew that they were about to christen it in a whole new way. Each of them was in such a happy mood that they laughed and talked about things neither had thought of in years.

“Oh, look, Rory; it’s like our own little piece of the world.”

The trees grew plentiful in this special place, encircling the springs as if they were guarding it from unseen dangers.

Birds sang in the trees above them as if adding their own special music to serenade them.

Giant rocks, some padded in moss, were scattered haphazardly, adding to the tranquility.

A small fox sat perched upon a log watching as they approached. At a yip of warning from his mother, he turned and, with his red tail waving gaily, he entered the protection of the trees.

Rory put both arms around Salina and pulled her back against him. Neither of them spoke, enjoying the view and the precious feelings running through them.

Nuzzling her neck, Rory smoothed his hands back and forth along Salina’s ribs, causing a shiver of desire to ripple through her. He was not surprised when she tipped her head back to expose her neck giving him better access. He had found that Salina’s throat was especially sensitive and she enjoyed having him nuzzle her there. His hands traveled from her rib cage up to her breasts. He felt her nipples respond and gave them each the attention that they sought, rubbing each gently between his fingers. Returning his hands to their quest, he continued with his travels, now with each on a separate mission. Following the path God had created; Rory traveled down the slope between her breasts. He made circular motions on her abdomen while slowly inching her gown up. As the fingers of his right hand found the hem of her gown, his left hand was releasing the button on his jeans.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked. Probing her entrance, he found her already wet.

“Let’s try something new,” he whispered as he released his hardened erection from his too-tight pants. He was excited and anxious to try yet another form of lovemaking with Salina.

He pulled the bottom of her gown around to the side so he could expose her nice little fanny to his hard, aroused shaft. With his fingers at the top of her warm, wet entrance, he coaxed her, “Spread your legs wider, sweetheart. Let me in,” he said as he stepped still closer. He brought himself between her thighs.

“Bend forward, that’s it, brace your hands on the rocks; I won’t let go,” he gasped as his breath changed rhythm in his excitement.

Rory guided himself to her entrance and pushed inside. She was so welcoming, so wet and tight.

“Oh, Salina!” He shouted her name in ecstasy as he drew back and thrust forward again. He reached around her and, with one hand, caressed her breasts while the other stroked the little nub at her entrance. Wanting to hear his name called out. Wanting to feel the ripples of pleasure as she found her release.

Rory stroked faster and thrust harder as he felt the first tremors and heard the hitch in her breathing. He knew that he would soon have what he craved. Feeling his own pleasure ready to burst, he thrust more forcibly once, twice and the third time as he collapsed on top of her, his heart pounding. He smiled as he heard her shout his name.

“I’ll never be able to come here again without remembering what just happened here,” he gasped, still trying to catch his breath. He looked down at the woman in his arms. “Are you alright, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know when I’ve ever been happier,” She answered. “Everything between us feels so natural, so right.”

She flushed as she thought of the way they had just made love; bent over a rock, him coming into her from behind.

“I didn’t know that we could make love that way. A week ago I would have been sickened by the very idea. But with you it was absolutely right.” She told him honestly how she’d felt as he had entered her. “You filled me so completely. The feel of you thrusting so deeply inside of me..., I can’t explain to you how that made me feel.”

She tried her best to explain to him how she felt, but knew that she was doing it badly. The feelings had been so intense. He had filled her so completely while thrusting so deeply that she had thought she would shatter. She was right, she did shatter and she couldn't wait for the next time.

"How did you know to do that? You said you had never been with anyone but me."

"I was telling you the truth. Men talk; they talk about what they do with women. Me, I listen. I might not be experienced, sweetheart, but I've been listening for a long time." Rory grinned and shot Salina a wink.

"I want to learn all the new and exiting ways that we can be together. Is that okay?" she asked, not wanting to seem overly bold, but wanting to be honest.

"Oh, sweetheart," Rory grinned. "We'll try lots of different things anytime anywhere you want."

He held out his hand. "How about we skip that swim for now and head back to the shack for another lesson?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Salina giggled and grabbed hold of his outstretched hand. "I so do enjoy our lessons," she answered.

\* \* \* \*

Josh couldn't believe his luck. He'd just decided to stop for a break when he had heard voices and laughter. He dismounted and looked through the trees. He wasn't real surprised to see Rory and Salina walking hand in hand along the path. He knew that the two were close and figured that Rory was probably holding Salina's hand to help her so that she didn't slip.

"What's so damn funny? I've never been out huntin' strays and found anything to smile about," he mumbled to himself. He could not imagine what they found so funny. The two of them couldn't have that much in common. They hadn't seen each other in years.

He watched as they walked closer. He almost drew his gun when he saw Rory pull Salina back against him and kiss her.

“That no good son of a bitch,” He growled. “Putting his hands on my woman. Why doesn’t she do something to stop him?” He openly stared as the couple began to make love.

Josh felt himself harden as he saw the two of them. He rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans, unashamed of what he was doing. He wasn’t spying. After all, the pair was outside, rutting like two animals. He continued to watch as Rory mounted Salina from behind. His face twisted in distaste as he watched the slut push back against the bastard, arching against him, begging for every inch he would give her.

Josh stroked himself and knew he, too, would need some release. It would not be the first time and so, while he watched the couple on the rock coming to a raging release, he pumped his own seed onto the forest floor. He would make them pay.

The bitch was ruined. She’d never shown him such passion. He’d still marry her because he had told everyone that he was going to and he wouldn’t suffer the humiliation of not going through with it. Besides, he wanted her land; he’d bed her repeatedly and she better pray that the first and every other brat she bore looked like him. As for Rory Holloway, his days were numbered.

## Chapter 13

Rory and Salina spent two wonderful weeks at their hillside retreat. They rarely left the small shack the first few days. This morning was starting out the same.

“Come here, you,” Rory growled. He wanted to make love again, this time on the table. He grabbed Salina about the waist and eased her back, pushing the dirty plates to the side.

He unbuttoned his own blue shirt, now on Salina’s bared body. She had taken to wearing it when they crawled out of bed. Her bared nipples pebbled against the cool air hitting her.

“I need a taste,” he whispered as he plucked an unfinished peach from her plate and squeezed it over her body. The juice splashed onto her skin and drops rolled from her breasts.

He dipped his head and took the sweet nectar between his lips, using his tongue to lick the stickiness from her. “So sweet! I’ll never get enough.” He continued his journey to the valley between and across, to give the other breast the same sweet torture.

He heard her giggle as he drizzled the juice enticingly down her ribs and stomach to pool in her belly button where he was equally eager to lap it up.

He moved lower still and felt Salina jump in surprise as his breath touched the curls that hid her womanhood. Her hands now pressed his head to the place where her legs met.

Now was not the time to practice such an intimate caress. He was too far gone. Too eager to be inside of her and so, with a sweet, sensual kiss to the inside of her thigh, he eased his way back up to her waiting lips.

“I can’t wait. I need you now,” He gasped as he released his arousal and slid her bottom down on the table.

“Yes,” he heard her whisper as he pushed himself deep inside of her and waited. Her womanhood wrapped itself around him. They fit so tight, their bodies made for each other. He could feel the warmth and liquid heat that was only Salina. Her trembles of passion stroked him, bringing him to completion without him having to thrust.

Her body answered his body's needs. "I love you, Salina!" he cried as he brought them both to a heart-warming, tender climax.

"Will it always be this wonderful?" Salina asked. She was still laying on the table with Rory resting above her. His body fitted snugly into her. Never had she felt so fulfilled.

Rory looked around at the mess they had just created and grinned wickedly. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I think Agnes and your daddy would have something to say about finding the two of us bare as two naked babies on the kitchen table," he teased.

"Oh, Rory," she said, nipping him softly on the shoulder and lathing it with her tongue. "You know what I mean. Will it always feel this special?"

He kissed her lightly on the lips. "It will only get better. My love for you can only go stronger as we grow old together." He smiled. "I can't promise it will always be so wild. I might slow down in my golden years, but slow can be oh-so-good, too. Want me to show you?" he leered.

"No!" She shrieked and slapped him on his bare backside. "Get off me, you lazy cur, and help me clean up in here," she ordered as she pushed him off and scooted to the floor, drawing the shirt together. "I want to go riding. Duchess hasn't had a good run in days. She's most likely feeling neglected."

"I'm feeling neglected," he pouted as he pulled his pants up, tucking himself carefully inside before fastening them.

"I'll make it up to you later," she promised as she blew him a kiss and danced away from his reaching hands.

\* \* \* \*

Rory lay back on the bed of grass and smiled in remembrance. They had ridden horse and for the first time he was glad that his horse could not speak. Smiling, he thought it was surely worth any embarrassment he would have felt had the story been told.

The feel of Salina riding his hardened shaft as the two of them had galloped naked upon his horse's back through the open meadow. They had been so lost in their feelings. He knew that it would take something very special to equal the excitement as the climax had overcome the two of them.

“You take my breath away,” he said as he turned to look at her. They still lay naked on the ground where their wobbly legs had not held them. Salina’s skin shimmered with dampness from making love and she still had the mischievous sparkle shining in her beautiful blue eyes.

“You know that I have loved every moment that we have spent alone here. But it’s time to go home,” he said as he reached out to grab her hand.

“I don’t want to go back. Not yet,” she replied, pulling away from him to reach for her dress where it lay scattered on the ground.

“I’m going to have to hurt someone that’s been good to me. I never wanted to hurt him,” she whispered.

They had spent hours talking, riding, picnicking, laughing and making love whenever they felt like it.

“I understand that, Salina, and I’m sure Josh will, too. I’ve enjoyed every precious day that we’ve had alone but it’s time to go home.”

“I suppose you’re right, but let’s have tonight. We’ll head back in the morning.” Rory nodded his head in agreement and they turned their horses and headed back to the shack.

A snapping twig and a horse’s whinny were their only warning before a gunshot blasted into the peaceful mountain air. It grazed the outside of Rory’s arm and embedded in a tree. The shot was so unsuspected that Salina was unprepared when Duchess bolted.

The horse ran as if the fires of hell were on her.

“Whoa, girl!” Salina cried as she tried to bring her back under control. It wasn’t safe for her to run so frantically. Salina would have given her the space to run herself out, but the terrain here was too dangerous. The rocks and holes could mean a broken leg and, if that were to happen, the mare would have to be put down.

“Whoa, girl, easy.” Salina tried once again to calm her mount. She applied pressure to the reins. She could hear Rory riding behind her, trying to catch up to her to help.

“Salina, let go of the reins. I’ll swing you up behind me,” he shouted.

“No!” She shouted as she tightened her knees around the mare’s middle. “I can do this,” she vowed. “Come on, girl. You can do it. I’m not giving up on you.” She pleaded with her old friend and, with another tug on the reins, the mare stumbled and began to slow.



“Damn it, Salina. I won’t lose you. Jump!” he pleaded.

He’d heard the whinny of a strange horse just seconds before the report of a rifle and felt the burning in his arm. It was long enough that he’d recognized both the horse and the rider. But he’d had no time to act as he controlled his own mount and watched in horror as Duchess bolted with Salina on her back. He’d raced after them with his heart in his throat, praying as he’d never prayed before that he’d reach her in time.

Now the damn fool woman wouldn’t let him save her...He would not lose her. Not now! Salina, thank God, was an excellent horsewoman. She would not fall off. He wouldn’t let her because there would be no hope if she did. Traveling at the speed they were, she would be killed. He kicked his own horse for more speed.

He rode up beside her. “Please Salina. Leave her,” he pleaded. He should have known better. The woman he loved was no coward. She would fight valiantly to calm her mare.

“No!” His breath hitched as her horse stumbled, but she corrected herself. “Steady, boy,” he said to his own horse. Seeing his chance, he grabbed her bridle and jumped from the stallion before he had come to a stop.

“Are you hurt?” he asked as he pulled Salina into his arms, running his hands up and down her body to assure himself that she was not. “God, Baby, I thought I had lost you!” He rained kisses over her tear-streaked face and didn’t notice the tears trailing down his own.

“I was so scared,” she cried as she fell gratefully into his arms. She did notice his tears and knew he needed some reassurance that she was not hurt.

“I’m fine, I promise,” she whispered while wiping his tears away. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. “I’m fine,” she repeated over and over again while she, too, rained kisses across his damp face. She didn’t know if she was trying to convince him or herself--maybe the both of them. “Hold me for just a minute and then I want to check on Duchess. Do you think she’s okay?” she asked.

Rory sighed. He didn’t want to tell her his fears. “I don’t know, Sunshine,” he said, tightening his arms around her for comfort. “You know that she may have to be put down.”

“No!” Salina shouted. “Don’t say such a thing. I can’t lose her.” She pushed away.

“Don’t, Salina. Don’t push me away. Whatever happens we’ll face it together,” he said, pulling her back into the shelter of his arms. He wanted to spare her the hurt. “I can go check on her if you want me to.”

“No. She’s my horse. We’ll both go,” she answered.

“Are you ready?” Rory asked as he put his arm around her shoulder and turned her.

“I’ll never be ready, but it has to be done,” she answered as they walked toward the mare.

“She’s favoring her right leg,” Salina whispered in a tear-strained voice. She gently rubbed her hand up the swollen leg. “It’s not broken,” she said with a relieved smile on her face. It wasn’t much, but it did give her hope.

Rory ran his hand along the injury. “You’re right,” he agreed. He stood and cupped Salina’s face in his hands. “Are you sure you’re alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine. What the hell happened? No one should be up here,” she said. “Some greenhorn that shouldn’t own a gun mistakin’ us for game? I’m sure glad he missed,” she said with a chuckle, feeling more able to try to lighten the mood now that the danger was past.

“It wasn’t a greenhorn,” Rory replied seriously. “And he didn’t exactly miss.”

“What are you talking about?” Salina asked as she pushed against his shoulders. Her hand felt sticky. She looked down and then looked back at Rory with fear and anger in her eyes.

“Blood! My God, Rory, you’re hurt! Why the hell didn’t you say something? You’re standing here cuddling me and kissing me like nothing’s wrong while you bleed to death!” Gripping the front of his shirt, she ripped it open, causing buttons to fly.

Rory chuckled. When his little Spitfire got her gumption back, she had a temper to rival anyone’s. But, damn, he had a temper, too.

“Yes, I needed to hold you!” he shouted. “Why didn’t you jump when I told you to? You just scared ten years off of my life. A life not worth living if something happens to you.”

“Don’t talk that way,” Salina scolded.

“It’s the truth, Sunshine. You’re my life and, truth to tell, I’d forgotten about being hurt.”

“How could you forget being shot? No one forgets getting shot,” she admonished.

“All that I could think about was you racing blindly on a runaway horse. The thought of you falling off. I could see your broken body laying on the rock-covered ground.” His voice caught on the emotion he was trying to control. He hadn’t thought about himself. There was no Rory without Salina.

“I prayed to God to keep you safe. Surely, fate wouldn’t be so cruel as to take you away so soon after giving me your love. That’s what I was thinking of, my sweet girl. Not of me, but of you,” he whispered as he kissed her tenderly on her opened lips.

“Those are pretty words coming from your sweet lips, Rory Holloway, but they don’t mean much to me if you die, now do they?” she asked. The man was spouting pretty words when he was bleeding all over the ground. “Now, get your damn shirt off so I can see what you’ve done to yourself,” she snarled, angry that he had taken so long to tell her that he was hurt. “Damn stubborn jackass,” she mumbled.

“Salina Lynn.” He chuckled. “Ladies don’t use such words.”

“Don’t you be preachin’ at me, Rory Holloway. I learned them from you,” she growled back at him.

“Hey, darlin’, calm down. You tearing into me like an angry mama cougar isn’t going to help matters at all. But I sure do love to see you all fired up.”

He smiled, showing the deep dimples in his cheeks. “Now, before you get all excited and start tearing the rest of my clothes off...” He released a hiss of pain and wasn’t able to finish his teasing when Salina started probing the tender area on his arm.

“Ouch, Christ, Salina! Be careful, I just got shot ,you know. Can’t you...” Ready to keep joking with her to lighten up their moods, he looked down and saw her shoulders shaking. He realized than that what had happened was finally hitting her.

“Oh, Baby. Don’t cry,” he crooned as he gathered her into his arms. He sat down exactly where they had been standing. Barren trees swayed gently behind them and the rocky terrain encircled the area, offering them shelter.

The horses, recovered from their mad flight, nibbled at the tender stalks of grass that were peeking up through the coarse ground.

Rory began to rock Salina back and forth, cooing soft words of comfort. Tenderly, he brushed her hair back from her face as he began to talk.

“We’re all right, darlin’. Neither of us are seriously hurt. I think we should head home from here. We didn’t leave anything important at the shack. The fire’s out, so we have nothing to worry about there. You’re not going to be able to ride your mare, so we’ll have to ride double. We’re not that far from Little Fox’s place; we can stop there and he’ll know what to do for her.”

He really didn’t want to tell her what he knew about the shooting. But honesty was a strong point in their relationship and always would be. Besides, he wanted her to be prepared for any more danger.

Not taking a break in his talking, he continued. “Salina, it wasn’t an accident. I saw who shot at us. It was Josh Randall,” he said quietly, waiting for her response, which wasn’t long coming.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re wrong. It’s been years since you last saw Josh. It’s just somebody that looks like him,” she argued.

“Why would Josh shoot at us? He’s got no business even bein’ up here...”

“Salina, I’m not wrong. It was Randall and he wasn’t shooting at us. He was shooting at me,” Rory explained. He knew the bullet was meant for him. It was just luck that Randall was a piss-poor shot.

“There has to be a mistake. Maybe he didn’t recognize you and thought I was in danger. I have to talk to him. I have to explain,” Salina said. She couldn’t believe what had happened. Why?

“We have to get out of here. What if he comes back?”

When Salina would have jumped up, Rory held her tight. “He’s probably long gone by now; he knows that he missed. I have no way to prove that it was him. It’ll be his word against mine, but I’m not mistaken. It was him.” He looked down at his arm, saying, “Let’s get my arm wrapped and get out of here. I’m ready to go home.”

Twenty minutes later, Rory mounted his stallion. He was wearing a different shirt since Salina had made his other one into a rag.

“Come on up here in front of me, Sunshine,” he called as he held his hand out to her. “We’ll just let the mare follow behind us. The going will be slow, but we’ll reach Fox’s ranch before nightfall.” He prayed that they didn’t run into any more problems before then. He didn’t say anything to Salina, but he’d lost enough blood that he felt weakened.

\* \* \* \*

“Damn it!” Josh couldn’t believe he’d missed the target. A damn bug had flown up his nose just as he’d gotten ready to pull the trigger. The little bugger had made him jump, causing his horse to step and making him miss his prey. He knew Holloway had seen him because his startled horse had whinnied, alerting Holloway that he was near. If Holloway hadn’t turned when he’d heard the horse, he’d be a dead man. He’d hit his mark. although he’d only grazed him. He’d seen the blood on the bastard’s arm.

He’d watched Holloway and Salina for the last couple of days, laughing and enjoying themselves. They were constantly rutting and screwing like animals. When he’d seen them out riding, he’d decided to take his chance to be rid of Rory. He had planned to then move in and comfort Salina in her time of grief. It would have looked like an accident. How was that for a coincidence? Gaining the affections of two women the same way, by killing the men in their lives. The plan was now ruined and he would have to rethink things. He’d go on home and lay low. After a few days, he’d go into town to pay another visit to Raven. He sure could use a woman. Watching the two of them had made him horny and pleasuring himself just wasn’t the same as having a soft woman beneath him. He didn’t much care if the woman was willing. She just had to be available. Raven was always available for him. He’d made sure of that. She’d better not disappoint him a second time.

\* \* \* \*

Fox had been in the corral working with his yearlings when he had heard the shot. Raven and Little Lady (as she’d come to call the pup) were in their favorite spot on the front porch.

“That shot came from the hills where Rory and Salina are. There’s no reason they should be shootin’ unless something is wrong,” he said, leaping onto the back of the nearest horse “I’m going to check it out,” he called over his shoulder and, urging the horse to jump, they cleared the fence. Fox didn’t need fancy rigging. He grew up riding bareback with just a halter and rope.

As he rode, he thought about the last couple of weeks. He and Raven were now more comfortable with one another. He still slept on a pallet in front of the fire. But they talked and shared memories from the years when John had been alive. He hoped that someday they would have a real marriage. He would love to have children and teach them all he knew about horses. Fox knew that Raven wasn't ready to take that step and, as much as he wanted a real marriage, he would wait. He was content with the way things were between them.

Raven watched as Michael (for that's how she'd come to call him, if only to herself) leaped on the back of a horse and jumped right over the fence.

"He's beautiful," she whispered to Little Lady. It was absolutely breathtaking to watch him ride, his midnight black hair flying out behind him as he leaned with the horse. "I can't tell where one stops and the other begins. They look like they're joined."

She'd been startled by the sound of a lone gunshot. While living in town, it was not uncommon to hear the gunfire. But since moving back out to the ranch, she had not heard any. She had not missed the sound. Raven hated violence, having been a victim of it this past year.

Raven anxiously paced, wondering what her husband would find in the hills. The word husband rolled more smoothly off of her tongue. She and Fox were more comfortable with one another. He was so good to her that she no longer shied away from his touches. She wasn't yet ready to make love with him, but maybe she should invite him to share the bed with her. She'd come to enjoy their evenings sitting on the porch. They watched Little Lady and laughed at her antics. She loved that little dog and had to admit that she spoiled her shamelessly, almost as much as her new husband spoiled her. Raven made a decision to take the next step. Fox had been so patient with her and it was now her turn to take a chance. She knew in her heart that Fox would never hurt her.

## Chapter 14

Silas was ready for his family to come home. He'd gotten out of bed today. He wasn't ready to wrestle any calves, but he had dressed himself and made it to the front porch. Once there, he sent to town for the preacher. He was now waiting impatiently for the man to arrive. He had important matters he wanted settled.

"It's about guldurned time," Silas grumbled as the preacher pulled his buggy into the ranch yard. There was no use wasting time with niceties.

"Silas, mind your manners." Agnes spoke from the doorway. "Good afternoon, Preacher Wilson. Set yourself down and have a cup of this tea I brewed special for you."

"Thank you kindly, Miss Agnes. You know how I do enjoy your tea," he began.

"Can we stop with the jawin'?" Silas interrupted. "I asked you out here for a reason, not to exchange words with the hired help. Beggin' your pardon, Preacher, but this is important." Silas apologized for his abruptness. He didn't want to rile the man of the cloth, but he needed to get things settled and right soon, before them young 'uns got home.

"I'm sorry, Silas," Preacher Wilson said, bowing his head in politeness to the grizzled old man. "What is it you needed to speak to me about? Do you wish to have blessing? Is your health failing? I was given to understand you were feeling much better."

"I ain't a-dying," Silas roared. "I called you out here to tell you to be expecting a wedding. I don't rightly know when it will be happening." Silas looked him straight in the eye, not backing down. "I wanted to prepare you for the event. I don't want any sermons from you. You're the preacher; I respect that. But people will follow where you lead, so I want you a-leadin' them in the right direction."

Silas moved uncomfortably in his chair. He wasn't used to sitting up for this long period of time. "I expect the wedding to take place within the next week. My young ones will be coming home soon." His voice grew stronger as he prepared to give the preacher the news. "They'll be coming come wanting to be married to each other," he announced. He waited to see the shock on the Preacher's face. When none was forthcoming, he continued.

“As you know, they are not blood-related, so there’s no spiritual reason that they can not be married. Also, if you need an excuse to set your heart and your soul to rest, I’ll give you one. The two of them have been alone up there in a line shack for well over a week.” He smiled, as if proud of himself over the comment he was about to make. “Preacher Wilson, I don’t want my grandbaby to be born a bastard.”

Preacher Wilson sat and listened to Silas’s sermon. He showed not a hint of what he was thinking. “I cannot speak for the rest of my flock. But I will speak for myself; I would be very pleased to introduce two newly married couples to the community.”

He smiled, knowing that he was going to pass on some news of his own that no one else was aware of and, since he hadn’t been told to keep it quiet, he saw no reason not to pass on the news.

“It seems this is the month for unusual weddings, because I recently married Michael Little Fox to one of the soiled doves.” He shook his head as if disgusted. “The poor young woman had been beaten unmercifully and Fox carried her right into my parlor in the dead of night, where I performed the ceremony.” He raised his head and looked Silas in the eye. “I think that if the flock has trouble accepting a couple into their midst, it will be this couple.”

“Fox is a good man, no matter his breeding,” Silas defended his friend.

“Oh, I agree. He is very well respected about town. Given his mixed blood, it says much about the man.” The preacher only hoped that they would accept Fox’s wife and treat her with the same respect that they showed to him.

“However, I don’t think it will be easy for Raven Little Fox,” he said with a shake of his head. “The women are going to find it hard to forget that she worked as a soiled dove. The men, too, will not soon forget.”

“Fox won’t take kindly to anyone messin’ with his wife,” Silas replied. He had known Fox a good many years and a more loyal friend there was not.

“I’m sure you’re right. But, I must trust in my flock.” The preacher got to his feet and replaced his cup to the saucer. “You tell Rory and Salina I would be more than happy to marry them either here at the ranch or at the church.” Having had his say regarding both couples, he held out his hand. “It’s been a mighty long time since you’ve graced the church with your company,” He reminded Silas.



Silas inclined his head at the rebuke from the man. "I'll be seein' you real soon, Preacher. You have my word."

"That's just fine, then," the preacher said as he got in his buggy. He gave the reins a flick, turned and headed back to town. He thought about the two couples that were going to be introduced to his flock.

"Please. Father," he prayed, looking up at the heavens. "Help my flock to accept these young people and accept them into their fold."

He looked back to the road and saw Josh Randall racing across the land headed toward his own ranch.

"I wonder why that young man is in such a hurry that he can't stop to visit with a fellow on such a beautiful day," he mumbled to himself. "I think there's another member of the flock that needs to be reminded that he should visit the church more often."

\* \* \* \*

Josh galloped his horse towards home. He didn't see the buggy coming down the road with the preacher in it. He wouldn't have cared if he had seen the man. He just wanted to get home. Reaching the stables, he dismounted.

"Jed!" He shouted for his foreman. "Take care of my horse." He didn't wait around to see if his orders were followed. He left his horse unattended. He'd let someone else see to that chore. That was what he paid them for, anyway.

He continued walking until he reached the sanctuary of his room. He had plans to make and he would not show himself until he knew what he was going to do about the situation he had just created for himself. He wasn't overly worried, but he had to be very careful. He'd resurface in a couple of days when he went to the White Dove to visit Raven; until then, his ranch hands and his house hold staff knew better than to disturb him. His meals would be placed outside the door so as not to bother him when he was planning. This was not the first time he had taken to his room; everyone on the ranch was used to this behavior.

\* \* \* \*

"Let's stop here," Rory said as they came abreast of a small stream.

“Are you okay?” Salina asked. She looked over her shoulder.

“I’m fine now, really,” he promised. “I felt a little dizzy when we first headed out, but I’m fine now.” He smiled teasingly. “Nature’s callin’, darlin’, and I really need to answer it.”

“Rory, I really didn’t need to hear that,” she scolded with a blush.

He kissed her lightly on the cheek. “All that we’ve done with each other and you can still blush at the mention of me relieving myself...I love you Salina. Now, do you have to use the bushes, too?” he asked.

“No, I’ll wait for you here unless you think you need my help, you being one-handed and all. Do you think you might need an extra hand in the holding?” she called out saucily.

Rory stopped, stunned at the words coming out of her mouth. “You saucy wench, you. I best be marryin’ you before your mouth gets you in serious trouble.”

He heard her chuckle as he went about his business. He came back to find Salina bent over the mare.

“She’s tired.”

“I know, sweetheart. We’re just about to Fox’s; we’ll rest up there,” he promised. “Let’s mount up; we’ll be there in another hour or so.”

\* \* \* \*

Fox saw the riders coming toward him. They were riding double, leading a riderless horse. He didn’t like what he saw; such a sight usually meant trouble. As he rode closer, he saw that it was his good friend, Rory. Which meant the little package in front of him was none other than Salina.

He was happy to see his friend; they had a lot of catching up to do. Rory and Fox had been like brothers for years. Rory had never seemed to notice that Fox was a breed. He always treated him as an equal. He wondered what Rory would think when he told him that he was a married man. Fox knew that Rory wouldn’t be surprised that the woman was Raven. He had known of Fox’s feelings toward the widow of their friend, John.

He smiled as he continued to watch. The way Rory was nuzzling Salina, it looked like his friend had some news of his own to share. The couple hadn’t even noticed him yet,

they were so involved in one another. Fox could tell from the caressing and the secret smiles that these two people were very much in love. Their relationship had gone far beyond mere friendship. He was happy for the two of them. Hell, if he was honest with himself, he was jealous. He wanted for himself and Raven what Rory and Salina seemed to have.

Fox knew that trouble was not far off. Josh Randall had made public claims on Salina. He wouldn't take this rejection lightly. Fox would stand by his friends. He would be honest and warn them before they ever reached his ranch. He decided to tell them about Raven. He wanted Raven to be comfortable around his friends and in order for that to happen, they had to know the truth. He chuckled as he watched his friends. If they didn't come up for air soon, they'd either suffocate or run him clean over. He stopped his horse and waited.

Rory and Salina traveled slowly. The injured horse behind them a constant reminder of the enemy they now knew that they had.

"You know that we're going to have to do something about Randal," Rory said to Salina.

"Let me talk to him. It's my fault," she began. She blamed herself for Rory being shot. If she had not gone off with him, none of this would have happened.

"Don't you start blaming yourself. It's not your fault. The fault lays with Josh," he scolded. "He's a coward. The man could have showed himself. He could have faced me man to man, but instead he tried to shoot me in the back."

"I should have talked to him before we left. He probably came up there wanting to court me and we surprised him. He's hurt." She tried to reason it out.

"I don't want you seein' him alone. There's no tellin' what he'll do. He knows that I saw him," Rory stated. There was no way in hell he was lettin' her anywhere near the man. "Promise me that you won't go off alone until this is settled."

"I can't promise that. I've got work to do," she said. "I will promise not to go to his ranch to see him, but I won't promise to stay put like a child on my own ranch."

"That's enough for now. I'm sorry, Salina. I know how much your freedom means to you, but I'm worried," he confessed.

They were moving at such a slow pace that Rory was free to kiss and caress Salina. “Don’t worry about it right now. Just sit back and enjoy,” he whispered playfully. He nibbled along her tempting neck and noticed the love bites he had left there over the last couple of days. He had to smile triumphantly.

“You better wear something high necked,” he teased. “People are definitely gonna know what we were doing up in those hills and it didn’t have a thing to do with hunting for strays.” He licked at the marks on her neck.

“Although by the looks of your neck, we did do a little branding.” He shouldn’t feel so superior branding her that way. But seeing his mark on her made him feel damn good. Besides, she’d done some branding of her own. Inching along her neck to her jaw, Rory was glad that they were on a straight stretch and his horse was well-mannered.

“I want to stop and make love to you,” he whispered. “I have a sweet ache only you can ease.”

Damn it, they shouldn’t have to worry about being shot. They had been so happy and carefree just hours ago.

“I want you, too,” Salina said as she turned her head and arched back into him, giving him better access to her sweet mouth.

He reached her lips and his tongue found its way inside. “So sweet,” he moaned. He turned his head to the side, deepening the kiss.

The nickering of his horse and the answer of another (other than the limping one following behind) stopped him. Raising his head, he looked into the very amused face of his best friend, next to Salina. From the amused look on Michael Little Fox’s face, Rory could only assume that he had been watching their approach for some time. He wasn’t ashamed or embarrassed at being caught in such an intimate embrace. He wanted everyone to know about his feelings for Salina. He was happy that Fox would be the first to know that he was going to be married.

Rory returned Fox’s smile with pride and drew his horse to a stop. “Fox, it’s good to see you.” Holding out his hand, he gripped Fox’s in their familiar handshake. “We were gong to stop in at your place.”

He gazed down into Salina’s very red face and realized that she must be embarrassed at being caught with his tongue in her mouth. “Sweetheart, I’m sorry I got carried away.”

"I'm not," she replied with a grin and grabbed him, to again mash her lips into his and seductively taste him with her tongue.

"Behave, Minx." He chuckled and kissed her on the end of the nose.

Salina knew she should be embarrassed that Fox had seen her and Rory practically making love.

"I'm not embarrassed or ashamed to get caught kissing you," she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

She had been enjoying herself so much that she had not seen or heard anything. She would still be returning the dancing of tongues if Rory had not noticed Fox and pulled away.

"Fox is a good friend and I know that he will be truly happy for us," she said quietly. "I just wish things were different so we could just happily make our plans."

They now had to worry about Josh Randall. He was not going to stop them, though; they were still getting married as soon as possible.

"Are you sure that we shouldn't wait until we have a talk with Josh?" she asked worriedly. "You're in danger and I don't like being the cause."

"No, Salina, we talked about this on the ride down," he said, pressing his forehead against hers. He was well aware of Fox watching them. "We are not," he said with venom, "going to let anyone keep us from being man and wife."

"I want you safe," she whispered. She tried to control her voice, but she really wanted to slam some sense in the bullheaded man pressed against her.

"I will be. Nothing's going to happen," he promised, rubbing his nose against hers. "We'll have a small ceremony at the ranch, family and friends only. We'll be an old married couple before Josh can cause any more harm," he teased as he turned to face Fox.

"Salina and I have some exciting news to share." He again glanced down at Salina. "Is it okay?" he whispered.

"You better stay safe, Rory Holloway, or you'll answer to me," she said and added a nod to her statement.

"We're going to be married and I'd like you, my friend, to stand with me as witness," Rory said to Fox.

Swinging his leg over the side of his horse, he leaped to the ground. Turning, he reached up and, unmindful of the pull in his shoulder, lifted Salina into his arms, letting her slide slowly down his hardened body.

He stood quietly, just holding her bent with his forehead fit intimately against hers.

"I love you, Sunshine."

"I love you too, Rory Holloway."

Giving one last squeeze, he turned back to Fox, his expression changing from happy to serious in a matter of seconds.

He dropped the reins on the ground, knowing that the well-trained horse would not wander.

"Fox, can you give me a hand?" he asked.

"Sure. What's up?" Fox replied while he dismounted and ground-tied his horse.

"We need you to take a look at Salina's horse. We ran into some trouble and she's limping." The three of them walked back and knelt on the ground in front of the mare.

Fox inspected the swollen leg carefully. "She's hurting. How did this happen?" he asked. "Salina's not a careless rider and I know how much this mare means to her."

He remembered the day that Rory had purchased the horse from him and given her to Salina. Rory had been so excited, knowing how much she would like the gift.

He patted the horse affectionately and rose to his feet. "I'm sure she'll be fine, but she needs time to heal."

He glanced over his shoulder at Rory. "I see, my friend, that the mare was not the only one injured. You are favoring your arm," he stated. He wouldn't ask questions. He valued privacy. Rory and Salina would tell the story if and when they were ready.

\* \* \* \*

Rory entwined his fingers with Salina's, not liking to break contact with her. Their feelings were still so new and their emotions were running high; it wasn't everyday that someone shot at you. It was time to explain to Fox exactly what had happened on the hill.

"Fox, we ran into some trouble. We were riding up by the line shack when a gunshot scared the mare." Rory pulled Salina into his arms, needing to remind himself that she was safe.

“She bolted with Salina in the saddle. Thank God she’s such a good rider.” He rubbed his chin on the top of Salina’s head and looked intently at his friend.

“I haven’t heard of any hunters up that way. Some young one careless with a gun?” Fox commented.

“No. It wasn’t an accident and it wasn’t some kid with a gun,” Rory sneered. “The bullet was meant for me. The shot went wild.”

“I still can’t believe it,” Salina interrupted. “It could have been an accident.”

“It wasn’t!” Rory said with a shake of his head. “Josh Randall took a shot at me and it’s a good thing he’s not much of a shot. That added to the fact his horse isn’t well trained saved my life.”

He rubbed the sore spot on his arm and gave a small smile. “I’m obliged, my friend, that you taught me to scout. If I hadn’t heard his horse I’d be a dead man.”

Fox shook his head, saying, “I’m not at all surprised by the story you’ve just told.”

He saw that Salina was about to interrupt yet again and held up his hand. “Randall is a loose gun, my friend. He’s dangerous and out of control. He’s going to have to be watched. There’s more of the story than you know.”

He could not wait any longer to share his own news.

“I will tell you all that I know. First, you are not the only ones with news; I too have something to share.

Looking at his friends with a proud smile on his face, he could see the questioning on theirs and knew that he was about to shock them.

“I was married two weeks ago to Raven Walker.”

He waited nervously to see how his friends would respond to his news, wanting them to be happy for him and for Raven. He knew that once they got to know the gentle lady that she was, they would forget where it was that she had lived and worked.

Salina stepped out of Rory’s embrace and into a very surprised Fox’s arms. She didn’t know Fox well. He was more Rory’s friend than hers, although they had grown closer and gotten to know each other better in the last couple of years. He always seemed so quiet and alone, preferring no one’s company. She was glad that he had found someone.

Hugging him fiercely and meaning every word she said, "I'm so happy for you, Fox, for both you and Raven."

Salina, being her curious self, had many questions. But she decided against asking them. She knew that Fox would tell them the details if and when he wanted them to know what had led up to his hasty marriage.

She knew nothing about Raven and was not one to jump to conclusions. "I'm sure that Raven is a fine person. I can't wait to meet her," she said.

Rory, too, offered his congratulations. "That's great news, my friend. Raven is a very nice lady. I remember how fond of her you always were." He shook Fox's hand and said, "I'm also glad she isn't working at the Dove any more. I never understood why she went there after John's accident."

"Thank you, my friends, for your good wishes, Fox said. "I know that you speak them from the heart."

"Of course we do, Fox. Why wouldn't we?" Salina asked innocently.

"I'm afraid that I must explain. All is not as it seems with my marriage," he started hesitantly. "After what happened up in the high country, I'm convinced that we are now all indirectly involved in a scheme set by one hot-headed bastard."

Rory interrupted. "I don't understand, Fox. What do you mean?"

"I don't think you understand how dangerous Randall truly is," Fox said.

"That's just not true," Salina interrupted. "Josh has always been kind to me. Oh, not as a child, but in the last couple of months, he's been there for me when I was lonely."

"You cannot trust this man. Did you agree then to become his wife?" Fox questioned.

"Of course not..."

"Over my dead body," Rory and Salina called out together.

"It is as I thought. Josh Randall has all but claimed Salina for his wife. It was no doubt the sight of the two of you together that drove him to the shooting," Fox acknowledged.

"How do you know all of this?" Rory asked. Fox would not lie. He had his reasons for speaking to Salina so harshly and Rory wanted to hear them.

"Come. I will explain on the way home," Fox said as he lifted Salina onto Rory's horse.



"I'm sorry for speaking to you in such a way, Nina`. But you must understand how truly dangerous this man is."

"It's alright Fox," Salina said placing her hands over his and giving them a gentle squeeze. "I'm sure you have your reasons for believing what it you say."

"I do. And soon you will see the truth in what I speak," he said as he mounted his own horse and headed to the ranch. As they rode, he told them all that had happened in the past couple of weeks, beginning with Raven's rape.

"No one should have to be treated the way in which my wife was treated. The blood and the smell...my wife screams in the night from the pain caused by that animal. He is worse than an animal. Animals kill for survival. Randall does not kill. He makes his prey suffer." Fox spat on the ground to show his contempt for the man in question.

"He bragged quite loudly in town about his upcoming marriage to Salina. This wedding kept Raven alive. She believed that if Randall married he would no longer lay claim to her body," Fox continued as he glanced to see Salina and Rory's reactions to the story they had just heard.

Rory listened carefully as Fox told of Raven's violent rape by Josh Randall.

"I have never liked Randall," he whispered. "But never would I have believed him able to do such a God-awful thing to a woman."

He glanced down at Salina and saw how pasty white she had become. "Sweetheart, are you alright?" he asked.

He looked up at the blue sky and around them at the green grass growing under their horses' hooves. Everywhere he looked it was beautiful, so peaceful. Yet somewhere not far away lived an animal.

"I can't get over it, the very idea that a neighbor--someone who has been at the house, visiting the family--could do such a terrible thing. He needs to be stopped. We have to do something," Rory said and looked to Fox for agreement.

"No, Rory. You can't go after him," Salina said, gripping his hand tightly. "I want the same promise from you that I gave. We'll see Josh together."

Rory shook his head. "Things have changed. The man is dangerous. Not only to you, but to other women. Raven's work at the Dove shouldn't matter. She's a woman and should be treated with respect."

“Thank you, my friend,” Fox said with a nod of his head. “I’m happy that you feel as you do. I hope that the town’s people feel the same.”

“There is no other way to see things. Josh Randall is an evil man,” Rory replied and tightened his arms around Salina. “I think of the times you have been alone with him, Sunshine. He touched you and kissed you. It makes me sick at the danger you were in and didn’t even know it.”

“I don’t think he would hurt me,” Salina said as she snuggled closer to Rory. “He wanted to court me. Why would he harm me?” she asked.

She glanced up to see Fox’s ranch ahead. The beautiful little cabin sat so prettily back against the trees with a stream running along the back. Fox’s barn stood proudly not far away with a corral of wild horses dancing in it.

“Let’s not talk anymore about it. I’m in a hurry to meet Fox’s new wife,” she stated firmly with a smile pasted on her face. She did not know Raven as well as Rory, but she felt sure that they would be great friends. The woman had to be extremely strong to survive what she had been through both physically and mentally.

## Chapter 15

Raven removed the pie from the oven and turned to watch as the riders approached the ranch. She recognized her husband along with Rory Holloway and his sister Salina Houston.

She was a little nervous about meeting them. She had known Rory for years because he had been a friend of John's, but she had not seen him since her move to the White Dove.

Salina she didn't know at all. She had seen her around town but had, of course, never spoken to her. Whores did not speak to the Gods-fearing townspeople. Salina had always seemed nice, but she wondered how Salina would feel having her friend married to a whore. She would love it if the two of them could become close friends, never having had a woman for a friend.

\* \* \* \*

They drew their horses to a halt in front of the barn.

"Let me take the mare in the barn and rub some liniment on that swollen leg." Fox said as he took the reins. "You can turn the others loose in the corral."

Rory watched his friend walk into the barn. He still couldn't believe the story they'd been told. He put his arm around Salina's waist. "How you holdin up, Sunshine?" He asked her softly. "It's been one hell of a day." He smiled as they watched the horses roll in the dirt.

"I'll be fine," she said as she laid her head on his shoulder. "It's nice to be somewhere safe. It's funny, this morning I didn't want to come home and now I can't wait to get there."

"I know the feelin', darlin', but nothin' bad is gonna happen. I'll keep you safe. I promise," he vowed.

Turning as a unit, they walked with Fox toward the house and his waiting bride. As they approached the porch, Raven came out of the house with Little Lady following behind.

“Oh, by the way, Salina, thanks for the pup,” Fox called over his shoulder. He saw the confused look on her face and realized that she would have no idea what he was talking about.

“I rode over to your place the other day to talk to you and your daddy. I didn’t know that Rory was home,” he explained.

He smiled devilishly as he went on to explain his visit to the Triple H and his talk with Agnes. “She all but begged me to take one of them pups home with me. I took pity on the woman ‘cause I love her cooking so and brought one home to Raven as a wedding present. They are quite good friends.”

Rory and Salina laughed, knowing how demanding Agnes could be. Salina watched as the puppy bounced happily at the feet of the red-haired woman. “Looks to me like she found a real good home,” she said with a sincere smile. “I’m sure you will both be very happy here.” She nodded to Raven and smiled.

Fox stopped at the bottom of the step. “Raven, I’d like you to meet Salina Houston, and you already know Rory.”

“It’s nice to meet you Miss Houston,” Raven replied to the introduction with a soft voice. “Mr. Holloway, it’s good to see you again.”

“Shoot, iff’n we’re gonna be friends, you best be callin me Salina. Congratulations on your wedding. I’m sure you’ll be very happy,” Salina said, giving Raven a big smile.

“And please call me Rory. I’m not much for that Mister stuff,” Rory replied with an equally bright smile.

“You all come in and get washed up for supper now. It’s all on the table. You must be starved,” Raven said as she ushered them proudly into the house.

“You shouldn’t have gone to such a bother. What can I do to help?” Salina asked as she followed the beautiful woman through the door. Fox had found himself a real nice lady.

\* \* \* \*

“That was mighty tasty eatin’, Raven,” Rory praised. “Fox better watch himself or he’ll be gettin’ fat.” He looked over at Salina, who was finishing up her own piece of pie. She sure was a beauty, but he knew she couldn’t cook worth spit. “Sunshine, can you cook as good as Raven?” he asked innocently.

Salina choked on the drink of milk she’d just, taken spraying it across the table while she choked. She knew she was blushing. That skunk Rory knew damn well she couldn’t cook worth beans. “Well, honey,” she drawled in her best seductive voice. “You don’t have to worry yourself none about gettin’ fat and lazy. I’ll keep you so busy lovin’ you, won’t have time to think of food,” she purred.

“Salina Lynn, watch yourself. We’re not alone, you know,” he gasped. “I never...”

“Oh, but you will, darlin’,” she purred back. There, that should about even the score for embarrassing her. She looked to where Fox sat chuckling and gave him a wink.

Fox chuckled at their bickering. “Rory and Salina will be stayin’ the night with us. Salina’s horse had an accident,” Fox stated. Although their ranches were not that far away from each other, Fox could sense the couple’s need to be home. They had reasons to be wary of riding at night, though.

Raven, sensing the acceptance of Fox’s friends, smiled and added her own invitation. “Please say you’ll stay. I would love to have the company.”

Rory and Salina, wanting to get home, hesitated before nodding their agreement. “We’d love to stay if we won’t be puttin you out none,” he accepted. “Our horses could sure use the rest.” It wasn’t the whole truth, but after what had happened today, he didn’t want to be caught on the trail in the dark. “We’ll head home in the morning.”

“It’s settled, then,” Fox said, rubbing his hands together and grinning wickedly. “Salina can bed down with Raven and you and I can put our bedrolls on the floor before the fire,” he said innocently while trying not to laugh aloud.

“That’s not...” Rory never finished his sentence as Fox interrupted.

“Of course, if you don’t mind bedding down in the barn, there’s more room. I’m afraid the cabin’s not big enough,” he said with a smile. He knew that Rory and Salina would want their privacy.

“That’s fine with us and you know it,” Rory said with a grin. He could see the question in Raven’s eyes. “What your husband has failed to tell you and is taking great pleasure in teasing me about is that Salina and I are getting married. He’s trying gallantly without success to protect her reputation.” He grinned. “Sorry, friend, but you’re too late.”

“Rory!” Salina gasped and elbowed him in the belly. “Behave yourself or I’ll take Fox up on his first offer,” she said as she rose and helped Raven clear the supper dishes.

The two couples visited and laughed late into the night. No one spoke of the problems they all faced. They all wanted to enjoy this special bond of friendship that was steadily growing.

\* \* \* \*

Early the next morning Rory and Salina set off for home. They again rode double, as the mare was staying at Fox’s until she healed. They talked about Fox and his new wife and Salina said how much she had enjoyed the visit. She knew that Fox and Raven didn’t have a real marriage right now, but from the way the two of them watched one another, she expected it wouldn’t be long. She smiled at the thought of their children growing up together. The fact that Raven had worked at the White Dove made no difference in Salina’s feelings for her; if anything, she admired her even more.

Raven was strong and she had done what she had to in order to survive and protect a friend. Frowning, she thought of the reasons why she had been forced to work in such a terrible place. Josh Randall was a cruel son of a bitch. But there was no way they could prove the wrongs he had done and until they could, all of them would just have to watch their backs.

Rory, too, was thinking of Josh Randall. He would have to alert the ranch hands to keep their eyes open for him. He wanted no surprises; if the bastard wanted a fight, he could face him like a man. Above all else, he didn’t want Randall anywhere near Salina. He would see that she was protected at all times. It was not going to be easy, as Salina was not one to stay inside; she loved the ranch and everything that went with the running

of it and he would not take that away from her. He wrapped his arms tighter around her and thought of the surprise they had for Silas.

Silas was sitting on the front porch when he saw Rory's horse coming in with two riders. He got shakily to his feet, wondering what had happened to Salina's mare. His worries eased as he saw the smiles on their faces. Smiling in return, he had not yet reached the bottom step before Salina was running into his arms, laughing and jabbering away. She had her usual flow of questions spilling from her mouth.

"Daddy, how are you? Should you be out of bed?" Stepping back, she laid her hands against his brow, unable to believe this was the same man who only weeks ago she had thought was dying. She looked him in the eye and scolded.

"You shouldn't be up and around; one of the ranch hands should have come and gotten us when you started feeling better. I would have kept you in bed if I had to hog tie you to do it." She stood with her hands on her hips and her legs slightly parted. She wanted to get her point across. Her father meant the world to her and she was so happy to see him doing so well, but she had been so scared; it was hard to believe he was so much better.

Rory chuckled at the sight before him. He was so proud of her; his bride-to-be was such a spitfire and he loved her with all his heart. Their life together would never be boring. He was still chuckling as he walked up behind her and with one arm circled her waist and pulled her back against him, while with the other he covered her mouth.

"Come up for air, darlin'. There's something I'd like to say to your daddy." Removing his hand, he covered her sassy little mouth with his hungry lips. Before he could deepen the kiss, he heard the amused clearing of a throat. Lifting his head, he moved Salina to his side and, with his arm still around her waist, he stepped forward and with great pride announced:

"Silas, I'm honored to say that your daughter has made me the happiest man alive. She has agreed to become my wife."

Smiles were wide as Silas let out a yell and threw his hat into the air. He wrapped his arms around the two of them and, with tears of joy streaming down his face, he said, "Nothing in the world could make me happier than the words you just said to me."

Rory returned the smile, giving Salina a squeeze and a look that said they shared a secret. "I bet we can make you even happier with the rest of our news. We're going to be married as soon as the preacher gets here. Michael Little Fox went into town to bring him out here. We want to be married on the ranch."

Salina interrupted. "But, first, Daddy--we need Agnes to look at Rory's arm. Fox's wife Raven and I cleaned and bandaged it last night, but I'd feel better if Agnes doctored it."

Rory and Salina then went on to tell their tale about what had happened the day before. They also added that they knew who had shot at them.

Rory also felt that Silas should be made aware of Josh's violence toward women. He told him of Fox marrying Raven after she'd been violently raped by Josh.

Silas felt that as long as the kids were telling their tales, he should reveal what had happened on the day that they had left. He told them how Josh had come snooping around. He felt that maybe it was his fault that the kids had been shot at for telling Josh that they would only be gone days when it had turned into weeks.

Rory and Salina assured him that it wouldn't have made a difference. Josh Randall was evil and they'd just have to be careful.

The three of them continued talking as they walked into the kitchen. Agnes was waiting for them. She handed out hugs and kisses for everyone including Silas after hearing of the coming wedding.

Hearing about Rory's injury and Salina's close escape took the smile from her face. No one hurt one of her babies, for that is what these two young ones were. That young Randall would not be getting anymore of her pies, least wise not without a little arsenic to season it.

She looked at Rory's arm and declared that the girls had done a fine job in their cleaning of it. She applied some smelly concoction and, after wrapping it in a cloth, quickly shooed everyone out of her kitchen, telling them that if they were having a wedding she had some cooking to do.

The wedding took place at two o'clock that afternoon. It was a very small, quiet ceremony with the only guests being Silas, Agnes, Fox and Raven. The smallness of the ceremony in no way diminished the beauty of the wedding.



Salina looked absolutely breathtaking as she came down the stairs. Her blond hair was hanging freely about her shoulders, her blue eyes sparkling excitedly with unshed tears.

She wore the same beautiful dress that her mother had worn when she married her father; also, as a special treat for Rory, she wore the hat that his mother had worn when she, too, married Silas. The dress was made of the most delicate material Salina had ever seen. It had been a gift to her mother and she had worn it proudly. She had her hat cocked off to the side of her head and smiled mischievously as she descended the stairs to join her smiling father.

She took his breath away. Rory smiled proudly as he watched Salina walking slowly toward him. He had waited for what seemed a lifetime for this day. He was surprised to see that she wore a combination of her mother's and his mother's wedding gowns. It made him very happy to think that there was a part of both of those special women present today.

He, too, had taken great care in his dress. He didn't own a suit and knew that Salina wouldn't expect one, but he did have a pair of black jeans belted with the buckle Salina had given him for his birthday. He also had a crisp white shirt embroidered yet again by Salina; all of her gifts were so special to his heart that he wanted to share everything on this day. His family and friends were gathered in the house to watch them become husband and wife. He couldn't be happier.

Rory and Salina had both wanted a quiet ceremony. They would announce their marriage to the ranch hands at a later date and Preacher Wilson would announce Rory and Salina's along with Fox and Raven's marriages the following Sunday at church.

Rory bent down and kissed his new bride's smiling lips. "You have just made me the happiest man alive."

Salina returned the kiss and said, "I can't believe we're really married. I'm Mrs. Rory Holloway!"

She wrapped her arms around Rory's neck as he picked her up and spun her around and around. Their laughter brought smiles to the faces of the five other people in the room.

“I got a fine meal a waiting for everyone in that big fancy room. It’ll be best ate warm but iffin you all don’t hurry, you’ll be eatin it cold.”

Agnes used her usual gruffness and pushed everyone toward the dining room and the feast waiting. It was during the meal that Rory and Salina found out that Silas had a surprise of his own.

“I’ve moved out of the main house and moved all my clothes and things out in the old foreman’s house. You young people don’t need me underfoot.”

The sly old dog had been so sure of the outcome of the kids’ venture that he had given them the ranch house.

“You need to have a place of your own to raise a family and I want my own space, too. It’s been years since I’ve been able to kick up my heels.”

He was looking forward to living in the abandoned house. It was just the right size for an old bachelor like himself and he thought maybe he’d sneak one of Salina’s pups in for some added company.

“I signed over the ownership of the ranch to the two of you. I don’t want any arguments. It was my choice.”

He held up his hands to stop them from interrupting.

“I would like to live in the little house until the day I cock up my toes and then I’d like you to lay me to rest by your beautiful mamas.”

Rory and Salina were shocked. They could not believe that he had signed the ranch over to them. That the crafty old devil had planned all of this so carefully absolutely amazed Salina.

She had been nervous about the thought of making love to Rory with her daddy just down the hall. That was no longer the case. Both she and Rory thanked Silas for the wondrous gift but insisted that he still take meals with them. They were a family and they wanted him involved in everything.

He agreed to take the evening meal with them, saying that they needed the privacy to work on those grandbabies he wanted.

Rory smiled. His father-in-law was sure one sly old fox. He had known about Silas’s feelings about him marrying Salina, but he hadn’t had any idea that Silas had drawn up papers giving them the ranch or that he had ideas of moving out of the main house. He

wouldn't spill the beans to the old man now, but he'd already been working hard at making those grandbabies.

Rory had had a wonderful wedding day, but now he was ready to see their company leave. He wanted his wedding night. The thought that he could now wake up beside Salina every morning brought a sappy smile to his face. They had this whole big old house to make love in. He wanted to try out every room. He wondered if his bride was thinking the same thing. He wondered, also, if it would be rude of him to ask everyone to please get the hell out so he could go upstairs and ravage his wife. He was sure Fox would understand, but he wasn't so sure that Preacher Wilson would be of the same mind.

He sighed in relief when Fox and Raven rose from the table, announcing that they had to get going. Soon after, Preacher Wilson took his leave, too. It wouldn't be long now, Rory was sure, before Silas headed for his new house. He had seemed almost eager to be moving in to the small house.

Smiling slyly, he watched Silas carefully, wondering if his new father-in-law had a special woman friend he was hiding. It would explain his need for privacy. He decided to leave that thought for the time being. It wasn't something he wanted to think about on his wedding night.

Agnes would be staying on at the big house, but she had a room off the kitchen and never showed herself after dinner until breakfast the next morning. Rory figured they had better forego the using of the kitchen cupboards. He wasn't sure how Agnes would react if she happened to stumble out and see a very naked Rory pumping fiercely into an equally naked Salina. She'd probably send him to the doctor for some kind of tonic. He laughed at the thought of her telling the doctor that he (Rory) couldn't control his sexual urges.

He was brought out of his rather racy thoughts as Salina tugged on his hands to wish their guests farewell. They accepted the congratulations and made plans with Fox and Raven to have a picnic after church on Sunday.

Waving the last of them off and wishing Agnes goodnight, Rory turned and pulled his wife into his arms. They were finally alone. He picked her up and started up the stairs to the master bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Fox and Raven left soon after they had eaten. Fox could tell his friend was in a hurry to proceed with the honeymoon. He grinned; maybe he should have been contrary and hung around for a long while. The way Rory had been glaring at him, he probably would have tossed him out on his ear if they had stuck around any longer. Rory and Salina had sure looked happy.

He thought back to his own wedding and the differences in the two ceremonies. He wondered if Raven was sorry about getting married. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She sure looked beautiful today. She had on one of the new dresses he had bought for her. He had brought the buckboard to the wedding so that she could ride comfortably and not worry about wrinkling the new dress that she was so proud of. The smile on her face when he had given her the dresses was worth more to him than the money he'd had to spend for them.

Raven, too, was thinking about their wedding. She wasn't sorry about being married to Fox. But she wished she'd had the fairy tale wedding to tell her children about that Salina would have. Her own wedding was very unique. How many women could say their bridegrooms had rescued them and carried them off like a knight in shining armor? But it wasn't the sort of tale you wanted to tell your children about. She didn't want (if she and Michael were blessed enough to have a family) her children to ever know that she had once been a whore. This brought to mind the fact that it was time for her and Fox to talk to about their relationship. She nibbled on her lips nervously as she worked up the courage to speak. She decided to just say what was on her mind.

"Fox? I want to talk to you about something." She looked over at him as he slowed the horses.

Fox glanced at her questioningly, wondering if she was going to want out of the marriage. God, he hoped not; they hadn't even given it an honest try yet. He loved having her at the ranch and hoped that she was happy. It was so nice to come in after working all day and having her smiling face waiting. He waited for her to continue, almost afraid to breathe.

"I want you to start sleeping in our bed. We can never make our marriage work with you sleeping on the floor."

Fox just about choked. He could not believe what he was hearing. He jerked the horses to a stop. “Raven, are you sure about this? Because I meant what I said before I married you.”

Fox swallowed hard, afraid that he was dreaming. They might finally have a real marriage. He wanted what Rory and Salina had; they had seemed so happy. He wanted that same happiness for himself and Raven. Fox realized that Raven was still talking.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready to make love with you. But I would like my husband to sleep in our bed where he belongs.” She was now twisting her new dress up in tight wrinkles. She waited breathlessly for Fox to answer.

Fox turned a shade of pink and, not knowing what to say, he nodded his head as he clicked to the horses. The movement of the wagon brought Fox out of his stupefied state. She wanted him in her bed, their bed. He couldn’t stop the grin that lit up his face. Sure, she said she didn’t know if she was ready for more than sleeping. But it was a start. He couldn’t wait for the coming night, his first night sharing a bed with his beautiful wife.

## Chapter 16

Rory carried Salina up the stairs and into the master bedroom. They stopped breathlessly inside the door and looked around them. Someone, probably Agnes, had lit candles and placed them throughout the room. She had also sprinkled pretty flower petals across the top of the bed. The gentle aroma, laced with the quiet flicker of the candles, was enchanting.

Rory closed the door softly behind them and set Salina on her feet. Gazing into her eyes, he started the process of dealing once again with the endless buttons she seemed to always have on her dress. As he unbuttoned her, he smothered her face in kisses.

Salina wasn't standing idly by; she was working the buttons of his shirt, trying to dodge his kisses so that she could trail nibbles and kisses across his powerfully muscled chest. She loved running her fingers through the curls that ran from below the indent in his neck, down over his bronzed chest and pebbled nipples. She followed the tufts of hair over his very firm stomach and felt him suck in his breath as she reached the top of his jeans. She needed to unbutton them in order to continue to follow her path as it narrowed. Unzipping his pants, she eased his jeans over his hips and down to his knees. She stepped back to admire her work. She was very proud of herself, indeed.

He stood proud, his erection standing proud also. It waved as if in greeting to her. Her trail had come to a wondrous end as she gazed at all of the beautiful dark curls that surrounded her long, hard warrior. Deciding to take the lead, she slipped her arms out of the sleeves and stepped out of her dress. Her camisole came next.

She pushed Rory's hands down to his side when he tried to reach for her. Gently, she shook her head, as she now stood naked in front of him. She pushed him toward the bed, his pants still around his knees, shirt draping off of his shoulders. Good Lord, the man still had his boots on. She didn't care. She'd waited all day to have him and she wasn't waiting any longer.

He'd been teasing her with gentle kisses and caresses for two days, unable to follow through, first while at Fox's and, later, since arriving home. The time had come to make him fulfill the promises his body had made to hers.

She pushed him across the bed and crawled over him, straddling his waist. Gripping the head of her strong stallion in her hands, she brought him to her throbbing, wet, woman's center.

Salina was an excellent horsewoman and she was more than ready to ride. She ached and only Rory could take that ache away. Coming down on him, she sighed with the pure pleasure that poured through her.

He fit so tightly inside of her and he felt so right. She could feel him throbbing and pulsing inside of her. She bent towards him and licked at his nipples.

He answered with a groan and buck of his hips. He could not reach out to touch her as she had tangled his arms inside of his shirt.

She smiled mischievously as she trailed her fingers down the center of his chest. She continued the path she had before followed with her eyes. This time her fingers came to rest in the wondrous place where the two of them were joined. Looking him in the eye, she applied gentle pressure and watched as his eyes widened.

Feeling very bold, she brought both of her hands up her ribcage and over her own breasts. She cupped them and marveled at the way that Rory's eyes darkened even more with desire. Still cupping her breasts, she leaned forward and offered them to Rory's waiting lips.

He latched on like a starving man, licking and sucking. As he sucked and nipped, Salina picked up the tempo and they were soon moving in time. She knew she was reaching the peak and knew also that Rory was not far behind. She rode him hard, sliding up and down on his swollen shaft. She felt him harden even more and, quickening the pace, she brought them both to a wondrous climax. She collapsed on top of her new husband, sweat beading her beautiful face. Her hair, once elegantly styled, now hung down around her face.

She looked like a wanton. Rory couldn't believe what his new wife had just done to him. Now that he could think again, he eased his arms out of the tangle of his sleeves. She had been so wild. He loved it. He loved the fact that she felt so secure that she could make love to him with such wild abandon. He brought his arms up and rubbed her bare back, easing from her firm butt right up to the nape of her delectable little neck. Using his feet, he pushed off his boots and kicked out of his jeans.

They giggled as he twitched this way and that, still embedded deeply inside of Salina. He did not want to let her go just yet; he loved the feel of being buried deep inside of her. They lay contentedly, she on top of him, for a very long time just enjoying the feel of each other. Before long, the lack of sleep caught up with them and they drifted off safely wrapped in each other's arms.

\* \* \* \*

Fox and Raven began their first night together much more differently. Each very nervous. Fox dropped Raven off at the house and he went on to the barn to unhitch the team.

Raven scurried into the house. Lord, she was so nervous. She'd been with men before, but this was different. This was her new husband. What if he didn't like the things she did to him? Were husbands different from paying customers? It had been a long time since John.

She and John had not had a real passionate relationship. He had been her childhood friend and they had gotten on well and eventually married. There had never been real passion. Sure, they had made love, but not often, and it had always been kind of clumsy, as if they were both embarrassed by the act of making love to one another.

She didn't know if she was ready to take such an intimate step with Michael. What would he expect from her?

She had worked at the Dove, but she had not practiced different ways to have sex. She had just supplied the female body for men to thrust themselves into. This was all new to her. Quickly, she removed her dress and slipped into the new sleeping gown that Fox had given her. He had personally burned her old one.

Fox was stalling. There was no other word for it. He'd brushed the horses, twice. He'd also fed and watered the stock. Now he sat on a bale of hay, twiddling a stalk between his fingers. He was scared of his new wife. She'd been with many men. Fox had only been with a very few women and that was years ago. What if he didn't satisfy her? She probably knew ways to make love that he'd never even thought of; could he measure up to the other men she'd known? He didn't know. But he had to go in the house.



She was waiting for him. They didn't have to make love. She had said she didn't know if she was ready. He'd just lay beside her and sleep. He was beat; they'd had no sleep the night before. Surely he could lay beside her and not touch her. He'd be to sleep in no time.

Raven wondered how long it took to unhitch the team. It seemed like it was taking Fox an awful long time. She'd been waiting in bed for it seemed like forever. She decided to get up and check, but as she threw back the blankets she heard his booted feet on the steps and the front door opening. She smiled as she heard him murmuring a greeting to Little Lady as he walked through the house.

She pulled the covers back up to her chin as he walked into the bedroom. He looked as nervous as she was and that gave her some confidence. She watched as he unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders.

He was so dark-skinned and muscular. His Indian heritage showed in his beautifully bronzed skin and in his glorious black hair. She was glad that he had left it to hang loosely around his broad shoulders.

Fox removed his boots and reached for the snap of his jeans. He stopped and looked at Raven questioningly.

"Fox." She started talking carefully. "This is our home. Our bed. I want you to be comfortable. I want us both to be comfortable."

Fox didn't answer but reached over and distinguished the lamp, plunging the room in darkness. He didn't want Raven to see how aroused he was; just the thought of crawling into that bed with her naked had his manhood calling out for attention.

He pulled back the blanket and crawled into the bed. He had always thought that he had a huge bed, but with Raven laying next to him and his vow that he would not touch her, it seemed like he was laying on a very small plank.

He rolled to his side facing away from her and adding more room between the two of them. He closed his eyes and thought of all the work he had to do the following day. He prayed she would soon fall asleep.

Raven knew that if she was going to get better acquainted with her husband she was going to have to make the first move. Fox had vowed not to touch her and he was a man of his word. She wanted a real marriage and a family. She had talked with Salina and

they had become friends. Salina had told her not to worry about other people, but to live a life for herself and for her husband. She had stated that she and Rory would stand by them and always be there should they need anything.

Carefully Raven rolled to her side and faced Fox's back. She could not see clearly, the moonlight shining through the window her only light. The moonbeams glistened off Fox's muscular back and she itched to trace the rippling muscles that she knew he had. She slowly inched closer to him, bringing her body up snugly against his bare back. She wrapped her arms around him and held on. She was sure he had never been held before and she didn't want to seem whorish. She just wanted to let him know that she was ready. The next move was up to him.

Fox stopped thinking as all his brain cells shot straight to his manhood when Raven's pebbly nipples pressed against his sensitive back. He knew she had on the new sleeping gown he had bought her. He had seen it before he distinguished the lamp. But she might as well have been naked too, with nothing between them but the light material. He waited and, as she wrapped her arms around his waist, he knew that she was asking him to make love with her.

He inhaled deeply, breathing in her scent. Turning toward her, he took her tenderly into his arms. She smelled of lilacs. He'd seen the scent at the dry goods store and the smell reminded him of Raven. He'd bought it especially for her.

Fox gazed into her eyes and brushed her hair back from her face; she had such beautiful hair. The color was so unusual, not brown and not red but a color all its own, a color that suited her and went so well with her beautiful green eyes. He ran his thumb along her cheekbone, down her jaw line and across her lips. He traced first the bottom and then the top before dipping his head to have a taste.

She tasted sweet, minty, and uniquely like Raven. This first true kiss as husband and wife--he would never forget it. He fed on her mouth. Tracing her lips with his tongue, seeking entrance, wanting to deepen it and, as she slowly opened her mouth inviting him in, he responded with a groan. Their tongues thrust in a gentle hide-and-seek pattern. He hungrily sucked at her tongue, no longer afraid that he would not satisfy her; he could feel the fire in her. A fire meant for him. He wanted to go slowly, not wanting her to remember the last time she had been intimate with a man. Slowly, he unbuttoned her

gown. He had purposely chosen buttons instead of ties. He wanted to go slowly; each button gave him the time to control himself.

He paced himself; he was halfway to the bottom.

Raven grabbed hold and lifted the garment over her head, exposing her nakedness to him. He opened his eyes and looked on her beauty. This wasn't the first time he had seen her, but the first time he had been thinking of healing her, protecting her. This time he was thinking like a man, a man that wanted his wife.

He bent his head and licked her nipple. He then glanced up to see if she was okay and saw her arching back exposing her neck; he also gave it some of his attention. He nipped gently and suckled, branding her as his. These were gentle love bites meant to soothe and to ignite her passion.

Raven responded in kind; she ran her hands over Fox's shoulders as he came to rest over top of her. She wasn't afraid. He was so careful with her. She knew that he was watching her to see if she was thinking of the time before. This time was nothing like the last. There was no way she would feel the same and, as Fox entered her slick woman's opening, she called out his name with the pleasure she was feeling.

Fox, too, felt the spectacular feelings bursting in him and knew that he would not last and as Raven tightened around him he, too, found release. He promised himself that he would love his wife more fully the next time. But he knew that she also had felt pleasure. He wrapped her up in his arms and then he remembered the name that she had called out in her passion. She had called him Michael. No one ever called him by that name. He was smiling as he fell asleep, liking the sound of his name on her lips.

## Chapter 17

The week passed quickly for both couples. Sunday arrived and, with it, the announcement to everyone at church about the two new couples in the community. There were gasps of surprise as the announcement was made, but as the two couples stood united closely together none of them were to sure who it was meant for. The women seemed to shun the two brides, but with their strong, silent and very protective husbands close by, any other harsh feelings or comments they kept to themselves.

Having decided to have a picnic, Rory and Salina sent Silas and Agnes home without them and joined Fox and Raven in their wagon. They traveled to a meadow that was over run with sweet-smelling wild flowers. The creek that adjoined their two ranches ran along side the meadow and across the way into a wooded area.

The ladies laid out the bounty of food: fried chicken, chunks of bread and cheese and some of Agnes's apple pie.

The men unhitched the team before joining Salina and Raven on the quilt that they had spread on the ground.

They talked and laughed like teenagers while eating enough food to feed an entire army. Afterward, the men lay back lazily with their heads pillowed comfortably in their wives' laps.

Salina and Raven shared amused smiles as they gazed down at their now dozing husbands. They talked quietly about their plans for the future, not wanting to disturb the men. Both women agreed that it was nice to have a woman their own age to talk with.

While the ladies talked quietly, someone else watched from across the stream. Josh was fuming. He couldn't believe it when he had went into the Dove earlier in the day to visit Raven and found that she had been carried out in the arms of the half-breed Michael Little Fox.

He was storming out of the saloon when he had overheard men talking about the announcement that the preacher had made at church that morning. The breed had married his whore. Not to mention the fact that Rory Holloway had married that bitch Salina Houston.

The four of them thought that they had won. They thought that they were safe. They couldn't be more wrong. He wasn't finished with them yet.

They had made him into a laughing stock and he would not let them get away with the humiliation they had caused to him.

Spittle flew from his mouth and he wiped it with the back of his hand. He then rubbed his hand up and down over his groin. He had an itch; he hadn't had a woman for weeks. He'd have to go to the next town and find himself one. Then he would deal with the four people who had ruined all of his plans. Let them think they had won. He'd be back.

Turning; he walked back to where he had tied his horse and mounted, riding off in search of a woman; again, he didn't care if she was willing as long as she had the right equipment and was beneath him.

Raven and Salina enjoyed their visit; they had no idea that danger and evil had been just a stone's throw away. Their only concerns on this day was how long to let their sleeping princes lay as if they had not a care in the world.

"Let's go wading Raven, it will be fun. Shhh," Salina whispered as she gently lifted Rory's head from her lap, watching as Raven did the same with Fox.

Sitting on a rock, they giggled as they removed their shoes and stockings. Cautiously, Raven stuck her bared toes into the water.

"Oh, it's cold!" she shrieked.

Salina had more stamina and walked right in and began to splash.

Rory looked at Fox and smiled; his eyebrow arched questioningly.

"Do our wives really think that they could leave our sides without us knowing it?" He shook his head at the playful antics going on at the edge of the creek.

"They make more noise than the boys blowing off steam on a Saturday night."

Folding their arms behind their heads, they sat back and, with love shining in their eyes, enjoyed the show of bare leg each of their wives was unknowingly showing.

Fox shook his head at the shrieks and laughter. "How can two small women make such noise?"

"I don't know, brother, but they sure seem to be having fun. Let's join them." Getting to their feet, they soundlessly walked up behind their very noisy wives.

The girls were having so much fun laughing together that neither noticed the arrival of their husbands. They each acted instinctively, thinking their husbands still asleep. They let out blood-curdling screams when they were grabbed from behind.

Shocked, the men released them so fast that, knocked off balance, the men both fell on their backsides in to the very cold stream.

Turning to defend themselves, the girls stopped short and burst into uncontrollable laughter at the sight of their sleepy, rumped, adorable and now very wet husbands' disgusted and very surprised faces.

Rory and Fox looked at each other and, smiling mischievously, reached for the hands of Salina and Raven. As the girls reached down to help them to their feet, the men openly grinned and, before the girls guessed their intent and could pull away, they were pulled into the icy stream on top of their husbands.

The two couples played like carefree children for the rest of the afternoon. They later packed the scraps of remaining food and returned home, promising to get together again soon.

\* \* \* \*

The Sunday outing had set the pace for the next weeks; the time passed quickly and smoothly.

Silas had settled into his new house with the pup he had adopted as his constant companion. He spent most of his time at the little house, but occasionally had coffee at the main house in the morning and kept his promise to have the evening meal there, also.

Rory and Salina spent their days working and playing, sometimes sneaking to the barn with an excuse to check a horse, or a walk to the stream to check the water. Of course, no one bought their rather thin excuses, as the hay and grass that usually clung to their clothing or hair was all the evidence needed as to what they had really been checking.

The ranch hands had accepted the marriage, having always known of the special bond between the two of them; the hasty wedding did not surprise them. On the contrary, they were very happy for their bosses.

The nights were spent loving each other. They sometimes spent the whole night just wrapped in each other's arms. Talking and whispering sweet words of love. They spent time planning their futures. They didn't speak about Josh Randall, having heard that he had left town weeks ago after hearing of their marriage.

Salina didn't expect him back anytime soon. He was sure to have heard about the wedding. Not liking to lose, she was sure that he had left town to lick his wounds.

His foreman had said he didn't say where he was going or when he would return. Everyone prayed that he would just stay away. Maybe find a woman in another town and settle. It was a lot to hope for.

Rory didn't put it to rest so easily. He had the fear in the back of his mind that they hadn't heard the last of Josh Randall. Any man that would go so far as to shoot another man would not easily give up something that he believed was his.

## Chapter 18

Rory woke early, the pink shadows of dawn creeping across the sky. He knew he didn't have to get started this early, so he rolled to wrap his arms around Salina. He loved waking beside her every morning. He smiled as he thought about getting a little morning treat. He leaned into her to nuzzle her neck just as she leaped from the bed, her head banging into his nose, causing him to see stars. His eyes watered, tears rolling down his face. He put his hand over his face and sank back into the pillows, bellowing.

"Jesus H. Christ Salina! What's wrong wit...?" He stopped his question as he heard terrible retching. He wiped the tears from his eyes and looked off the side of the bed.

She was slumped naked over the slop bucket, heaving uncontrollably, beads of sweat pooling on her forehead.

Jumping from the bed, not bothering to dress, he grabbed a rag and poured cool water from the pitcher over it. He knelt beside her on the floor in front of the slop bucket and held the cool cloth to her forehead. His other hand rubbed soothingly on her bare, heaving back.

"Darlin'," he began worriedly. He hated seeing her so sick. No one should vomit that much. He sympathized with her, his own stomach beginning to feel queasy.

"Are you sick?" Stupid question. "You're heaving your guts out; of course, you're sick." He jumped to his feet. "Let me go ask Agnes what we can do for you. Maybe we should send for the doc."

Salina grabbed Rory's hand, stopping him. She knew what was wrong with her. She smiled even through the misery she was feeling. She had some wonderful news to tell her husband and couldn't wait to see the look on his face when she revealed her illness. She hadn't had her woman's courses since she and Rory had first made love. She hadn't wanted to say anything until she was sure, but she'd been feeling queasy lately; add this morning's gut-wrenching episode to the mix and she knew for a certainty. She was carrying Rory's baby.

Salina knew that Rory was waiting impatiently for her to let go of him so that he could go for help. He was worrying needlessly and she loved him all the more for it. Taking the wet cloth, she wiped her mouth, drank some water from the glass and rinsed.



Feeling more human, she rose to her feet and faced her worried husband. She brushed tenderly at the worry lines on his handsome face. She then took both of his hands in hers, placed them gently on her flat stomach, and proceeded to tell her very naked husband why there was no need for him to go running to the kitchen in his present state of undress and causing poor Agnes to have an attack.

Rory whooped with joy and scooped his still green-tinged wife up in his arms. Their combined shouts soon brought two sets of pounding feet up the stairs to their open doorway where there were then four very shocked people. Two of them very naked and the other two equally embarrassed because they didn't know what in the hell they had just interrupted.

Thinking fast, Rory grabbed the blanket from off of the bed and, wrapping both himself and Salina, snuggly together, he then turned to face the red-faced Silas and Agnes. His grin so wide as to almost split his face, he proudly announced, "We're going to have a baby! Can you believe it? I'm going to be a daddy!"

Silas and Agnes now let out delighted squeals of their own. In their excitement, they embraced the happy couple. The tears streamed unchecked down Silas's face. Kissing his daughter, he stepped back and announced, "This calls for a celebration breakfast; it's not every day that a man finds out he's going to be a granddaddy."

He turned back to the naked couple entwined in a shaggy blanket and, with a humorous twinkle in his eye and a deep chuckle, suggested, "Maybe you two should put some clothes on before joining us."

Rory nodded his head in agreement, the grin still spread across his face. He was too emotional to even speak and so proud he was about to burst. He thought that maybe his father-in-law felt the same. Silas had been almost skipping when he had left the room. He tightened his arms tighter around Salina and leaned down to nuzzle her neck.

"Are you feeling better now, Sunshine?" He rubbed a circle pattern on her stomach through the blanket, wondering if she was going to be this violently sick every morning. He sure hoped not; he hated the thought of her being so ill.

Salina tilted her head back against his shoulder and looked up with a smile on her face. "I'm fine, Rory, really." She started to giggle. "Did you see the look on Daddy and Agnes's faces when they walked in here and saw us?"

She turned in his arms and wrapped her arms around his bronzed, bare back. Rubbing up and down the smooth, rippling muscles, she said, "I think maybe we should make sure our door is shut from now on. I wouldn't want Agnes to really get an eyeful if she happens to come up here and we are rather involved in one of our lessons."

With that comment, she collapsed against Rory's chest giggling uncontrollably at the pictures flashing through her mind at the expressions that would be on the older woman's face.

"You are so bad, Mrs. Holloway. And I do love that about you."

Rory shook his head and picked his giggling wife up in his arms. He headed back to the bed, eager to finish what he had started earlier. He looked at Salina questioningly, wondering if it would be safe and praying that she would say yes. He let out a relieved sigh when she smiled and nodded her head.

They spent the next two hours in their room, first making glorious, tender love and than just holding each other and marveling over the fact that God had blessed them with such a special gift. Needless to say, they were very late for their breakfast.

Eager to share the exciting news with their friends, Rory and Salina left soon after eating and headed for Fox and Raven's place. Rory insisted on taking the wagon. Although Duchess could now be ridden and was a very gentle mare, he was taking no chances with Salina or the baby.

Salina, ever the arguer, balked at the idea of not riding her horse for the next six months.

"Rory, you're being unreasonable. Women carry babies all of the time."

Kissing her on the nose, he smiled. "I know this, darlin', but women don't carry my baby every day." He wrapped her in his arms and rocked her back and forth while gazing into her eyes.

Salina smiled at the pride she could see bursting from him. She shook her head, giving in to him on this whim. His protectiveness was going to drive her nuts. She chuckled, wondering if he would let her go to the outhouse by herself. Lord, she wasn't even going to mention that fact to him or he'd want to hold her hand.

They set off at a slow pace. They weren't in any hurry. They had all day to visit. It had been a while since seeing their friends and they were looking forward to spending some time talking with them.

The ride to Fox's ranch was beautiful and the weather was equally beautiful. They rode along enjoying the peace and quiet; it reminded them of the time they had spent at the line shack. They didn't find the time to be alone now that they had returned to the real world. So they took every little bit of time they could to be alone.

Salina rode with one of Rory's arms around her waist and her head resting on his shoulder. She placed her hand on his thigh and rubbed it lovingly. She had never been so happy. Their life together was pure heaven. Now they were going to be adding a little person to their family. She hoped they had a little boy with his daddy's beautiful face, dark hair and eyes. She smiled mischievously; of course, a little girl with her daddy's beautiful looks would be more fun and would take the pressure off of her. The poor little thing probably wouldn't be allowed out of the house until she was thirty, being that her daddy would be so protective. Rory talked about her being like an angry cougar when riled. He was like an old bear protecting his cubs.

Rory looked down at his wife and wondered what mischief she was brewing. She had that look on her face that usually spelled trouble. He was going to have his hands full keeping her out of trouble. He doubted he could talk her into taking cooking lessons from Agnes. His Sunshine was definitely not a cook and she had no interest in learning. She was an outside girl, always had been, and always would be. He didn't find that a flaw.

Salina was a great help to the running of the ranch. He just wanted her to take it easy now that they were going to have the baby. Maybe seeing Raven working in the house would help her adjust to the change her life was about to make. Raven seemed to love to keep house for Fox and make him meals.

Rory knew how much Salina thought of Raven, how much she respected her. The two of them had become instant friends and he couldn't be happier. He quit his worries. Salina would be fine and he would make sure that she took things easy.

He glanced up as they reached the ranch house and saw his friend coming out of the house, his wife following close behind. They waved and called a greeting.

## Chapter 19

Fox and Raven were very happy for their friends and hoped that they, too, would soon have the same news to share. Raven so much wanted to give Fox a son or daughter. She prayed that her working in the whorehouse and using the different herbs and remedies to prevent breeding had not done something to her womb. She would not let her worries show. Today was a happy one and she hugged her friend closely and congratulated both of them on their joyful news.

The girls wandered into the house. Salina shook her head at the ever-present pup at Raven's feet.

"Rory once warned me of spoiling those pups. I think mayhap he should have had that discussion with you and my father."

Raven smiled fondly as she looked down at Little Lady. "I know that I spoil her shamelessly. She is very special to me, not only because she was a gift from Fox but also because she loves me unconditionally." Raven tried to smile as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Little Lady doesn't care who or what I was. She loves me for who I am now and she is loyal to me."

Salina, very emotional herself, wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulder. "Oh, Raven. I love you for who you are. Don't you know that I think you're the bravest woman alive?" She stepped back, tears now streaming down her own face. "I know Fox loves you. It might not have started out that way, but the way that man watches you I know that he has very special feelings for you." Her voice rose as she pleaded with her friend to understand. "You are my best friend next to Rory. You have absolutely no reason to be ashamed of yourself. You did what you had to do in order for you to survive. Don't you ever let anyone take that spirit and courage away from you!"

Rory and Fox watched as their wives walked into the house. Glancing at each other, they noticed that they both wore the same sappy expressions.

Rory chuckled. "We are two very lucky son of a guns."

Fox nodded in agreement. "You don't have to tell me, my friend. I count my blessings daily."

They walked toward the corrals and talked about their ranches. Fox showed Rory the yearlings he was currently training. But they both knew that they were avoiding the topic that was most on their minds, that being Josh Randall.

“Rory, I have heard news of a young girl who was found raped and beaten to death in a small village about twenty miles west of Delver.

“Do they know anything about who did it?”

“Rumor has it that Josh Randall was seen in the same village just days before the girl’s body was found. She was just a child.”

Rory looked at Fox worriedly. He prayed that he was wrong in what he was thinking. Had Randall killed that young girl after violating her? He wasn’t taking any chances with Salina’s safety. He would stress to everyone at the ranch to keep their eyes and ears open for Randall’s return. If he had killed the girl, he would be making his way home to where he thought he’d be safe.

“If he’s the one, Fox, he’s gong to be even more out of control. He will have nothing to lose.”

“I will never let him get close enough to Raven to again treat her in the way that he did.”

He fisted his hands trying to control the anger.

“You will never know how close, my friend, I came to killing a man. I will keep my wife safe at all costs.”

“Me too, my friend, when I think of him alone with Salina all of those times when I was not here. Never again.”

Reassuring each other that they could protect their women, Rory and Fox entered the house only to see two tear-streaked, blotchy faces.

They stopped in their tracks, unsure what had happened. Rory stepped toward Salina. “What’s wrong, darlin’?”

The girls always got on so well together that he couldn’t imagine them arguing about something.

Salina looked up at the concern in Rory’s voice. She saw the confusion on both of the men’s faces. She looked at Raven; they quit their crying and burst into fits of laughter, waving the men off.

Rory and Fox sighed with frustration while shaking their heads. Sometimes it was hard to understand what went through a woman's mind. Pouring themselves some coffee, they sat down at the table and listened as Salina and Raven made plans to go into town. They wanted to buy cloth to make things for the baby. The men looked at each other and, with a small nod unseen by their wives, they had come to an understanding. They would be going along on the shopping trip to Delver.

They didn't exactly look forward to the day in town, preferring to stay on their ranches. They each had plenty of work to keep them busy. But there was no way they were letting their wives go alone and if only one of them went the women would know that something was wrong. They didn't want to alarm them unnecessarily, but wanted to be close by in case Randall did arrive unexpectedly back in town.

\* \* \* \*

The rumors Fox had heard were correct. But Marie, the young girl from the village, had not been the first.

There had been the whore in Franklin. She'd had to die. She'd laughed at him when he'd climaxed too soon. It was that bitch Salina's fault. He'd been picturing himself with her in his mind, all of that glorious hair and that lily-white, satiny smooth skin pressing against his own naked flesh. It hardened him again just thinking of her.

The red-haired whore shouldn't have laughed. He'd taken great delight in wrapping his hands around her wrinkly throat. She'd had a painted face to mask her age. The paint was unable to hide her fear or her scared eyes bulging from their sockets. He'd known that she was scared and that she understood he was going to kill her. The smell of her fear fed his hunger. He had plunged his engorged shaft repeatedly into her dry center, not caring that she was not primed and ready. He'd shown her that he was a man more than capable of pleasuring a woman.

He'd covered her with a blanket and snuck out of the upstairs window. He'd left Franklin that night. Two days later, he'd arrived in the unnamed village and that's where he'd met Marie.

She'd been such a sweet little thing. All dark, dark hair, dark skin and those beautiful dark eyes. Her eyes had been so dark that they were almost black. He'd really enjoyed his

time with the young virgin. She'd been so docile and she had done whatever he had asked. The pleasures he had found with her were better than any pleasures that he had ever known with any other woman.

He hadn't wanted to kill her. He had thought of setting her up in a little cabin as his own private love toy. But she had threatened to go to her padre and tell him all that they had done together. She had wanted to force him into marrying. He'd had to stop her; he couldn't marry some nobody. He was the great Josh Randall. He was going to have a successful ranching empire and he needed the bloodlines and the money that went with marrying well in order to reach his goal.

He'd tried to reason with Marie. They'd met in the woods outside of the village. He'd tried telling her that he'd buy her a pretty little house, but she'd refused, saying that she wasn't a puta. She wanted to be his bride. He'd tried slapping her into submission; when that didn't work, he'd hit her harder. He'd scared her and, of course, her fear had fed his hunger. He'd continued to beat her as he'd made love to her one last time, only this time she didn't seem to enjoy it as much as he did. He'd looked down into her bruised and battered face to see those beautiful black eyes staring back at him unseeingly. He'd dumped her body in some brush and left.

It was time for him to return to Delver. He needed to check on the running of his ranch and he had some revenge to carry out. He was sure that by now the Holloways and the Foxes had let their guards down. He'd lay low at the ranch for a while and collect the information he needed to make their lives hell.

## Chapter 20

The day of the shopping trip dawned bright and beautiful. Salina and Raven rode in the wagon with Rory and Fox riding alongside on their horses. They pulled to a stop in front of the dry goods store. After helping the women down from their seats, the men left, saying that they would return in twenty minutes.

In actuality, they would never lose sight of the front of the store. But they'd never let their concerns show and upset Raven and Salina because of their combined conditions. Fox and Raven had shared their good news on the way into town. The girls were both so excited to be picking out cloth to sew and to be able to raise their babies together.

Raven and Salina went into the store. They were smiling and jabbering away, as was their usual custom. Salina had noticed the silence that had come over the other customers in the store when they had entered, but she chose to ignore them. They were too happy and excited to let anyone put a damper on their moods.

She picked up a bolt of white cloth. "Oh, look at this, Raven. Wouldn't it make wonderfully soft nappies?"

"Oh, my, yes," Raven agreed. "Look at this; it would make some pretty gowns."

"Let's get them," Salina said and headed for the front counter. "Mr. Prigg, please cut enough of this cloth for twelve nappies apiece and enough of the other for three baby gowns apiece."

Raven froze in the act of putting the cloth on the counter and the smile left her face at the gasp of out rage behind them along with the whispered words.

"Can you imagine the nerve of some people? A whore thinking to raise her half-breed child amongst us fine folk. Has she no shame?"

Seeing the tears in her friend's eyes, Salina whirled around ready to fight. Sparks of anger shooting from her eyes. "You vicious witch! How dare you speak about my friend that way!"

Salina was throwing her arms and gesturing wildly.

"It's alright, Salina, let's just go." Raven was trying to calm her, but just as she thought that she was winning, the old biddy in the yellow dress had to open her big mouth again.



“She can’t just waltz in here acting like the rest of us decent God-fearing folk. She’s probably lain with half the single men in this town. Who’s to say that babe she’s carrying is even her husband’s?”

Salina pulled away. “No, it is not alright. No one insults my friend the way this woman just has.”

Salina now stood toe to toe with the woman. “Let me inform you, *Missus* Oliver, it isn’t just the single men who frequent the Dove weekly for the women’s companionship. *Mister* Oliver is a frequent visitor to the girls upstairs.”

Clearly outraged, Mrs. Oliver puffed up. “Why, I never!”

Salina, not done yet, threw in, “My thoughts exactly, Ma’am, which is probably why he visits those ladies.” Not yet ready to let the old girl off the hook, she continued.

“And another thing, Mrs. Oliver, Raven is nothing like you folks say. She is ten times better than any of you so-called God-fearing people. Good day, Mrs. Oliver.”

Salina glanced back at Raven, only now noticing that she had quit her pleas to calm down. She saw Raven bent over, white-faced. Bending and wrapping her arm around Raven’s waist, she screamed for Rory.

Both men came on the run, brushing past a rather frazzled-looking Mrs. Oliver. Fox wondered at the strange look on her face. But seeing the color of his own wife’s face, he did not even stop. He swept her up into his arms and tried to calm her.

Salina flew into Rory’s arms and began telling the ugly tale of what had just happened with Mrs. Oliver.

Rory hugged her tightly. He was so damn proud of her. There was no stopping Salina when she was in her mama cougar mode. God help anyone that threatened her or someone she protected.

Fox carried Raven out of the store. She had wrapped her arms around his neck and was sobbing uncontrollably. Fox continued to whisper to her soothingly.

“Hush, sweetheart, you must calm yourself. You endanger our little one by becoming so upset.”

Raven tried to calm herself, the sounds of her husband’s soft voice making her feel safe. Her voice still trembled as she spoke.

“Oh, Michael. It was so terrible. She said that I had no right raising a baby and that I didn’t even know who its daddy was.”

She began to sob again as she continued. “I love you, Michael. How can people be so cruel? I don’t know what I would have done without Salina with me.” She lifted her head from his shoulder.

Fox tightened his arms protectively as Raven glanced around, looking for her loyal friend. She got a panicked look on her face when she didn’t immediately see Salina. “Is Salina okay? She was so angry with that woman, Fox. She defended me.”

Fox kissed her gently, relieved that she had calmed down. He was so angry, but he had to control that anger. He didn’t want Raven made more upset.

Salina had handled the problem and he would be forever grateful to her. His wife and her condition were his main concern. “Salina is fine. She is with her husband. He will calm her as I have just calmed you.”

As if hearing their names, Rory and Salina stepped out of the store. Rory had his arm protectively wrapped around his wife’s slightly thickening waist. In the other hand he carried some brown paper-wrapped packages.

Salina glanced anxiously to Raven. She wanted to rush to her friend’s side, but Rory was not releasing her. Boy, after today she’d never get out of his sight. She looked up at her husband and scolded, “Rory, let me go. I’m fine and you’re embarrassing me. I want to go check on Raven.”

Rory just grinned and shook his head no. When he had heard Salina’s scream, it had scared the hell out of him.

The stories of the dead girl were still fresh in his mind. He wasn’t ready to let her go just yet. He felt much better to have her snuggled right up against him. He held her tightly until they both reached Fox’s side.

Fox slowly set Raven on her feet. He watched her carefully and when he saw no ill affects from the day’s upset, he reached forward, trailed a finger down Salina’s nose and tapped the end of it.

“I must thank you, my friend. You are a brave warrior to protect my wife and our unborn child. Are you sure that you and your own precious bundle are all right?”

Salina smiled and nodded her head even as she began to answer. "I'm fine, Fox, really; we both are," she said as she patted her stomach. "I'm not a warrior, although I thank you for the compliment. Raven is my friend and, as you know, if someone insults one of my friends, they are insulting me also. I don't take insults well."

Salina turned and reached for two of the packages that Rory was still holding. Smiling, she handed them to Raven. "These are the bolts of cloth that we picked out for our babies." She bent closer, her concern showing clearly on her face. "Are you okay, Raven? You scared me to death. Is the baby okay? Are you in any pain?"

Rory stepped behind his blabbering wife and pulled her tightly to him. "Sunshine, calm down, you're getting too upset. You have to give her time to answer your endless questions." Rory smiled indulgently at his wife.

Raven smiled, a small lifting of the corners of her, needing the comfort that only he could provide. "I'm fine; I just got too upset. But I think that I'd like to skip any other shopping and just go home."

The others agreed. This time they all rode in the wagon and tied the men's horses to the back. Rory and Salina rode in the seat and Fox in the box with Raven cradled in his arms. The ride home was very quiet and not as happy as the ride into town had been.

The two couples had just had a rough day, filled with unhappiness and bitter feelings from people who didn't take the time to get to know someone before passing judgment. The couples would survive these hurts. But there were other dangers lurking close by that they might not survive so easily.

Josh had arrived back at his ranch three days after leaving the village. He'd traveled paths that were not used often. He didn't want to be seen until he was ready to make his move. He informed his ranch hands and the household staff to keep their mouths shut about his return.

He then took some of his more loyal ranch hands to the side. He told them to keep their eyes and ears open for any information about the happenings on both the Fox ranch and the Triple H. He also asked if there had been any rumors about where he'd been staying.

His men had heard none of the rumors that Fox had heard. Josh felt confident that no one could link him to the two women's deaths. He'd been extremely careful not to be

seen in both Franklin and at the Village. A few breeds that were leading a string of horses had seen him. But everyone knew that Indians were ignorant and didn't know anything.

He was confident, too, that no one would be watching for him in Delver. He'd left everyone with the impression that he was not returning any time soon and that's what he wanted them to still believe. The more time he had to plot his revenge, the better. If people didn't expect him, he could easily spy on this prey. Their time was drawing near. No one humiliated Josh Randall and, before this was over, he was going to have a taste of that bitch Salina Houston Holloway.

He'd had the breed's whore; now he wanted something prime. Of course, she'd have to die after he finished with her. He couldn't have her talking. She'd have to have a terrible accident while out riding. The bitch loved to ride. He was sure that her marriage hadn't changed that about her. She'd have to be ass-deep in the running of their ranch and Rory was so whipped that he would give her free rein to do the work of a man.

Josh sneered. If he had had his way, he would keep her in the bedroom where she belonged. No woman belonged out riding the range. Ranch work was man's work; the only place a woman belonged was flat on her back waiting for her man to come to her. He'd have trained her the right way for a woman to behave, given half the chance. Now that plan was ruined. He didn't want Rory Holloway's leftovers for a wife. He just wanted to sample her.

He'd find the perfect woman to marry. She was out there; maybe the banker's little girl. She was just sixteen; he should be able to train her well. Yes, sir, that was a good idea. All of that money that she would inherit he could invest and buy all of the land that he wanted. No one said he had to marry into a ranching family. Who cared how he reached his goals for an empire as long as the goals were met?

Josh smiled in anticipation of that fresh young body writhing beneath him. He knew for a certainty that she was pure and biddable. Her daddy would have seen to that, wanting her to marry well, and who better than Josh Randall? First, he had some unfinished business to take care of. He didn't want anything to mess up this new plan. He had to plan everything carefully as to not alert anyone to his presence until he was ready to spring.

Josh chuckled to himself. He was smart and cunning. They'd never see him coming and by the time they knew he was back, it would be too late. The trap would already be sprung. Time was now on his side and all he had to do was wait for just the right opportunity.

## Chapter 21

Rory and Salina lay in their big, old bed. Snuggled together, they never took up much space entwined as they always were. Rory could tell that Salina was still upset by what had happened in town. She was laying with her head on his chest, a favorite position of hers. She was way too quiet. Salina was never quiet. She was a jabberer and the fact that she was laying so still now spoke volumes.

He held her gently and rubbed her back. He knew that when she'd collected her thoughts she'd speak. But he didn't know if he could stand her silence for that length of time. He used his free hand to brush her hair back from her face.

"Salina?" He asked quietly. "Are you okay, darlin'?" Rory felt rather than saw her nod. He heard her snuffle and felt the dampness of her tears falling onto his bare chest.

His little spitfire had been so brave and strong today while defending her friend. He waited patiently, knowing that she was getting her emotions under control.

Salina wiped the remaining tears from her face and raised her head from Rory's now dampened chest. She trailed her fingers lovingly through the curly hair that grew there and settled her head onto his shoulder.

Rory readjusted the way they were laying to make them both more comfortable. He kept his hands moving slowly up and down her bare skin, offering her the comfort and security he knew that she needed.

"It was terrible, Rory." Salina began retelling the tale. She added the details that she had neglected to mention while they were in town. "I'm glad that everyone has seemed to accept us as a couple. But I hate how they treat Raven. Mrs. Oliver said such horrible things about Raven and Fox. She even had the nerve to say that their sweet baby should not be raised with decent folk."

Salina's voice now held no tears. She was angry all over again on behalf of her friend. The very idea of that woman speaking about Raven made her spitting mad. "She called Raven a whore and said that her baby wasn't even Fox's. I was so steamed, Rory, that I let my temper run away with my mouth."

Rory chuckled as Salina blushed after going into detail about telling Mrs. Oliver of Hank's frequent visits to the Dove. "Darlin', I'm sure glad that you don't get angry with

me very often. I don't think I could survive the lashing of your tongue." He kissed the top of her head. "I'm proud of the way you and Raven have become close. Not many women would have accepted her as readily as you have, given her previous lifestyle."

"There is nothing to accept. Raven is my friend. She did what she had to in order to survive. She's a stronger, better person than many of those so called God-fearing people in town who passed judgment. I'm proud to call her my friend."

"She is lucky to have you for a friend and I am proud to call you wife, friend and lover."

The last he whispered seductively as he ran his index finger along her jaw and across her bottom lip. He allowed his lips to follow the same trail as he guided her back to rest on the bed. Rising up on his elbow, he started to work his way down the valley between her ripening breasts. He nuzzled first one erect, rosy nipple and then gave the other the same special attention.

His warm tongue worked its way down to Salina's navel, where he circled and dipped inside. Before Salina knew what he was doing, he cupped the little mound of her belly and kissed it.

"Hello, my little one," he said quietly. "I'm your daddy and I can't wait to meet you." He used his hands and made caressing circles around and around on her stomach as if soothing a newborn.

The further along Salina became in her pregnancy, the more concerned he was about hurting her with his loving. Salina assured him that it would be fine as long as they were careful. But sometimes he got carried away and he was worried about being too aggressive. He knew Salina loved making love as much as he did and promised himself that they would be very careful.

He moved up and over Salina, settling between her spread legs. He eased himself down to settle with his lips even with her rounding belly and, giving it a last kiss, he told the little one, "Sleep so that I can give Mama some much needed snuggling." Running his hands down Salina's raised thighs, he spread her legs still further apart. Breathing in the feminine scent that was pure Salina, he nuzzled his way through her woman's curls. He then turned his head to gently kiss the insides of her creamy, white thighs.

Salina arched up into Rory's hot mouth seeking something just beyond her reach. She could hear Rory chuckle as she clutched at his hair. Her toes curled as she felt the first thrust of his tongue and raised her hips still further off of the bed. She called his name as he brought his hands upward to catch her breasts in his palms.

Knowing she was not far from reaching a very fiery peak and wanting Rory with her, Salina pulled once more at his hair as she pleaded with him to join with her.

Rory, ever ready to please his wife and wanting his own release, allowed her to capture his throbbing manhood and guide him home. He kissed her openmouthed, entangling their tongues in their familiar dance, wanting her to taste the sweet honey that she had made just for him. Their tongues thrust as their bodies carried the same sweet tempo. They moaned as their feelings of ecstasy rose still higher, shouting each other's names as they came to completion.

Rory raised his head and looked at Salina a bit sheepishly, a blush rising to his cheeks. "Salina, honey? The baby can't see what we just did, can he? I'd hate for that to have been his first glimpse of his daddy."

Salina laughed and wrapped her arms tightly around her oh-so-cute husband. "Don't worry, Daddy," she said mischievously. "I really don't think he'd recognize you at that angle anyway." She giggled uproariously as he tickled her in retaliation for her smart mouth.

They lay wrapped together for a while longer before drifting into a wondrously peaceful, happy sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Michael Little Fox was offering some comfort to his own wife. She lay on her side facing away from him. He was spooned tightly behind her. He had his arm draped around her waist, holding her securely against him. He'd only heard bits and pieces of what had been said to Raven while she'd been in the store. He didn't need to hear the words to see and to understand the hurt rolling through his beautiful wife.

Raven had been so happy this morning even as she had been heaving violently around the corner of the house. She hadn't been able to contain her excitement and wanting to tell Salina about their baby. She'd had such plans for a happy shopping trip.



Fox leaned in close to her ear, talking softly. "I'm sorry, honey, that your feelings were hurt today. No one has the right to judge the way you've lived your life." He continued to talk soothingly to her, telling her how much he loved her.

Raven turned in his arms to face him. She placed her hands on both sides of his face and gazed lovingly into his beautiful eyes. "Michael. I wasn't hurt because of what she said about me. I was hurt to think of her viciousness hurting you." She took his hand and placed it on her stomach where their love for each other would grow. "I also hurt at the idea that our baby would be ashamed to call me Mama."

Fox grasped his wife's hand tightly and kept it bound with his over the resting-place of their child. In a stern voice, he scolded, "I don't ever want you to feel ashamed, Mrs. Little Fox. You are one of the bravest females I know. Our baby will be proud to call you his or her Mama."

He kissed her tenderly on the lips and enfolded her in his arms. They would not make love this night. As much as he desired his beautiful wife, tonight was for her and she needed to feel safe. He needed to make her feel secure in his love for her as a person. Not for sex; she'd known lust. He would now show her what love truly was. He'd show her his love for her by offering her the comfort she needed.

\* \* \* \*

Silas sat in his small house. He was truly blessed. He had his health, a beautiful daughter who was married to a man that he was equally proud of and now a new grand baby on the way. He was happy and relieved that the people in the community had accepted them as a family. He'd been concerned when the kids had returned from their trip to town.

Salina had not spoken and had gone immediately upstairs. When Salina didn't talk, something was very wrong. Someone had upset his little girl and he didn't like it. A woman in her delicate condition should not be made upset. He wanted answers.

Rory had watched with worried eyes as she slowly climbed the stairs. He'd stayed below just long enough to explain about the cruelty shown to Fox's new bride.

Silas was disappointed in his neighbors. He had never understood how people could be so cruel to one another. Fox's bride was such a sweet little thing. He was proud to hear

of the way Salina had protected her new friend. He'd raised his little girl right. He'd done his best to teach her right from wrong and was very proud in the way she'd grown.

The community accepting Rory and Salina had eased his mind greatly, but he still had the fear of that little shit Josh Randall showing his face and causing harm to his family. Silas would give his life protecting them. He might be old and tired from ranching, but he was far from dead. Anyone threatening those he loved would find that he was a man to be reckoned with.

He knew of Rory's fears in Randall's return. Knew that Rory worried about him seeking revenge against Salina. He would do his best to ease Rory's worries and take some of the load off of him.

## Chapter 22

Two weeks passed. Fox refused to let Raven leave the ranch. He didn't allow her to do any work, either. He let her sit quietly on the front porch enjoying the beautiful weather. He was worried about her and the baby. He could still remember how white her face had been that day in the store. She had scared him spitless. Raven was the best thing to happen to him and he was taking no chances with her health.

He'd been back to town once since the incident and he'd run into Hank Oliver while he was there. He'd told him that he'd better curb his wife's tongue. Fox was not one to cause trouble, but he would not accept anyone insulting his wife. Hank had apologized for his wife's behavior, swearing that it would not happen again. Fox had made a point of approaching Hank in a roomful of men, making it known that he would accept no slurs against Raven. Having said his piece, he'd returned home. He hadn't mentioned the meeting to Raven. He'd made his point and saw no reason for her to be involved any more than she had already been.

\* \* \* \*

Josh, too, had been busy in the weeks since his return. He'd learned from his men that Salina Holloway was breeding. He smiled in anticipation. He'd never lain with a woman who was carrying. The thought thrilled him. He wondered if her stomach would get in the way when he plowed her. He remembered the look of her full breasts as he'd watched her and Rory making love in the hills. Would they be even larger now? Would they be overfilling to both his hands and his mouth? He was hard and aching just thinking about sinking into her warmth. He'd prove to her that he was twice the man of her husband.

He'd been without a woman since returning and knew that the time was drawing nearer to make his move. The fact that Salina was breeding changed his plans just a bit. She wouldn't be working the ranch now, but she'd have to leave the safety of her home at some point. Her guard dog of a husband couldn't be with her all of the time.

He'd heard also that the breed's whore was breeding. He'd laughed outright when he'd heard the insults that had been thrown at her in town. Served her right; she should

have stayed at the Dove where she had been protected from the gossip of the good ladies of Delver.

\* \* \* \*

Salina was bored. Rory was out working with the beeves and, of course, he wouldn't let her go along. He was so protective he sometimes drove her nuts. She loved her husband dearly, but she wished that he'd give her something to do. The sitting around doing nothing but getting fat was something she was not used to.

She'd spent the morning visiting with her daddy in his new house. They'd sat on the front porch drinking tea and playing checkers.

She hated playing checkers. She wanted to be galloping on Duchess's back with the fresh air blowing in her face.

He'd sent her to the main house after beating her soundly three times in a row. "I'd have me more of a challenge playing against that there dog. Go on up in the kitchen and help Agnes. It will pass the time until Rory gets home."

"Okay, Daddy, I'll do better next time. I hate this darn sittin' doin' nothing." She pouted, hoping to get a little sympathy from her daddy.

"Doin' nothing; how can you say that, girl? You're carrin my grandbaby, I'd say that's something. Go on now and scat, your long face is upsettin' my digestion."

Salina walked into the kitchen where Agnes was bending over the tub kneading bread. "Agnes, mind if I help you out some?"

"Well, glory be, child. I didn't think this day would ever come. You sure can, I've been itching to have you come into the kitchen so as I can teach you some about cookin'."

Salina smiled; everyone was aware that she couldn't even boil water. "Whew, it sure is hot in here," she muttered as she pushed her sweat-soaked hair from her face and clutched the wall. The heat was making her dizzy.

"Here you go, Salina, why don't you beat these eggs up for me?" Agnes handed her the bowl.

She'd thought she was long over her morning sickness, but the sight of the yellow of the broken eggs looking back at her jiggling and wiggling combined with the smell of cooking meat sent her running for the door.

"Ugh, damn, I'm useless," she mumbled as she wiped her mouth and rinsed with the cup that always hung outside the kitchen.

Agnes had followed close behind. "Here, honey, chew on some of this dried bread and then go lay yourself down and rest."

Now she was banned from the kitchen and her daddy didn't want her company. There was only one place to be. She found herself back at the beginning, sitting in the barn with the old cow dog Queenie laying at her feet.

All of her pups were gone now. They'd all been given to good homes. Salina eased herself awkwardly down on to the ground next to the dog. Queenie looked at her sadly and put her head in Salina's lap. Salina smiled and scratched between her old friend's ears. They'd been through many years together and shared many secrets.

Rory stood in the doorway of the barn watching his beautiful wife. He was remembering a time not so long ago when he'd done the same thing. He smiled as he thought that Salina was not as graceful today as she had been months earlier. But she was more beautiful. She had such a radiant shine to her face. She glowed. Her eyes were always shining brightly.

He walked across the barn and settled himself next to her. They sat quietly for some time. Rory finally broke the silence. "Are you feeling better, darlin'?" Agnes said you'd been sick."

Salina stuck her bottom lip out but couldn't stop the smile that appeared "I think she gave me those raw eggs on purpose to get me out of her kitchen. I just couldn't stand those darn things swaying back and forth staring up at me." She shivered as if the thought caused her to have chills.

"Daddy doesn't want me, either." She could feel the beginning of tears forming. Her feelings shouldn't be hurt. No one meant to make her feel unneeded. But she did just the same.

"I can't do anything right. I'm just taking up space."

“You’re definitely not unwanted, darlin’. I always want you.” He raised his eyebrows up and down leeringly and took hold of her hand.

“How would you like to go for a walk with me? I asked Agnes to pack a basket. I told her that I wanted to take the beautiful stray that was hiding out in our barn on a picnic.” Rising to his feet, he pulled his wobbly wife to her feet.

Salina wrapped her arms around his neck “Thanks, Rory. You always know when I need something. I’m going stir crazy sitting around doing nothing.” Still holding his hand, she practically skipped out of the barn. “A picnic with a handsome man sounds absolutely wonderful!”

They walked to the creek hand in hand. Laying a blanket beneath some trees, Rory helped Salina to the ground. He sat behind her leaning back against a tree, pulling her snugly back between his spread legs. He wrapped his arms around her expanding waist and rested his hands on the mound of her stomach. He rubbed his chin repeatedly and lovingly back and forth on the top of her head.

Salina reclined back against Rory, totally at ease. She loved the feel of his hands on her body. She smiled, feeling the rigid length of him pressing against her. The fact that he still wanted her and found her desirable even with her round belly and awkward movements brought a grin to her face. She wiggled against him invitingly. Wickedly and with playful intent, she reached behind her and between their bodies to cup him in her hands and gave his aroused Johnson a firm squeeze.

She giggled like a young girl when he bent down and bit her neck in retaliation and called her “Minx.” Salina turned and rose to her knees still between his spread legs. She gave him an innocent look, but ruined its effect when she raised her eyebrow and looked at him challengingly.

Salina was very confident in her sexuality and, loving to tease and shock Rory with her boldness, she reached for the snap and zipper of his jeans. She gazed intently into his eyes. She could read his growing desire by their darkening. Gripping the top of his jeans, she prodded him to lift his hips as she tugged them down, releasing his hardened shaft. She licked her lips and gave him a wicked grin, which grew wider as she heard him moan.

Salina smiled; she might have Rory moaning, but she wasn't finished with her surprises just yet. Rory's manhood was waving enthusiastically, offering her a welcoming ride. Not wishing to disappoint, Salina picked up the hem of her gown and straddled a very stunned Rory. She was hot, wet and very ready to receive him. She'd been anticipating this moment since Rory had suggested the picnic. Therefore, she'd removed her undergarments when she'd went on one of her never-ending trips to the outhouse, thus the shocked look on her husband's handsome face.

Rory was absolutely shocked. His wife was running around loose without any underwear. *Good Lord!* he thought to himself. How long had she been naked under her gown? If she'd just removed the things, where in the world had she left them? Before he could form the words to ask her his questions, she settled her woman's center snugly over his very erect manhood. He tried to keep his eyes open and focused on his wife. Salina had still not broken eye contact with him. The pleasure of Salina riding him was so intense that he thought his eyes were going to roll back into his head.

Salina could feel Rory bucking beneath her. She could not believe how deeply he filled her. Joined as they were, the feelings were more intense. She rocked back and forth on his hardened shaft. As the feelings grew, she lengthened her strokes, bringing him still deeper inside of her.

Rory was straining, his hips lifting up off of the ground. Salina kept up her continued slow, steady strokes, prolonging the sweet agony as they climbed ever higher. Climbing higher toward the heavens and the burst of stars that they knew awaited them at the top.

"Salina!" Rory shouted as he released his seed inside of her. His release enforced her own and Salina collapsed against him. Rory was trying to recover from his own climax. He rubbed Salina's back, knowing how much she enjoyed it, giving them both the time they needed for their breathing to slow.

Finally Rory could contain his questions no longer. Reaching down, he pinched her dimpled backside and with a humorous ring to his voice asked, "Okay, darlin'. Do you want to tell me where you left your under drawers?" He now arched his eyebrow at her questioningly. He tried unsuccessfully to keep the grin from his face.

Salina looked up as he asked his question and, seeing his grin, she did not even try to control the giggle that escaped. "I took them off and left them folded in the outhouse. Do

you think anyone will notice them?” Salina smiled. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat just to see that surprised look on your face.”

Rory shook his head and rolled them over onto their sides. “Shock? Woman, that doesn’t even begin to describe what I was feeling, but I soon forgot it when you caused me to feel so damn good.” He squeezed her tightly. “I love you, honey. You and all of your wonderful surprises.

The two of them lay under the tree, Salina wrapped in Rory’s arms. They lay spooned together the rest of the afternoon, enjoying the rare time that they had alone.

“I’ll try to make more time to be with you, darling,” Rory promised. He knew how much she wanted to be involved in the everyday running of the ranch. She was sacrificing something she truly loved to protect herself and their baby. He knew she didn’t think of it as a sacrifice, but in a way that’s exactly what it was.

Salina kissed Rory on the cheek. It was a tender thank you kiss, not as a lover but as a true friend. She appreciated the effort he was making to keep her happy. She knew first hand how hard Rory worked and the demands that running the ranch made on a person.

They were now short two people with her daddy still not working and now her unable to work, too. She would not ask him to spread himself thinner. She was happy with her life, just a might unsure right now on her new role as a wife and mama.

“I’m fine, Rory. You don’t need to worry about me.” Picking up their blanket, she continued, “I’ll find my way in running the house. My emotions are just jumbled right now. Give me time and I’ll get everything figured out.” She smiled wistfully. “Besides, in a few months I’ll have more than enough to keep me busy.” She said this as she patted her belly fondly.

Rory picked her up and, as he carried her to the wagon, he looked at her worriedly. “I just want your happiness, Salina.” He placed her in the seat and gripped her hands. “I never want you to be sorry that we are married.”

Salina angrily jerked her hands from his hold and punched him in the shoulder. “Rory Holloway! How could you say such a thing?”

Grabbing the front of his shirt, she bent down rather awkwardly and pulled him up until they were nose to nose. “You listen to me. I love you with all of my heart and I never want to hear you say that I’d ever be sorry for our marriage” Salina’s face reddened



with her rage. “Ohhh! You’ve made me so mad! If I knew I could get away with it, I’d leave your sorry behind here and go home without you!”

Rory knew he had better not smile. But, darn it, she was so cute when she was riled. He couldn’t resist the temptation of her lips so close and so he feathered kisses along them. He drew back and could not contain his grin any longer. “I love you, too, my little spitfire, and I’m sorry for upsetting you.” He reached between them to ease Salina’s grip on his shirt. “I’ll never question your feelings on our marriage again. Now,” he said with a mischievous grin, “let’s go find your wayward underwear.”

“Oh, you,” Salina said as Rory settled himself beside her on the seat. She snuggled close against him, her head riding comfortably on his shoulder. She couldn’t believe after the loving they had just shared he would think such a thing. The very thought of being without Rory made her feel physically ill. Theirs was a love that only comes along once in a lifetime and she was hanging onto that love forever.

They rode back to the ranch house in silence. As they arrived in the yard they burst into hysterical laughter, for hanging from the corner of the outhouse blowing proudly in the breeze were Salina’s snow-white under drawers.

As Rory helped Salina down from the wagon, Silas came out of the barn. He never broke his stride although he was chuckling softly as he gave them a wink. He walked past on his way to his own house, saying quietly, “Darndest thing you ever saw, Bandit brought me those drawers there over an hour ago. Don’t rightly know where he found them.”

Salina’s face turned three shades of red. “Daddy, you’d best teach that pup of yours some manners,” she scolded, trying to keep a straight face.

Silas opened his house door and, still chuckling, said, “I might better have taught my daughter to hide her drawers a little better.” With that, he turned and walked into his house.

Entering their own house the two, still laughing, were met by a stern looking Agnes. She had her hands on her hips and was shaking her head. She, too, was fighting back a smile so that she could scold.

“I declare you young ones should know better. You should have seen your daddy chasing that pup down and then having a tug of war with him over your unmentionables.”

Salina and Rory couldn't help themselves. They collapsed against one another laughing hysterically. Picturing Silas chasing the dog and under drawers through the yard was more than their senses of humor could handle.

She certainly hoped none of the hired hands had been around while the chase had been on. The two of them continued up the stairs to their room.

Rory thought maybe he could do a little search and see if he could find anything else wayward under her gown.

## Chapter 23

The next morning at the breakfast table, Salina announced that she was taking the wagon and going to visit Raven. “Fox has gone all protective and won’t let Raven off of the ranch.” Salina looked over at Rory and arching her eyebrow, challengingly she asked, “Has he been taking lessons from you, by chance?”

Rory, with just a glance at Silas, telegraphed his unease with Salina going to Fox’s alone. He didn’t let on at the silent exchange between him and his father-in-law and instead shook his head and answered his wife with a mischievous grin on his face. “No, darlin’. I haven’t been giving lessons to anyone but you.”

Silas watched the exchange between Rory and Salina. She was clearly embarrassed by what Rory had just said to her, as her face had just turned a brilliant red. Although Silas didn’t understand what they were talking about, he had understood Rory’s look to him. Seeing that Salina was giving Rory hell for embarrassing her, he thought to save the young man from his daughter’s cutting tongue. Also, he wanted to ask his questions while her mind was still occupied with her husband. Interrupting her, Silas asked, “I’d like to go visiting myself. You don’t mind, honey, if I ride along with you, do you?”

Silas did his best to look like a pathetic old man in his need to get away from the ranch, which couldn’t be further from the truth. Silas loved the ranch and would be happy to never set foot off of its beautifully rich soil. But he didn’t want her to catch on to his real reason for wanting to tag along. He knew that Salina would argue if she knew that he was going to watch over her.

She felt more than able to care for herself. She was very capable; both he and Rory had taught her to protect herself. But there were more than just the everyday dangers now to worry about, and in her present condition she wasn’t as agile as she always had been.

Silas shared Rory’s worries. No man who treated a woman as savagely as Randall had treated Raven (or God help them if it had been Josh that killed that little girl) could be trusted. And the fact that Salina was carrying would make no difference at all to a man of his caliber. Silas was going to ride with his daughter and offer his protection whether she liked it or not.

Salina looked at her father warily. She knew how much he hated leaving the ranch. “Daddy, you know you don’t like leaving the ranch. Are you sure that you want to ride along with me?”

Silas knew that he was going to have to pull out the big guns. “Honey, the truth of the matter is I’m bored clear to death with nothing to do around this old place. You know I’m poor of health and I’d like to go visiting while I’m still able. Only the good Lord knows how much time I have left.” For added emphasis, Silas clutched at his chest, hoping that he hadn’t overplayed his hand.

Rory tried to hide his smile at the hurt look on Silas’s face. He knew Salina wouldn’t be leaving the ranch without her daddy. Silas was pleading his case now, looking so pathetic and hurt that it wasn’t long before Salina was agreeing to let him come along.

“Alright, Daddy, but you have to promise to take it easy. I don’t want you back in your sick bed.”

Rory had to give the sly old fox credit; he’d wormed his way right in and Salina had not caught on to his real reasons for going.

They left an hour after breakfast. Rory was very uneasy about letting Salina leave without him, but he couldn’t think of any acceptable excuse as to why she shouldn’t go. Silas would be with her and Rory knew that he would do anything to protect his daughter.

Rory lifted Salina up onto the seat of the wagon and gave her a kiss goodbye. He deepened the kiss and saw his father-in-law stowing his rifle under the seat. He drew back and told them both to “have a nice visit.” He knew how anxious Salina was to see to Raven. She’d been extremely worried about how she was taking the viciousness of the townspeople. She wanted to reassure her friend.

Salina was surprised to feel the wagon rock beneath her father’s weight as he climbed aboard. She had been so involved in Rory’s delicious kisses that she hadn’t even heard her father’s approach.

The wagon rocked again and she looked back to see her father’s Bandit dog sitting happily in the back of the wagon with his tongue hanging out as if to say, “Don’t forget me.”

She chuckled and, shaking her head, said, “Yes, you can come along, too, you big baby.” She turned and waved to Rory while clicking her tongue and setting the horses into motion.

Silas and Salina talked of how wonderfully their lives had changed in the last couple of months. They took their time, traveling slowly and enjoying the ride.

Silas kept his eyes open, watching for anything out of place. He didn’t really expect any trouble, but he would be ready if something were to happen.

Salina was really enjoying herself. She loved her life on the ranch. But because of her condition and being unable to do any of the work on it, she felt smothered. She was looking forward to her visit with Raven. Salina was sure that her daddy would have an equally enjoyable time visiting with Fox.

The two of them shared the love of horses and would have endless things to talk about. She shook her head, thinking even the dog would have a good time, too, running and playing with his sister.

She chuckled. Raven wouldn’t know what to think when she saw the wagon full of guests pulling into her yard. The people and animals piling out would probably drive Raven crazy. It was a good thing she’d brought one of Agnes’s pies to smooth the way.

Raven was sitting in her chair working on an outfit for the baby when she heard a wagon approaching and heard Little Lady barking, along with the return bark of another dog. She went out onto the porch and smiled in welcome as she saw Salina and her father driving into the ranch yard accompanied by, of all things, a dog that looked a lot like Little Lady. She shook her head; her friend sure knew how to brighten her days. She was so happy for the friendship that the two of them shared.

Fox, too, had seen the wagon arrive and had walked from the corral to greet their company. He shook Silas’s hand before moving to the other side of the wagon and lifting Salina down to set her gently on her feet. He waited for her to catch her balance before releasing her and stepping back. Salina laughed and said, “I’d like to see you try that about two months from now.”

They all laughed and Fox responded, “You grow more beautiful every day, my friend.”

Salina smiled and pushed him gently aside. "Thank you kindly, Fox, but you save all of those pretty words for your beautiful wife. She is the one that deserves them."

Still smiling, she walked towards her friend and they shared a warm embrace. "How are you, Raven? It seems like forever since I've seen you." She turned toward the men and raised her arm. "You remember my daddy, Silas, don't you?"

Silas bent forward in a slight bow. "Ma'am, nice to see you again. I hope you don't mind my coming by with Salina. I needed to get away and I thought to myself why should that Michael Little Fox get to enjoy the company of two such beautiful ladies?"

Raven stepped forward and took the older man's hand. She had met him once before and thought that Salina was very lucky to have such a fine, caring man for a father. "You are always welcome in our home, Mr. Houston. Please, won't you come in?"

Silas shook his head and smiled as he patted her hand. "Why don't you ladies go and enjoy your visit? I want to go see some of the prime horseflesh your husband is working with. But we'll be happy to come in later and enjoy a piece of that pie Salina wouldn't let me sample on the way over here." Turning to Fox, he said, "Come on, my boy. Why don't you show me those young colts you're so proud of?"

The men turned and walked to the corral. The two dogs chased each other through the yard. Little Lady was not sure that she wanted to leave her mistress's side and Bandit was equally sure that he didn't want to leave his master. In the end, their peppiness won out and they ran and played like puppies, barking joyously, causing the humans to shake their heads at their playfulness.

Salina and Raven chose to sit on the porch so that they could enjoy the fresh air. Neither brought up the subject of the last time they had seen each other, not wanting to put a damper on this visit. The two of them had much happier things to discuss.

They talked about their husbands and how overly protective the two of them were. They complained to each other of how they weren't allowed to go anywhere or do anything. The two of them giggled like schoolgirls as they confessed how tender and loving those same two stubborn men could be.

Salina blushed as she told Raven about the wonderful time she and Rory had had when they'd gone on a picnic.

Raven, too, turned a fiery red when she had confessed how just that morning Fox had taken her to the creek where they'd had such a wonderfully tender, sexual experience.

It was embarrassing to the two young women to talk of such things. They did not go into detail, but it was so nice to talk to another woman. They glanced repeatedly toward the corral while talking to be sure that the men didn't overhear their conversations.

Fox kept a constant eye on the two women visiting so intently on his front porch. He wondered what they were talking about. They were giggling and blushing something fierce. It was a glorious sight to see. He could stand and watch them for hours. It made him happy to see the smiles and to hear the giggles bursting forth from his wife.

Raven hadn't said any more about what had happened, but he knew that it still sat heavy on her heart. He loved her and her happiness meant everything to him. Salina's friendship meant the world to Raven and the two of them having so much fun made him smile. He wondered if they'd let him in on the joke they were sharing.

Angling his body so he could watch the girls and talk with Silas at the same time, he showed the older man the mustangs that he had been working with. He was proud to show his accomplishments to a man that he had always greatly admired.

Agnes had sent a freshly baked apple pie. The four of them sat down and ate it. They visited and laughed at the antics of the two pups. It seemed all too soon that Silas announced that it was time to head home.

Fox and Silas rehitched the team.

"Keep a sharp eye on the return trip. I feel an uneasiness much like Rory's."

Silas patted him on the back. "Don't you worry, Fox. I can protect my little girl and myself." Looking Fox in the eye, he said, "You take care of that little bride of yours. You've got quite a treasure in that little lady."

Fox thanked Silas and the two of them stood talking quietly as the women said their goodbyes. Fox again lifted Salina off of her feet and this time settled her onto the seat of the wagon. Salina shook her head, smiling, and waved. "See you soon," she called as Silas, with reins in his hand, headed the team out of the yard towards home. Bandit, still playing, ran after them and leaped into the back of the wagon.

"I had a good time, Daddy. I love the ranch, but it was sure nice getting away for a short time. Raven and I are planning another picnic." She nodded her head stubbornly.

“No matter what our husbands say, if it were up to the two of them we’d not leave the ranch until our babes have babes of their own.”

Silas laughed at the exaggeration. “You should count herself lucky to have a man dedicated solely to looking out for you and wanting to protect you against all odds.”

Salina shook her head at the men’s foolishness. What kind of danger could there be riding from their ranch to Fox’s and back?

Little did Salina know that danger was closer than she could have imagined and her happy carefree life was about to turn into a living hell. Danger was even now stalking them.



## Chapter 24

Josh couldn't believe his luck. He'd decided to leave the ranch to do a little scouting; it was pure coincidence that he should come across Salina and her father out in the open and all alone. Now was the time for him to make his move. He didn't have his plans completely made, but he'd never find a better opportunity to grab the bitch. The old man wouldn't be a challenge at all. He giggled to himself, amazed that Holloway thought so little of his pregnant cow of a wife that he'd send her out with only the old man for protection.

He watched as they drew closer to his hiding place among the trees. He'd have to get rid of the old man first. Raising his rifle to his shoulder, he aimed and pulled the trigger. He watched gleefully as the old man fell from the wagon, leaving a screaming Salina trying desperately to recover the reins to bring the now-running team of horses under control. It was a double bonus to Josh when he saw a dog leap from the wagon and go to the fallen man. Now there was nothing in the way of claiming his prize. Kicking his own horse, he sent him into a run to catch his running prey.

"Daddy!" Salina screamed; she couldn't believe what was happening. Someone had just shot her father. She had watched, unable to help, as he fell from the wagon. Frantically, she reached for the reins. She had to stop the horse and go back to where her father had fallen. She could only pray that he was alive. She sighed in relief as she heard the running hooves of a horse. Sure that help was on its way, she looked over her shoulder and urged her horses to a faster pace when she recognized Josh Randall moving to overtake the wagon. Only then did she begin to understand what had happened.

The devil had returned. He had returned for one reason. He'd come back to claim her. Salina knew there was no hope of escaping him in the wagon and she didn't want to endanger her unborn baby's life. She did the only thing she could to protect them both from serious injury. She pulled back on the reins and with the help of Josh brought the team under control.

The horses were under control, but Salina herself was in no way controlled.

"You bastard!" she screamed. "What have you done?" She attempted to swing at him, but he caught her arm in a fierce, hurting grip.

“Calm down, Princess. You and I are going for a little ride.” Not wanting to be slowed down by the wagon he pulled Salina from the front and settled her on the saddle in front of him. She began to struggle against him, kicking out with her feet and swinging her arms.

Josh tightened his arms around her even as she bent down and bit viciously into his wrist. “You little bitch,” he swore as he released her and gave her a punch to the cheek, knocking her out cold. That would teach the little bitch who was boss and he would at least be able to carry out this part of his plan in peace and quiet. The little hellcat wouldn’t give him any problems for some time.

Reaching down, he attached a lead to the team of horses and led them and the wagon into the woods. He wanted them out of eyesight of the body, which lay back on the road quite a distance. He was taking no chances of being followed. He tied them to a tree so that they wouldn’t wander and be found. He then turned his horse and with his prize laying limply in his arms headed into the hills.

\* \* \* \*

Rory felt uneasy about Salina leaving the ranch, even with her father along for protection. He hadn’t heard any news on Randall and that bothered him. Randall was a man who liked to be seen and talked about. He wanted all of the attention that he could receive. Something wasn’t right that no one had heard from him.

He decided to take matters into his own hands. “Jim, do me a favor and ride over to Randall’s spread. Find out where that bastard is hiding himself.”

“Will do, Rory. Do you want me to meet you back here?”

“No, I’m going to meet Silas and Salina. I don’t like them being out alone. They should be about half way between the two ranches.”

“She’s sure as shootin not going to like you chasing after her, Boss.”

“I know, I’m probably worryin’ for nothin’, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. Let me know as soon as you hear anything.” He grimaced, thinking of the ass-chewing that his little wife would give him for being so protective. She was such a sight to see that he could hardly wait to see the angry fire burning in her beautiful eyes.

Giving his horse a nudge, he rode toward Fox's house. He had been riding for quite some time when he noticed how quiet it was in the area. No birds sang; it was as if even the wind stood still. He thought he heard a dog barking, but then nothing. It must have been something else, like maybe a cougar was nearby with a fresh kill; if so, he didn't want to disturb it. A cougar with a fresh kill could be deadly. In a hurry, wanting to meet up with Silas and Salina, he didn't notice the tracks where a wagon had recently passed.

The closer he got to Fox's, the more uneasy he became. *I should have met them by now. Salina should know better than to stay this long.* It would be growing dark soon and it was always more dangerous to travel. It was his fault. He should have told Salina about some of the added dangers. He didn't really think that it would have made much of a difference.

Salina was so stubborn that she probably would have insisted on the visit to see Raven regardless of the risks. She would have not given any thoughts to the dangers, thinking that she could take care of herself.

But Rory knew that Silas wouldn't be so careless. He was aware of the rumors regarding Randall and Rory was sure that they should have been well on the way home.

Something was wrong; he kicked his horse into a hard gallop, more anxious to get to Fox's ranch. And if he did find his wife still there, she would have a sore bottom for scaring him in such a way. As for his father-in-law, he would get a tongue-lashing, too.

\* \* \* \*

Bandit lay loyally at his master's unmoving body. He whined and pushed at Silas, trying desperately to get him up from the ground. He tried again, licking at Silas's face, wanting reassurances from his master, knowing that something terrible had happened.

The pain woke Silas, a terrible burning in his shoulder. He winced as he tried to move away from something rough and wet on his face.

Whatever it was kept following the movement persistently. It was then that he heard Bandit whining and knew that his faithful companion had stayed with him. He was only a young pup, but he was loyal and he was far from stupid.

Silas didn't know what had happened, but he knew that Salina must be in trouble or she would have never left him injured. He was aware of being shot, but he had not seen

the shooter. The fact that Salina was gone led him to only one frightening conclusion. The shooting had been no accident. Josh Randall had returned and he now had his precious baby girl.

Silas had to go for help. He tried to roll to his feet, but the pain in his shoulder was nauseating. He lay as still as possible, waiting for the spell to pass. He couldn't lay there for long; he knew that he had to get up.

Bandit barked as if urging his master, knowing that he had to get him up from the ground. Again, Silas attempted to roll, this time making it to his hands and knees.

The pain in his shoulder and chest area was terrible, causing him to become sick. He emptied his stomach and, feeling dizzy but not wanting to risk lying down again, he stayed in his present position. He would get help for his little girl even if he had to crawl to get it.

\* \* \* \*

Fox and Raven returned to the house after waving goodbye to their guests. Fox enfolded his wife in his embrace and began nuzzling her neck even as his hand wandered upward to fondle her sensitive breasts. Smiling, knowing that he had her thoroughly distracted, he asked, "Okay, sweetheart. Would you like to tell me what had you and Salina blushing so prettily while you were sitting on the porch talking?"

Raven moaned at the pleasure her husband was giving her. She arched back against Michael and raised her arm up behind her to encircle his neck, urging his head down to meet her waiting lips even as she whispered teasingly, "I don't think so, my love." With a smile on her face, she glided her tongue across his lips, not thrusting for entrance, but licking and teasing tenderly, probing only to withdraw. "It was just talk amongst us women. I'm sure it wouldn't have interested you in the least." She grinned wickedly as she continued her teasing.

Fox was just beginning to work on the buttons at the front of Raven's gown when he heard the pounding of a horse's hooves. He kissed Raven soundly and raised his head. Something was wrong. No one rode a horse at that fast a pace unless there was trouble.

Setting Raven aside apologetically, he went to the still-open door.

“Something’s wrong, Raven. It’s Rory and he’s coming in fast.” His heart stopped beating as he saw Rory riding hell bent for leather into his ranch yard. Calling out to Raven, Fox ran out to meet his frantic friend.

“Rory, what is it? Did something happen to Salina or Silas on their way home?”

Rory had jumped from his horse and now stood facing his friend. “Are you telling me that they aren’t here? God, Fox! They never made it home. I didn’t meet them on my way over here, either.”

Raven, having now pulled herself back together, came out onto the porch. Seeing the worried looks on both men’s faces, she brought her hand to her mouth and let out a cry of anguish. She knew something must have happened to her friend. Rory wouldn’t have ridden his horse so hard without a good reason.

Fox, hearing his wife’s cry, turned and, seeing the look on her face, walked back to her and soothingly began to reassure her as he led her to a chair on the porch. While he was soothing his wife, he and Rory were staring intently at each other. They knew in their hearts what had happened to Salina and her father. They just hoped and prayed that they would be in time to save them.

Fox began ticking off in his mind the supplies needed for the manhunt that was sure to come along with the rescue.

Raven clutched at Fox’s hand. “Don’t you even think of staying at home with me. I’ll be fine here by myself.” Tears were falling softly down her cheeks as her worry for her friend increased. The thought of Salina in the hands of that animal sickened her. Josh was cruel. She prayed for Salina and the baby. “You go with Rory and bring Salina home safely. Between the two of you, I know you will find her.”

Raven sat up straight and collected herself. Rising to her feet, she began to plan. “I’ll go pack some food and other supplies that you may need when you find her.”

“Thanks, Raven. Fox, I need a fresh horse. I can’t wait for you. Catch up to me when you get everything we need.”

Fox nodded his head. “I’ll be right behind you, my friend. Let’s get you a fresh mount.”

They were headed for the corral when they heard the sounds of another horse being ridden hard. Both men stopped and turned. "That's Jim, I sent him to Randall's spread. I hope to God we're wrong and he was there."

Jim pulled back on his reins to bring his horse to a fast stop, sending the dust rolling. He jumped from his saddle and ran to Rory, eager to share his important news.

"Rory, you were right to worry. That son of a bitch has been back for weeks!" Jim smiled as he rubbed his skinned knuckles on his right hand. "With a little convincing I managed to get Jack Riley to talk. It seems Randall has been having the Triple H watched and having reports brought back to him on the comings and goings at the ranch." He stopped smiling as he continued. "He particularly wanted information on Salina and also he seemed interested in Fox's wife, Raven."

Jim watched carefully as he reported his last bit of information. He knew how much Rory loved his wife and hated to tell him what he had learned. God help them all if anything happened to Salina.

"Randall rode out early this morning headed in this direction. He still hadn't returned when I was there."

Fox and Raven had heard Jim's news. Fox was fuming. So, the little snake had been watching them. The thought that he had been spying all this time on him and his wife enraged him. The bastard had been asking questions and plotting to steal the women. God, he felt guilty, but he could only thank God that it had not been Raven who was taken. But Salina was family, too, and Fox had sworn to protect her.

Looking at Rory, he asked, "Can I trust him?"

Rory, knowing what Fox was asking, nodded.

Fox looked at Jim; the boy was young, with close cut blonde hair and bright green eyes. He didn't look much older than a school boy.

He was also a man that Rory trusted. Fox did the only thing he could. He, too, entrusted him with everything.

"Protect my wife with your life."

Jim nodded. "You have my word, Fox, no harm will come to her."

Michael Little Fox was a good man and Jim felt honored that he trusted him enough to protect his wife.

Jim stepped forward again. “There are more men on the way. I sent one of the housekeeper’s kids from the Randall place to the Triple H. I figured you’d have need of them.”

He was glad that he’d had the forethought to send the kid. If Randall did have Salina, she was in great danger. They had all heard the rumors surrounding Randall and had been so careful to keep an eye out for him. It stuck in his craw that the bastard had come back with no one the wiser.

Rory nodded his head, not trusting himself to speak. He was thankful that his ranch hand had thought ahead. They would need the manpower. They had lots of country to hunt and no real idea where to look. Fox was one of the best trackers he knew and Rory himself was no slouch. They would find his wife. He wouldn’t think anything else. He could not allow himself to believe anything else.

Salina was his life. Without her, he had nothing. He could wait no longer; grabbing the mane of his borrowed horse, he leaped aboard and thundered out of the ranch yard. He hoped his friends had not seen the sheen of tears falling down his cheeks. He needed these few minutes to control his roiling emotions. Men were not supposed to cry. But right now Rory wanted to roll up in a ball and sob.

Fox placed his hands on Raven’s shoulder and turned her to face him. He kissed her on the lips and stared intently into her eyes. “Promise me that you’ll stay put until I get back.”

Raven nodded. “You know I will; I’ll be waiting for you. I want a promise from you, too, a promise to return to me safely.”

“You know I’ll come home, Sugar, I have grown accustomed to seeing your sweet face waiting for me.”

Raven’s smile faltered. “May God bless you and return Salina to us unharmed.”

Fox ran his index finger down the side of Raven’s face and nodded his head.

Cupping her face gently in his roughened hand, he whispered, “I love you, be safe.”

Grabbing the two rifles he’d leaned against the post on the porch, Fox mounted his own horse. Wheeling him around, he galloped out of the yard after his friend.

“Catch,” he called to Rory as his horse came up abreast of him. They would need the extra gun in the search for Rory’s family. Whatever the outcome, Josh Randall was a dead man.

Fox ignored the blotchy face of his friend. He knew that if the situation was reversed he would be in exactly the same shape. He prayed fervently that they would find Salina soon. The longer that she was with the madman, the more danger she was in. He wondered about Silas. What would Randall do with the old man? He had no need of him. Fox didn’t even want to bring up his fears to Rory. He was guessing they’d find the old man laying dead along a trail somewhere.



## Chapter 25

Josh rode up into the rocks. He had no real destination in mind. He would know the best place to carry out his little game of revenge when he found it. He only needed seclusion to carry out his not-yet-planned scheme. He wanted to make the bitch suffer, wanted to hear her scream. She was such a cold bitch that any emotion she showed would be worth the time and effort it took.

He smiled to himself, thinking about maybe even letting her live after he was through with her. The humiliation that she would suffer after he raped her would be more than she could bear. Her sainted husband would definitely not want her after she'd lain with the great Josh Randall.

He'd plow her good. No way would she or Rory be able to live with the fact that she'd been with him so intimately. She'd never be able to go back to Holloway after having his lovin'; Holloway would never be the lover that Josh was. Yes, maybe he would let her live. Josh knew that his time was coming to an end. It was only a matter of time before he was caught. They would find the old man's body soon and piece things together. His days were definitely numbered, but he intended to have some fun with the days or hours that remained. If he had to die, he would die happily, knowing that he had had the ultimate revenge

\* \* \* \*

Rory and Fox had not ridden for long when they met up with three other riders from the Triple H. The ranch hands didn't know why they had been summoned to their boss's side but all of them were loyal to Silas, Rory and Salina. They were always treated kindly and like part of the family. The three cowboys knew that whatever it was that their boss needed, they would do everything in their power to help.

"Thanks for comin'. Salina and Silas never made it home from Fox's place. We can only guess from the information that Jim brought from Randall's that Josh has them." Rory didn't wait for questions from his men, but got straight to the point.

“This could get dangerous. I have no idea what we’ll find when we do find Randall.” He turned his head towards Fox, receiving a nod. As Fox walked off, Rory continued. “I do know that when Randall is found he won’t be coming back alive. He’s a loose cannon and has to be stopped. If you men can’t accept that or don’t want to take the risks, I’ll understand. You can go on back to the ranch with no hard feelings.”

Rory paused, giving them each time to digest all that he had said. He could tell by the shocked looks on their faces that they had never expected to be searching for two of their three bosses and a man that was so sick as to rape and kill women. He sighed with relief as all three men sat up a little straighter in their saddles and nodded their heads.

Mel McCoy spoke for the three of them. “You can count us in, Rory. You know how much Salina and Silas means to each and every one of us.” Looking toward the other hands, he said, “We are all planning on spoiling that little baby of yours rotten and helping to raise him or her to be the best darn cowboy around.”

That comment brought the smile to Rory’s face that the men were hoping for. “As far as that low-down sidewinder goes, any animal that’s sick and rabid should be put down and as far as we’re concerned it takes a sick animal to hurt a woman. We understand what has to be done and we’re proud to ride with you.”

Rory nodded his head. “Thanks for your support and your help. My son or daughter will be extremely lucky to have each and every one of you looking out for him or her. Now let’s go find my family and bring them home.”

Fox had not been listening to the conversation. He dismounted and walked along the trail looking for any signs that might lead them to the two missing people. He could tell that a wagon had been through recently. He continued walking and hit pay dirt when he saw where the grass lay trampled. Apparently, Silas and Salina had turned off the main trail, probably to enjoy the longer ride. They still should have met Rory, as the trail only wound a ways before meeting back up with the main trail.

They now had a place to start. “Here.” He called out to Rory and pointed the way as he mounted his horse. The search had begun and he hoped and prayed that the outcome would be happy and successful.

\* \* \* \*

Silas finally made it to a tree. He felt like he'd been on all fours in his own vomit for hours. It was a very degrading thing for a man of his caliber to be caught in his own waste and he was glad that he'd been saved from that insult. It had taken him a mite longer than he thought it should to reach the tree and he settled back against it to rest for just a minute. It was growing dark and he had to keep moving.

Rory would be worrying something fierce and he had to get help for Salina. He had listened intently for the sounds of the horses and the wagon, but it seemed that the coward who had shot him had stolen them too. Using his legs as support, Silas pushed himself up the tree to stand once more as a man and not a child. His spirits lifted somewhat. He was now on his feet. He would make it. He looked down as Bandit woofed his encouragement.

"Yes, my boy, we're going to make it. I think I should have named you Hero." He knew that without the encouragement of the pup he would have laid down and just died. "Let's get to it, my young friend," he said as he took his first stumbling step away from the support of the tree.

Wobbling and weaving, Silas stumbled down the trail at an almost drunken walk. He now wished that he and Salina had not taken the longer trail home, but they had been having such a nice time and he knew how much she was enjoying herself. He had wanted to keep that smile on her face as long as possible. It was pure old man foolishness and he hoped it didn't cost him his little girl's life.

He looked up through the darkening trail as the sun was rapidly sinking lower. He thought he saw a shadow of riders coming his way and was sure of it when he heard Bandit barking. Weaving and walking, he tried to stay conscious. He only prayed that it was a search party coming toward him. He reached out with his arm as he slowly toppled to the ground.

It was getting too dark. Fox knew that they were going to have to stop searching soon. There was no way he could follow a trail at night and he didn't want to risk missing some important detail. He looked over, "Rory..."

"Wait." Rory raised his hand. He had heard a dog barking. He was sure of it. "That's Silas's pup, I'd know that yip anywhere, he's constantly chasing and barking at something."

Giving his horse a kick, he turned to see if the others were following the sound of the dog. He was repeating to himself, "Please let her be there. Please let her be all right." He repeated it over and over and over. Trying to will it to be true. But as he rounded the turn in the trail, he knew that his prayers had not been answered as he saw his father-in-law stumbling toward them. Even as he saw him, he watched the father of his heart slowly flow to the ground.

Racing forward, Rory jumped from his horse and landed on his knees next to the fallen man. He turned him over as the others approached.

Fox knelt beside Rory and Silas. Holding out a canteen filled with water, he checked to see if the injured man was still alive. No one had to be told what had happened. They all recognized a gunshot wound in the older man's shoulder.

Fox nodded to his friend. "He's alive. We need to get him off of the trail and set up camp for the night." He hated to tell Rory what he was sure the man already knew. "It's too dark, my friend; we'll have to start searching again in the morning.

Rory lifted Silas's head and wet his lips, slowly bringing him around to consciousness. He was half-afraid to hear what the man would have to tell them when he did regain the ability to speak. He also hated the thought of Salina alone all night with a madman.

There was nothing else to do but to wait until morning. He couldn't risk Salina's life by missing some valuable trail that might have been left. He nodded his head in acceptance even as the men all separated, each to carry out a particular chore for setting up the camp.

"Let's get him out of the road," Fox said as he grabbed the old man's legs and laid him where he'd be more comfortable. "I'll be back." He mounted his horse, unable to sit idly if there was a slight chance he might find something. With the growing darkness, he knew that he could not ride far, but he hoped to find some small clue as to which direction they were headed.

He didn't have to ride far before his sharp hearing picked up the sound of harnesses rattling. Not wanting to be noticed, he unsheathed his rifle and dismounted from his horse. It would be too much to believe Randall would be so confident as to stay close by. But there was no need to take unnecessary risks.

He crept through the tangles of briars, moving soundlessly. Fox was an excellent tracker and could stalk game without ever being heard.

He spotted the team still hitched to the wagon. They'd been tied securely to a tree so that there was no way that they could have broken free. He knew that there was no one else around or he would have heard them. He saw the hoof prints of one horse carrying two riders leading away from the area. He now knew the animal was taking his prey to the hills.

## Chapter 26

Silas came to slowly. He looked up into Rory's worried eyes. At this moment, Silas truly hated himself.

"I've failed you, Rory. I didn't protect the one thing in my life that I have always vowed to take care of." He winced as he tried to sit up. "I didn't even see anyone. The coward shot me right out of the wagon."

Rory looked down at his father-in-law, hating to ask but knowing that he had to know.

"What about Salina? Do you have any idea what happened to her?"

Silas shook his head sadly. "I remember being shot. The next thing I remember is kneeling on the ground and heaving my guts out. I'm sorry, son. I'm a worthless old man."

Rory shook his head. "Take another drink." He offered the guilt-ridden man another sip from the canteen. "It wasn't your fault, Dad." He looked intently at Silas. Letting the words sink in. He had never called him Dad, having always referred to him as Silas. But if ever there was a time that they needed to feel truly bonded as a family, now was that time.

"The bastard has been planning this for a long time. He's been having our every move watched and reported back to him."

Hearing a noise, Rory jumped up and turned; he recognized the sound of an approaching wagon. It was full dark and he and the other men were taking no chances; they drew their guns on the new arrival. A wagon traveling this trail at night was not a common occurrence.

"Don't shoot. It's me," Fox called.

Rory reached the wagon first, reholstering his gun as he ran. Fox had found his wagon; please let Salina be in it, alive.

He felt in his heart that Salina was still alive. But Josh would make her suffer. He prayed that she would not fight Randall. Raven had told Fox how much Josh loved fighting and causing pain. He knew Salina's temper and that she would show no fear and that worried him all the more under the circumstances.

Rory watched his friend anxiously and sighed in relief when Fox shook his head and said, "It was empty. He had tied it off the trail a ways where it wouldn't be easily seen. I now know the direction that they're heading and, with one horse carrying two people, it will slow them down."

One horse carrying two people, that meant she was still alive. Thank God.

Fox walked toward the center of camp. "How is Silas?" He asked his question even as he knelt down to examine the wound. "He will be fine, but he needs a doctor. We now have the wagon and someone can take him to town or back to your ranch."

"Coffee's ready." Rory turned to get a cup from the pot that was brewing over the open fire. Silas reached out and grabbed onto his hand.

"You let these young fellas take me home." He nodded toward the ranch hands sitting around the fire. "I know that between you and Fox you'll bring our precious girl home." He fought his growing weakness, waiting for a nod from Rory before he let his weariness overtake him and he drifted off to sleep.

Fox and Rory set before the fire making plans for the day that they had ahead of them. "It won't be easy with the two of us."

"This is true, more guns would have been better." Fox agreed. "I will not lose the tracks. The more men the more noise and right now we need to be as fast and quiet as possible. The two of us will find her."

\* \* \* \*

Salina came awake and found herself tied to a tree. The side of her face hurt and she couldn't figure out why she couldn't move. Dazedly, she looked around wondering why she was laying on the ground and then she remembered. Because laying just out of her reach was the man who had kidnapped her, the same man who had shot and killed her father.

She held back a sob, not wanting to wake him. The longer that he slept, the more time she had to feel safe. It was full dark now and she was sure that Rory was looking for her. She smiled tearfully as she felt the baby give a healthy kick. She dared not speak aloud but needed to reassure herself, so she recited in her head.

“Don’t you worry, baby. Your daddy will be coming to take us away from this bad man.” She wished that she were free to move so that she could rub her rounded stomach to offer comfort to herself and the baby growing strong inside of her.

She looked back at the man at her feet. She tried to wiggle her hands but knew from the feel of the ropes biting into her delicate wrists that she would not be setting herself free. She was so tired and hungry. Knowing that she would get no food this night, she decided to sleep. She would need all of her strength in the days to come.

Silent tears fell down her face when she thought of her daddy laying cold and unmoving on the side of a wooded trail. She hoped someone found him soon before the wild animals found the body. The thought of something that horrible happening made her physically ill and she swallowed the bile that she could feel rising.

The next morning found Silas loaded carefully into the wagon to head home. With three extra men riding with him, he felt like a babe.

Rory and Fox had coddled him throughout the night, fussing over him something awful. He shook his head and smiled softly. He now knew just how both Raven and Salina felt. Those two big strong men had the most tender hearts and, oh, how they pampered. It must plain drive those two very independent girls crazy.

He was proud of both of those young men and was very confident of their success in bringing Salina home. He wouldn’t let himself think of any other possibility.

\* \* \* \*

Salina had a terrible night. She had to pee something fierce and that rat Randall had slept the night through. If she wouldn’t have to wear the same clothes all day, she’d wet in the ones she wore just for spite. Because the river she was holding would surely run down hill and drown the man sleeping at her feet.

She hated to wake him and begin her day of hell, but the pressure on her bladder was becoming unbearable. Kicking out with her foot, she smiled with satisfaction when she made contact with his head. She kicked him again just to hear his “oof” of pain.

“Wake up, you snake. I have to relieve myself,” she yelled to him. Josh just laid there ignoring her. She knew that he was awake; this was all part of his sick game. Well, she



had news for him; she was not playing. "I'm telling you, Josh! Either you get your rotten ass up now and untie me or you are going to look and smell like an outhouse."

She grinned wickedly as he jumped to his feet. He looked terrible. His hair was standing on end, his face covered in a day's growth of whiskers. It was his bloodshot eyes that tickled her the most because it was then that she noticed the empty bottle laying on the ground. He must have drunk the whole bottle while she'd been asleep. No wonder he'd slept so soundly. She bet her kicks to his already throbbing head had really made him ache.

She gazed up at him innocently and watched as he turned a very sickly color green and, with his hands over his mouth, he ran for the bushes. Oh, she was bad...But she hoped that he puked his guts out. She wasn't scared. She was mad. Rory would rescue her. It was only a matter of time. She'd just make Josh's life hell until her husband arrived. She swore to herself that Josh would never touch her sexually. She would live with a few bruises. But her body, heart and soul belonged only to Rory. She'd not give them up to anyone else. Not even to save her own life.

He felt absolutely horrible. Salina had still been unconscious when he'd stopped for the night. He had nothing else to do, so he'd tied her tightly to a tree and set out to drink all that he'd wanted without anyone nagging him. The next thing he knew the little bitch was kicking him in the already sore head.

He'd had big plans for Salina today. He'd wanted to have all kinds of fun with her child-ripened body. He knew from experience that after his night of drinking his manhood would not be up to performing. Unless it was really enticed. Maybe if he caused Salina enough pain, his limp, useless organ would rise to the challenge. With his mind firmly set, he rose from the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He walked down to the stream and drank thirstily. He took his time and even washed himself. Knowing that Salina was in desperate painful need of the bushes made him grin and walk back to the camp slowly. He'd teach her who was boss. She'd be begging him before the day was out.

## Chapter 27

Rory and Fox left camp earlier than Silas and the three ranch hands. They were anxious to be on their way. Thoughts of Salina in the hands of a madman spurred them on.

Fox knew the general direction in which they headed. He set off at a slow pace, not wanting to miss anything.

Rory rode at his side praying that by the days end he would have Salina safely enfolded in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Agnes was hanging clothes from the line when she heard the wagon approach the ranch house. “Oh, Lordy, what’s happened now?” she cried when she saw one of the ranch hands driving the wagon and another riding in back with someone.

She ran to the wagon as fast as her old, heavysset body would allow. She’d been worried sick when no one had returned from Fox’s place yesterday.

Agnes reached the wagon; Silas was laying inside with a bandage-wrapped shoulder. Mel was sitting in back with him.

“Silas has been shot. Tiny rode into town to bring the doc.”

“What about Salina? Is she riding in with Rory?” Agnes looked anxiously at the remaining men. She waited impatiently for their answers. She knew by the looks that they exchanged even before they told her that Salina would not be riding into the ranch yard.

“Rory and Fox have gone looking for Salina,” Mel said as he got out of the wagon. “We really need to get Mr. Houston into the house, Ma’am. Could you show us where you want us to put him?”

Agnes led them into the main house. Silas was going to need extra care. Care she couldn’t give him if he was at his little cabin. “Take him on up to Rory’s old room. I’m too old to be running back and forth between the two houses.”

“I’m not a babe, I can walk on my own two feet,” Silas roared.

The old coot was going to be fine if his complaining was anything to go by. What in tarnation was going on?

“Put me down, God damn it. Those two tender-hearted fools last night about drove me daft with all of their coddling.”

Ignoring his struggles, they settled him on the bed and quickly left the room. Agnes put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, scaring those nice young men that way.” Before Silas could reply to her scolding, they heard the sound of the doctor arriving.

Doc Morris inspected the wound. “Fox and Rory did a fine job of cleaning it; I don’t think you’ll have to worry none about infection. You are one very lucky man. It’s a wonder the fall from the wagon didn’t kill you.” He packed his equipment back into his bag before turning to Agnes. “Keep the patient quiet and in bed. I’ll be back in a day or two to check his wound and see that he’s healing.”

\* \* \* \*

Josh reentered the camp where Salina sat tied to the tree. He walked over to his saddlebags and picked up a knife and a length of rope. He was more than ready to show Salina just what kind of man she was dealing with. He wanted to show her exactly what she was missing by being married to that no good Holloway.

Salina watched Josh walk toward her with the knife and rope. She refused to show any sign of fear. She would not give the little worm that kind of satisfaction. If he wanted to fight, carrying a babe or not, she was ready to give him one.

“How are you feeling, Josh? Would you like another drink?” Salina snickered aloud as she asked her questions, knowing from the green tinge of his skin that he still wasn’t feeling well.

Josh was seething. “Keep laughing, bitch!” he said as he held the knife against Salina’s swollen stomach. “Don’t try anything or you’ll be meeting this brat before its time. I’ll cut it out of you right here and right now.”

Tying a rope around Salina’s neck, Josh cut her arms free from the tree. He watched as Salina rubbed at the raw skin on her wrists. “If you want to use the bushes you’d better get yourself up off of the ground and get to it.”

Salina rolled slowly to her knees and placed her hands on the ground to support herself. She had been in the same position for so long of a time that she was not sure if she could stand without aid from someone or something. She did not want to give Josh any excuse to touch her, so she crawled to the tree and pulled herself up to her feet. She weaved as she gained her feet and stood as still as possible, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

Josh, tired of her stalling, jerked on the rope that he had tied around Salina's neck.

"This is the last time I'm asking. Do you have to use the bushes or not?"

Salina stumbled behind him as he began pulling her along. She felt so degraded being led around like an animal. He led her deeper into the woods and she went along willingly.

"Go about your business," Josh ordered.

She didn't even hesitate; relief was too close at hand. She didn't have time to feel humiliated about performing such an intimate act in front of a man other than her husband.

Feeling so much better, she stood up and readjusted the skirt to her gown. Looking around, she tried to figure out where they were. The woods were sparse, but she didn't recognize anything.

She held her head high as she marched out of the woods, still being led by her captor. They arrived back at the camp and Josh removed some jerky and biscuits from his saddlebags.

"Here, take this and be glad I'm sharing." He didn't have any supplies to speak of, as he had not planned on being away from the ranch for longer than a few hours.

Salina took the food offered to her and ate it slowly. She needed the nourishment for the baby. The longer she could hold Josh off, the closer Rory would be in rescuing her. She didn't fool herself; she knew damn well what Josh wanted but she wasn't giving in to him without one hell of a fight.

Josh was far from stupid. He knew exactly what Salina was doing. She thought that she would be found by her milksop husband before much longer. But he was having his fun with her before that happened. He jerked her to a group of three trees set closely together. He turned on her as she struggled against him. 'Don't fight me, Princess; you'll

soon learn that I'm in control." He swung and hit her in the mouth, smiling as he watched the blood trickle from a split lip.

He stood her back against the center tree. He then raised her arms above her head and tied one against each of the outer trees. Kneeling at her feet, he spread her legs and proceeded to tie them in the same fashion that he had just tied her arms.

Salina arched away from the tree. She tried to get away as Josh laughed at her endless struggles. "Please let me go, Josh. It's not too late," Salina pleaded. "You can leave here and never come back."

Josh smiled up at Salina wickedly from his place at her feet. He removed his knife from where he had placed it in his boot. Grasping the hem of Salina's gown, he cut a slit in the dirty, worn blue fabric. Still holding the knife, he pulled on both sides of the tear, ripping the dress open from the hem to the neck. He then stepped back to gaze long and leisurely at the body that he had lusted after for such a long time. The body that he had now exposed and which was his for the taking.

Salina refused to cower before this man. She was not a coward and damn him for making her feel scared.

"You are a snake, Josh! Is this the only way for you to get a woman?" Salina wanted to keep him occupied. She didn't want him to touch her.

"Do you have to steal women? Do you have to take another man's wife?" Salina wondered if she had gone too far as Josh stepped close again, sticking his face into hers.

"Don't you know when to keep that big mouth of yours shut?" He slapped her on the other side of her face. He would teach her that he was the master.

Josh raised his knife and traced a path along the tops of Salina's very round, ripened breasts. He followed the path that led to the valley between them and with the sharpened point of his knife began to cut the laces holding her undergarment together.

He knew that his body was not yet ready to carry out the deeds rolling through his head. He would save some fun for later when his body was eager. With a quick flick of his wrist he shredded the sleeves of Salina's gown, causing it to fall freely at her feet.

He looked at the cuts that he had caused on her soft, delicate, otherwise unblemished arms. He smiled and traced his fingers through the blood that was beginning to trickle. He then brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked the blood away. He wanted to savor

the moment and to watch her body as she swayed almost naked between the trees. The decaying stump behind him offered a nice place to rest and enjoy.

Salina knew that she was bleeding. The sight of Josh sucking her blood from his filthy fingers caused her to feel nauseous. The thought of him tasting any of her was sickening. Her face hurt and she could taste the blood in her mouth.

She turned her head and could see the shallow cuts on her arms. But she was alive and as she looked down at her rounded stomach her baby gave a very strong, healthy kick. A kick as if to say, “Hey, Mom, you’re not alone.”

Salina raised her head proudly and stared triumphantly at the man sitting a few feet away. She would not let him win.

She would stand tall and fight for her life and the life of her unborn baby. Her daddy would have wanted it that way, had he lived. Feeling the tears threatening at the thought of her father, Salina raised her chin higher. She would not cry in front of this man. He was not worth one of her tears.

## Chapter 28

Rory and Fox rode at a slow, steady pace. They knew that Josh couldn't have gotten far the night before. He was riding double on his horse and he would have had to stop for the night because of the darkness and fear of predators. Even now Rory could hear the cry of a mountain lion ahead of them probably defending its downed prey or perhaps on the hunt for some unsuspecting victim.

Rory was desperate to find Salina. He wanted to race through the woods like a mad man screaming her name. But he knew that if he did let loose with his feeling that he would warn Josh of their approach. They hoped to come up on him unaware. And if their prayers were answered they would find Salina alive and unharmed.

\* \* \* \*

Raven was thankful for Jim's company. He had bedded down on the floor in front of the fire last night. This morning, after seeing that Fox still had not returned, he had carried in wood for the cook stove.

He was young, probably about seventeen years old. He was a cute kid, with his pretty green eyes and his blond, almost white hair. He had the looks of a boy who worked hard, the muscles already building in his arms and chest. He was still a babe. But he was a hard worker and took his responsibility of caring for Raven seriously. He was out now doing the morning chores.

Raven paced the kitchen worriedly. She had not slept well during the night. She was worried for Salina. She now knew that Silas had been found and was being taken to the ranch. A man from the Triple H had stopped by on his way into town and told her and Jim the news. He had also told them that Rory and Fox had left earlier this morning to continue in the search for Salina.

Raven shook herself from her troubling thoughts. There was a young man working in the barn. She was sure that he would have a powerful appetite and she meant to feed him well. She turned to the stove, added wood to the still warm coals, and set herself to her cooking.

\* \* \* \*

Agnes bustled around the house fussing over Silas. She was relieved that the old coot was going to live. But if he didn't quit with his complaining she was going to bash him over the head with an iron skillet and then he'd have more than a sore shoulder to bitch about. The man was plumb driving her crazy.

She was worried sick about Salina and that precious little babe that she carried. How much excitement could such a small bundle handle and still hold onto life? She prayed that Fox and Rory returned with her soon. In the meantime, she was sneaking the old man a sleeping draught so that she could get some much-needed peace and quiet. Once Silas set his mind to it, there would be no keeping him in bed and for the time being that was the best place for him.

Silas was tired of being treated like a babe. He might be old but he was far from useless, and no puny shoulder wound was going to keep him in bed. He was still able to sit a horse. He was going after the bastard who had taken his sweet Salina and no one was going to stop him.

He reached over for the covers and threw them back. He winced from the pain shooting through his shoulder as he swung his feet to the floor. He froze in this position. He guessed he'd have to change his thinking; something or, rather, someone was going to stop him.

Standing in the doorway was Agnes, shaking her head no and with a scowl on her face. She was holding a cast iron pan threateningly in one hand and in the other she held a glass full of lemonade. Silas didn't think she planned on doing any cooking up here in his bedroom and so he pulled his feet slyly back into the bed. He tucked the covers back up around himself.

He decided he'd made the right decision when she smiled and set her pan down on the nightstand. She handed him the glass and watched until he'd swallowed it all down. He wondered why she was so happy that he'd finished the whole glass.

"I'm getting out of this bed, Agnes. My little girl is out there somewhere and I aim to help find her, not lay around drinking your sissy lemonade." He thumped his good arm against the mattress as if for emphasis.

Agnes patted his hand. "We'll discuss it right after you wake from your nap."



Silas looked up at her questioningly and, seeing the triumphant look on her face; he knew. “Why, you crafty old lady, you drugged me. I can still fire you.” He shook his head, trying to hide a smile at her cleverness.

Agnes picked up her pan and walked through the door. She turned back and said, “We can talk about that later, too, you stubborn old fool.” She heard him chuckle as she closed the door and headed for the kitchen. She needed a cup of tea and some time to herself.

\* \* \* \*

Josh woke up when his head fell sideways and thumped into a tree that was growing near the stump. Damn, he thought to himself, as if there weren’t little men stomping inside his throbbing head already. But as he stood he found that he felt much better after his short nap.

He gazed over at Salina where he had left her tied to the trees. She stared at him intently. He could read the hatred in her eyes and he wondered if she had watched him while he’d slept.

Salina had been watching. She’d hoped that he’d choke on his own drool. He hadn’t slept as long as she would have liked and she could tell from the look on his face that he was ready to continue where he had left off.

She turned her head disgustedly as Josh unzipped his pants and removed his male member to relieve himself in front of her. Time had run out for her. She prayed that she would live through the ordeal.

Josh walked toward her, not bothering to pull his clothes together. What would be the point? They both knew what was going to happen, so there was no need to squash himself back into the boundaries of his clothing. He extended his knife and licked along the sides. He never took his eyes off Salina. He brought the point of the knife down between her breast and began cutting through the laces, uncaring that he also cut into her breasts. A little blood only added to the pleasure. He continued down until he came to her child-ripened stomach where the laces ended. He then grabbed both sides and ripped the remainder of the garment from her body, leaving her completely naked for his eyes.

He first traced his finger around her bulging belly button. He had never seen a woman breeding without her clothes on and he was very interested. The contours of the skin being so soft and then so tight below his fingers intrigued him. Sliding the knife back into his boot he brought both of his hands up to the bulge of her hardened stomach. Blue veins were exposed where the skin was pulled tightly. He ran his hands in circles and stopped when he felt the movement below.

Salina cringed as she felt Josh's hands rubbing Rory's baby. She didn't want this man touching her. He had no right. Something so evil should not be allowed to touch something as innocent and precious as a baby made out of her and Rory's love. She couldn't get away from his touch. The trees behind her kept her from arching away. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the horror that would come next.

Rory wanted to rush in and rip Josh Randall into tiny little pieces but Fox held him back. Shaking his head, Fox whispered, "It's too dangerous, my friend, to rush forward while he holds a knife. Salina is alive; let's not make a mistake now."

It had not been hard to find Josh and Salina. Josh was not overly smart. They had followed his tracks right to the camp. They were not the only ones, however, following the trail. The mountain lion they had heard was also on the prowl. She could probably smell the fresh blood and thought to find an easy meal. The smaller paw prints told that she had at least two cubs to feed.

Rory felt as if his heart was being ripped from his chest. His beautiful, strong-willed Salina was tied to a tree, her arms and legs stretched wide so that she was unable to move. The bastard had cut all of her clothes from her beautiful body and he could see the scratches and scrapes that were trickling blood. He could see these injuries from where he and Fox stood waiting in the edge of the trees.

Rory held his breath as Josh missed his boot and the knife fell to the ground. He looked toward Fox and at his nod they slowly and silently stepped out of the wood line. Rory saw red as some man other than himself tenderly, almost affectionately rubbed the spot where his precious baby rested, smearing her life's blood with his hands. He watched while his wife swallowed in revulsion and squeezed her brilliant, blue eyes tightly shut.

Fox, as silent as any hunter, stepped closer to his target and just as he made a grab for Randall, the scream of a wild cat punctured the silent forest area.

Josh whirled toward the sound. He had been so involved in the feel of Salina's body beneath his hands that the roar of the cat had startled him. He was even more surprised to see two men more dangerous and more deadly than any wild animal could ever be standing so close to him.

At the roar of a cat, Salina's eyes sprang open. She sagged in relief as she looked deeply into the smoldering, beautiful, dark brown eyes of her beloved husband. She had no worries. She was safe. Rory, her beloved friend, brother, lover and most importantly her very loving husband, was now here. Everything would be fine. Her wait was over.

Raising her head high and still staring at Rory, she said, "I love you." She managed to work up a small smile and said, "You have a lot of explaining to do. What the hell took you so long?"

Rory, too, was able to work up a small smile, his dimple indenting his sun-bronzed cheek. "I love you too, Sunshine. Sorry I'm late but, believe me, I got here as quickly as I could." He stopped where he stood and waited for Randall to make the next move.

"You wasted your trip," Josh sneered. "She's mine and if I can't have her, no one will. I'll gut the bitch where she's hanging and send the brat she's carrying to the forest floor."

He reached into his boot for his knife. The game was far from over. They might have ruined his plans for plowing this tramp, but he'd kill her; he'd do it in front of her husband. He'd have his revenge and die knowing that he had won.

His knife was not in his boot. What had he done with it? He looked on the ground and spotted it just as Rory kicked it deeper into the woods.

"You won't be needing that any more, Randall. You're going to Hell and I don't believe you'll have any use of any extras; they'll only want your rotten soul."

Josh knew that he was a dead man and, being a born coward, he turned to run. Fox cut off his escape by sticking out his foot.

"Going somewhere?" he asked his voice sounding far calmer than the rage he was feeling as he looked at Josh laying sprawled face-first on the ground. This was the man

who had treated his beloved so cruelly.” He fisted his hands to keep from breaking the man in two.

Josh began to whine. “You can’t just kill me. Neither of you would be able to live with the guilt.” Josh sneered at the men, thinking he could still worm his way out of the mess he was in.

“How about you, Holloway? Everyone knows what I did to Fox’s whore. Can you live with what I did to your bitch?”

Drool slid out the sides of Josh’s mouth. His eyes were bloodshot and the wild look on his face convinced the men that he was fast losing control.

Rory looked up from where he was cutting Salina free from the trees. He supported her body tenderly with one arm while he covered her nakedness with the shirt he had removed from his own back. Very gently, Rory turned her to face him fully and placed a kiss on her forehead as he buttoned the shirt.

He looked at his very battered, bruised and bloody wife. She looked absolutely terrible and was also the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen. She had two swollen black eyes and a swollen split lower lip. Dried blood from a nosebleed remained on her face. These were the visual injuries. He would look more carefully when they had the time.

Hugging his wife closely and bringing her snugly against him, Rory turned to the man laying on the ground as Fox came toward them to check on Salina.

“You are very wrong,” Rory said quietly. “I will have no guilt in getting rid of rabid vermin.” Pulling his gun from the holster at his side, Rory raised it and pointed it at the man still sniveling on the ground, trying to crawl away.

Fox, sensing Rory’s intent, ran to intercept and grabbed Rory’s gun. “No, my friend, in this he is right. You could not live with yourself.”

Before anyone could move, there came a loud crack of branches and a scream of pain. The three people standing whirled and looked in wonder at the big, tawny colored cougar attacking the man laying on the ground. Josh had made it to the tree line where the female cougar had been waiting in a tree. The smell of Salina’s blood covering Josh’s body attracted the hungry mother.

No one stepped forward to help. This was nature's way and justice had been served. Rory and Fox were both relieved that they had not had to carry out their own brand of justice. Randall had been right. Neither of them could have taken a human life cold bloodedly and lived with themselves, but for their families they would have done so.

Josh struggled to break free of the big cat. He pounded its back, trying unsuccessfully to get away. The cougar gave one final growl of warning and bit into his neck, piercing his jugular, and the Devil Josh Randall breathed no more.

Salina turned and buried her face into Rory's bare chest as the cougar dragged the lifeless body away. She began to tremble and Rory swung her up into his arms.

"Let's get her away from this place." Fox nodded his head in agreement and led the way to the horses.

## Chapter 29

The three of them rode a short distance and stopped near a stream. Rory dismounted with Salina still cradled in his arms. He was not ready to let go of her just yet. He walked to the stream as Fox gathered wood to start a fire. They would camp here for the night and head home at first light.

Rory sat on a rock beside the stream and rocked Salina gently in his arms. He put his hand on the mound of her rounded belly and smiled as he felt the strong, healthy kick of their baby. They had a fighter there; with a mother like Salina, Rory expected no less. Salina had not yet spoken about what Josh did to her and Rory knew that she would when she was ready. For now, he was content to just hold her safely in his arms.

Fox waited; the couple by the stream needed time alone. He gave them as much as he could; Salina had been hurt and needed tending. He heated water over the campfire he had built and gathered what supplies he had brought from home before walking slowly to where Rory and Salina still sat.

Rory glanced up at Fox's approach. He saw the supplies that Fox carried and understood why he had interrupted them.

"Salina, honey, we need to clean you up." Hating to release her but knowing what had to do, Rory eased her into a sitting position. He lifted her off his lap, set her on the rock, and settled himself on the ground in front of her.

Fox held the water as Rory dipped a clean cloth that he now saw was Fox's shirt into the water. Very carefully, he began to wash the blood and dirt from her face. He winced at the brilliant colors of the bruising on her once unblemished skin. She now had bright purple, red, blues and yellows decorating her face. He cleaned the dried blood around her nose and lips. Through it all, Salina sat quietly. Not a whimper of pain passed her lips. He worried; maybe she was hurt much worse than what they expected. He needed to check the rest of her body.

Salina settled her hand over Rory's as he reached for the buttons on his shirt. She lifted her tear-filled eyes and gazed into Rory's own tear filled eyes.

“He didn’t rape me,” she whispered. “I would have never let him touch me so intimately. But he touched me. He saw me naked. I feel so dirty.” She started to cry. “I’m so ashamed, Rory, I felt so helpless.”

Rory put his fingers over her lips, careful not to touch any of her many bruises.

“You listen to me, Salina Holloway. You have nothing to be ashamed of.” Removing her hand from his and giving it a squeeze, he placed it in her lap. “You just hold on, sweetheart, and we’ll have you all cleaned up and you’ll feel much better.”

Still gazing at his wife, he said with a rough, scratchy voice, trying to hold his emotions in check, “Just so we’re clear, darling, it wouldn’t have mattered to me had he raped you. I would have hurt for you. But you, darlin’, would have still been pure in my eyes. You are my life and his touch could not have changed my feelings for you.” Rory leaned forward and kissed her on the nose.

Fox, seeing that they had things under control, set down the water. “I’ll go fix us something to eat. You will need something nourishing for you and your baby.”

He squatted down next to Salina and ran his hand over her hair much as one would a small child.

“You are a warrior, my beautiful friend. There was never a doubt in my mind that you would survive. I’m very proud to call you friend.”

Salina turned to look at Fox. “You are more than a friend. You and Raven are family, don’t you ever forget that. Thank you for coming for me.”

Fox nodded and got to his feet. He needed a few minutes to himself to collect his own wayward emotions. Seeing Salina so beaten brought back his own memories of the beating that Raven had received from the same evil man. He was happy at the way Josh had met his death. They were now free to live their lives without fear.

Rory finished cleaning the cuts and abrasions on Salina. The cuts below the shirt were shallow and none of them would require stitching of any kind. He washed her thoroughly and then rewashed her, knowing that she felt so dirty. He then buttoned her shirt and wrapped a blanket around her. Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to the warmth of the campfire.

Salina sat up on Rory’s lap and gripped his hand. “Rory, did you find Daddy’s body? Josh shot him.”

Tears began to fall freely down her cheeks, the first real tears that she had shed. “He fell from the wagon. I tried to catch him, but couldn’t. He’s dead and I just left him there for the wild animals to feed on. I wanted to go back.” She raised her hands to her face, sobbing.

Rory rocked her and began crooning softly. He should have told her earlier, but he had been more concerned for her injuries.

“Shh, Shh, darlin’, your daddy is fine. He isn’t dead. He’s back at the ranch and I’m sure that the sly old fox has probably got Agnes drove plumb crazy by now.”

Salina raised her head, unable to believe what Rory was telling her. “He’s okay? You’re sure of it?”

Rory nodded. “We found him walking along the road not far from where he fell. The contrary old man was going for help. We sent him home. I’m sure he’s chomping at the bit to hear any news.”

Salina smiled and hugged her husband enthusiastically. Everything was fine. She would tell Rory the full tale of what had happened to her someday but for now she was just happy to be safely back in his arms.



## Epilogue

Silas sat on the front porch of the main ranch house. He smiled as he watched the two happy couples walking toward him. The joy shining on their faces was magnificent as they watched the two small children toddling ahead of them. They all stopped as Fox and Raven's tiny dark skinned, dark haired beautiful little girl stumbled and fell. She started to cry and then looked up expectantly at the little equally dark haired and quite handsome little boy toddled over and helped her regain her wobbly feet, and then bent down to place a childish peck on her baby soft cheek.

Rory and Salina's little boy Reese was very protective of Fox's little girl.

Silas smiled proudly as the little ones spotted him and, calling "Papa," raced to where he sat. The closeness these two children shared reminded him of two other children and Silas wondered if someday this family would be bonded by more than mere friendship. Cradling his grandchildren in his arms, he rocked them back and forth in his old chair as he watched the grown ups move still closer.

Salina had survived her ordeal and somehow come out of it even stronger than she had been before. She and Rory were very happy and she would soon deliver their second child.

Fox and Raven were saddened by the fact that she had miscarried their second, but were blessed by the very healthy daughter they already had and were sure that if it were meant to be they would have many more children to bless their love.

Silas chuckled as he thought about young Jim. The young cowboy had become so smitten with Raven while protecting her and taking care of Fox's ranch that he was now ready to settle down himself. He was sparking pretty heavily with the banker's daughter.

Josh Randall's ranch had come up for sale and Rory and Fox bought it and were now equal partners in a Huge Ranching Dynasty. Some called it justice that the same two couples that he had set out to destroy had achieved the one thing that he had wanted.

Silas sighed and set his rocking chair into motion. Life was good and he looked forward to many more years and many more grandchildren. Now that he had the young ones all settled, he wondered if maybe he should start bringing that Agnes in line. He chuckled to himself. She sure was a saucy old wench...

### **Author Biography**

I've lived in Central Wisconsin all my life. I'm an avid reader whom would rather turn the pages of a book or as I've become savvier (love my pda) click the button to read an ebook than watch tv. I love the outdoors and weekends in the summer are spent up North at our cabin with my hubby, 2 sons and other family as well as friends.

Currently I have one published book with DCL Publications and have other stories in the works as well as a finished screenplay. I look forward to creating many more stories to share. Please feel free to visit my website to look at what's happening in my world @ [annavolk.com](http://annavolk.com) also email me @ [anna@annavolk.com](mailto:anna@annavolk.com)

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