



**Pepper  
Espinoza**

**FOUR O'CLOCK**

## FOUR O’CLOCK

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“We have to go back upstairs,” Johnny said, once he finally tore his mouth away.

“Like this?”

“It’ll be worse if we don’t go now.”

“What happened to you?”

“I got married.”

“You’re still holding on to the past.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.” Johnny shoved Brody away from him.

“No, I don’t think so. Not your problem, anyway.”

“Come on. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

“I feel fine now.”

Johnny didn’t. He picked up the lantern, and resolutely moved toward the stairs. He heard Brody behind him, his boots shuffling against the dirt floor—at least Brody was following him instead of daring Johnny to drag him out.

“Hey, Johnny?”

“What?”

Brody grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Their mouths clashed once again, like it was already a foregone conclusion. Brody’s other hand went to Johnny’s wrist, gripping it so hard that he dropped the lantern...

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*The Streets Of Florence*  
*Surrender's Edge*

# FOUR O'CLOCK

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BY

PEPPER ESPINOZA

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FOUR O'CLOCK  
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# CHAPTER 1

The crack of the old pistol broke the morning silence, sending a flock of geese flapping and fussing into the sky. The birds didn't distract Johnny Leach from his targets. One. Two. Three. Four. Each of the glass bottles shattered in turn, bullets hitting the narrow forms dead center. Johnny licked his lips, flipped the revolver open, and emptied the spent bullets at his feet. He moved methodically, but without thought, his body automatically going through the ritual. The same ritual he followed every single morning, regardless of the weather, or where he found himself.

Even at a distance, he could hear the saloon door slam shut as Elizabeth stepped onto the back stoop. He didn't need to

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turn around to know she was watching him with arms folded across her chest, straw-colored hair blowing in the soft breeze, her brown eyes narrowed by the sun into slits. If she had moved to a city, someplace like New Orleans, or Denver, or San Francisco, she would have held onto her youth. She would have married somebody with money, would have owned the finest dresses, would have had servants to handle the hard labor. But she hadn't gone when she had the chance, and now she looked too much like the country she refused to leave. Hard. Sun bleached. But still beautiful.

"I have your breakfast ready," she called out.

"I know that you do."

Johnny steadied the gun and fired off another six rounds, one right after the other. His arm ached from the reverberation, but he held steady, refusing to let it throw off his aim. He knew she was still watching. Still marking each shard of glass that flew up into the air and reflected sun back into her eyes.

Her voice drifted to him. "You missed one."

Johnny scowled. He had missed one, though if anybody else had been watching, they wouldn't have noticed. She'd always had better eyes than him. A steadier hand, too. She should have been the one out there practicing, keeping her aim sharp, but he couldn't even remember the last time she'd touched a gun, much less shot one.

"Go back in and see to your breakfast."

"You come in with me. You've got to eat."

"I'll eat." He holstered the gun and turned toward her. Her

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pink mouth was pulled in a straight line, neither smiling nor frowning. "Biscuits and gravy?"

"With some eggs."

As he approached the saloon, the hearty aroma of her breakfast drifted out to greet him. She always made too much. He would gorge himself and feel sick for the rest of the morning. "You sure know how to please a man."

Now her eyes glinted with a playful light. "So I've been told."

Johnny swatted at her backside. She shuffled away from him, laughing as his hand connected with her lawn skirt. "Get in that house, you little harlot."

"Not since I married you, dear."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Do you see any jealous lovers around here?" Elizabeth asked as Johnny shut the door.

"No, but only because they all know I'm a faster draw."

"Is that why you insist on target practice every morning? To scare them away?"

"Well, it kills two birds with one stone, doesn't it? I stay sharp, and everybody in town knows to stay away from my girl."

"Very clever. That's why I married you, you know," Elizabeth said as she filled his plate with his breakfast. "Because I like the way you handle your weapon."

"And because I promised you a glamorous life. Don't forget that part."

"How could I?"



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She settled at the table across from him, and now he recognized a small smile on her lips. The one that she never shared with anybody else, because it revealed too much. When she smiled like that, he could see her playful sense of humor, her quick wit, and above all of that, her obvious intelligence. She was smarter than any man, but she let people think she wasn't. She liked to keep them off guard.

"Ella got the train out of town this morning," Elizabeth said.

Johnny's fork stilled. "What?"

"She left. She said she's heading east."

"You just let her go?"

Elizabeth cut into her biscuit, smearing gravy across the plate. "I couldn't keep her against her will, Johnny. She was a whore, not a slave."

"She was also one of our best girls."

"Apparently, that wasn't a distinction that meant much to her."

"What is she going east for? Does she think she's going to find some respectable gentleman to marry her?"

"She's probably not going to tell any potential suitors that she used to be a whore."

Johnny snorted. "She'll get caught by a pimp in New Orleans or Charleston or on one of those riverboats, and then she'll realize how good she had it here."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Probably. But she was getting on my nerves for the past few weeks. I don't think I'll miss her."

"That train probably brought some new cowboys to town."

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We better be ready for them.”

“We are.”

“Even though we’re down a girl?”

“The longer they wait, the more they’ll have to drink and play cards. We’re getting their money either way.”

Johnny grinned. “You’ve always got a way of reminding me what’s important.”

“The more important question is whether or not you’ve got enough booze.”

“We’ve got plenty. And there’s going to be a supply train this afternoon. At four.”

“Maybe it’ll bring a new girl or two to town.”

“If we’re lucky.”

“Oh, one other thing.” Elizabeth dabbed the corners of her mouth, almost daintily. “I told Spencer he’s banned from going upstairs for at least a month.”

Johnny dropped his fork. “What?”

“I’m sorry, hon, but I didn’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you did. Not pissing off Spencer fucking Hutchins was a good choice.”

“He gave Sarah a black eye and a bloody nose. He knows my rules about roughing up the girls. I won’t tolerate it. I’ve never tolerated it. I even warned him once. So now he’s not welcome to my girls.”

Johnny rubbed his eyes, his appetite gone. When they first opened the Oriental, they had agreed that Johnny would run the bar and the card games, while Elizabeth watched over the girls and the upstairs operation. She set the rules. She set the

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fees. She collected the money and kept track of the books. It was entirely her domain, and she governed with an iron fist. There wasn't a cowboy within a hundred miles who didn't know about the Oriental's madam, and Johnny was more than happy to respect her right to run things as she saw fit. But there were other issues to consider. Like the fact that Spencer Hutchins was the sheriff's boy. And the fact that Spence ran with his own group of what could only be described as deputies.

"Johnny, if I didn't stick to my guns, I would have been basically throwing those girls to the wolves. They count on us, on me, to take care of them."

"Who's going to take care of us when Spencer comes in tonight looking for some strange?"

"You."

"I'm not shooting the sheriff's only son, and he knows it."

"It might not come to that."

Johnny had no doubt it would come to that. With Spencer, it would. The little shit needed to be beat within an inch of his life and taught some manners, but you couldn't take a grown man over your knee.

"He would have done worse if I hadn't stopped him," Elizabeth offered softly.

"Did he touch you?" Johnny demanded.

"No. He seemed to know better than that. So it's not that he doesn't know it's wrong to beat up on women. He just thinks he can beat up on whores, and I won't stand for that."

"He was probably afraid you'd cut his dick off."

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Elizabeth's mouth twitched. "That rumor has served me well."

"Only because most people who know you know it's not a rumor."

She smiled sweetly. "Sausage?"

"Cute." He sipped from his coffee, welcoming the bitter brew as it burned the back of his throat. "I'll deal with Spencer."

"You sure? I know this is my fight."

"It's our fight. You know I've always got your back."

"You're a good husband."

"I try."

They settled into a comfortable silence, punctuated by forks and knives scraping across the plates. Johnny supposed there was a good chance Spencer wouldn't pick a fight. He was an insufferable little shit with a huge sense of entitlement, but he was also easily distracted. By that night, he might find somebody else to fight with, or another girl to harass. It was possible, but Johnny decided he wasn't going to rely on that. It would be far better to be prepared for the full brunt of Spencer's anger.

Johnny was pouring himself a second cup of coffee when a shout pierced the air. He and Elizabeth exchanged a brief glance, and he almost ignored the sound altogether, but another one followed that. And then the unmistakable crack of a gun firing.

Johnny abandoned his coffee and sprinted to the front of the saloon and out the door. His gun was already drawn, and it

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didn't matter if he was nothing but the guy who served the drinks. He couldn't suppress his instincts, and when he heard a gun, he always ran to the trouble, not away from it. Elizabeth didn't even try to get in his way.

The scene that greeted him in the street brought him up short. Unremarkably, Spencer was standing in the middle of the street, his hand hovering over his gun, his face twisted in the mean scowl that Johnny expected from him. But the man he was staring down...that was a man that Johnny never expected to see again. Dead or alive.

"What's going on here?" Johnny demanded, his gun still in hand.

"You stay out of this," Spencer snapped, never taking his gaze from the stranger. "This doesn't concern you. Or your whore wife."

Johnny narrowed his eyes. If Spencer tried to draw, he wouldn't win. But Brody James deserved better than to be hung like a dog over somebody like Spencer Hutchins. "It does concern me, it's happening outside my saloon. Now what's going on?"

"He disrespected me."

Brody's face didn't even flicker. He didn't show a hint of recognition for Johnny. He didn't show a hint of acknowledgement for Spencer's claim.

"He's new to town, Spencer. He doesn't know any better."

"Too bad he's never going to get a chance to learn."

"Do you even know who this is?"

"No, and I don't care."

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“You should care. This is Brody James.”

Spencer didn't react, but his buddy, Thomas, did. “Are you shitting me? You've got to be shitting me.”

“I'm not.”

“Spence, he killed Kentucky Cody.”

Now Spencer's expression changed. “No, he didn't.”

“He did,” Thomas insisted.

“He did,” Johnny confirmed. “You know you're not as fast as that, Spence. So why don't you just walk away? Come on in and drinks will be on me.”

“I don't want to fight with you, kid,” Brody said.

“This isn't over,” Spencer warned, but his arm relaxed.

Johnny expected Spencer to stomp into the saloon like he owned the place and order the finest whiskey they had. But he stomped off the opposite direction, forcing Thomas to hurry to keep up with him. Elizabeth bustled out the door and took Johnny's arm. The force of her grip told him she had witnessed the whole thing from inside.

“Johnny...you know Brody James?”

“Yeah, I know him.”

“Well?”

“Well, enough. I'm wearing his gun.”

Brody finally turned toward him, his hat hiding eyes the color of iron. “Good to see you again, boy. Ma'am.”

“Johnny?”

“Come on. I think we can all use a drink.” He turned before Elizabeth could read too much in his eyes. One thing at a time. He could only explain one thing at a time. And he thought he might need more than one drink.

## CHAPTER 2

Brody was definitely older, and yet, he hadn't aged at all. His hair had been gray when Johnny met him fifteen years earlier, and even as a younger man, his eyes had been half-closed from the sun, and his forehead and mouth had been lined with wrinkles. He looked the same as he always had, no worse, no older. But he didn't move the same. And while he always had a hard glint in his eye, it had been dulled by what Johnny could only recognize as exhaustion. He would have beat Spencer in a fair fight, but Johnny suspected his draw would have been just a second slower than before, and his hand would have trembled after he fired the gun.

Johnny poured three shots without speaking. He didn't

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know what to say, so he decided to leave it to Elizabeth to break the ice, or to Brody to introduce himself. Or explain himself. Explain why he wasn't dead, why he decided to visit Dead Man's Corner. Had he known Johnny was living there now? He must have, because Brody wouldn't have had any other reason to disembark from the train. It was barely a stop on the route, and there were bigger, better cities to the east and the west.

"Is there a reason you stopped me from shooting that little shit?" Brody finally asked.

Johnny slammed his drink back, but it wasn't nearly as satisfying as he had hoped. "Sheriff's son."

"He has it coming."

"He does." Johnny poured himself another shot and capped the bottle. "Everybody agrees. But that doesn't change the fact that Sheriff Hutchins will personally destroy anybody who touches the kid."

"I thought you might be the sheriff, the way you rushed out there to break up the fight."

"No, nothing like that."

"You own this place?"

"I do. And this is my wife, Elizabeth."

Brody trained knowing eyes on her. "Elizabeth? Your reputation precedes you, girl."

"Oh, is that so?"

Brody inclined his head. "Everybody told me I needed to stop at Dead Man's Corner to see the girls at the Oriental. They said you ran the best brothel in the whole territory. It's a



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pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Pleasure’s mine, Mr. James.”

He shook his head. “No, call me Brody.”

“What are you doing here?” Johnny asked.

“Passing through. I’m taking the train to Galveston, and catching a steamer for South America. But when I realized the train would be stopping here, I thought I’d come and say good-bye.”

“Oh. What’s in South America?”

“A new life.”

“You in trouble?” Johnny asked.

“No more trouble than usual. But I couldn’t really just leave without seeing you, could I?”

Johnny met his eyes, then looked away, unable to hold his gaze. Elizabeth watched him with obvious concern, and he knew he wasn’t going to be able to hide anything from her. She saw through him. She always had. If she didn’t already suspect there was something going on, she would before Brody caught his train.

“How long are you staying?”

“Just until four.”

“Four o’clock today?”

“That’s when the next train is stopping. Got to be in Galveston by Sunday, or else I’ll miss my boat. And I already bought my ticket.”

“Are you hungry, Brody? We were just finishing up breakfast. I’ve still got plenty of food, though.”

“I’d love some breakfast. Thanks.”

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Johnny didn't think he wanted to be alone with Brody, but a part of him was still glad Elizabeth made herself scarce. Which just gave him another reason to love her.

"I was going to try to talk you into joining me, but now I think it might be a waste of time. Got a nice place, a good woman. You want to show me around?"

Johnny swallowed. "You want the tour?"

"Sure."

Johnny downed the second shot he had poured for himself, his fingers tingling from the warm shock of the whiskey. His stomach calmed, and he felt his nerves hardening. Brody was the only person, man or woman, who could make Johnny nervous just by looking at him. Except, he wasn't just nervous. He could tell anybody else that Brody gave him a case of the nerves, but they both knew it was something else entirely.

"There isn't much to see," Johnny said, as he gestured Brody around the bar. "It's probably just like every other saloon you've ever been in."

"Not just like every other one. This is yours, after all."

And to Brody, that really did make a difference. His boots tapped against the floor, echoing in the big, empty room. That night, the whole place would be full of loud men, loud music, loud sex, and loud drinking. Johnny preferred it that way. He didn't like the saloon much during the day, when it was just him and Elizabeth and too much time to think.

"This is the storage cellar," Johnny said, opening the trap door that led to the area beneath the barn. "Nothing down there."

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“Except the good stuff?”

“There’s some good stuff.”

“Show me.”

Johnny wasn’t surprised by the demand. Wasn’t that why he had started the tour with something that would take him out of sight and hearing distance from Elizabeth? Still, he was a little surprised that Brody hadn’t even hesitated. Maybe this was how he planned to say good-bye.

He grabbed the nearby lamp and lit it before stepping down the stairs. Brody followed, pulling the door shut behind them. Only a narrow circle of light illuminated the dark space, and Johnny could sense Brody, but he couldn’t see him. Which meant he was vulnerable. Brody could and would strike at any time, and Johnny couldn’t fend him off. Worse, Johnny wouldn’t, even though Elizabeth was right upstairs, making the man breakfast.

“Did you ever tell her about us?” Brody asked, his voice fuller, richer somehow, in the darkness.

“No.”

“She knows about the time up in Deadwood?”

“She knows.”

“But you never told her you were there with me?”

“No.”

“Is she a woman who needs to be protected from the truth?”

“No.”

“Is she the kind of girl that needs to be protected from anything?”

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“Not really, no.”

“She’s good. Just the sort I’d imagine for you.”

“I don’t need your approval.”

“I never said you did.”

“But you’re going to give it to me, anyway, right?”

Brody put a firm hand on his shoulder and pushed him backward, until his back met a support beam. His skin was golden in the low light, and he floated in front of Johnny like a ghost. It all came rushing back, memory after memory washing over him. The Oriental didn’t exist. Elizabeth didn’t exist. The world began and ended with Brody, and the history they shared. The history nobody could touch, and nobody could understand, because nobody was there except the two of them.

Brody took the heavy lantern from Johnny’s loose grip and set it on the floor. His face was plunged into shadows. “I’ve missed you, boy.”

“I had to go. Start over again.”

“I know. You were right to go. But he had it coming. There’s nothing you could have done about that.”

“The judge wouldn’t have cared for that argument.”

“But we both know it’s true.”

“We do,” Johnny acknowledged. He felt each of Brody’s words. His breath was warm and a little sour from the whiskey. They were standing chest to chest, toe to toe, and Johnny had nowhere to go. He’d have to push Brody away if he wanted to move. “Is that why you’re going to South America?”

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“Something like that. You know how it is. Things will catch up with you if you’re not paying attention.”

“Is somebody chasing you?”

“Nobody fast enough to catch me.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, I really did just come here to say good-bye. Talk about old times.”

“Talk?”

“I thought we might get a bit of talking in.”

He was even closer now. Johnny didn’t like to be crowded, and he really didn’t like it when Brody crowded him. Especially since he was so utterly aware that Brody was almost—almost—touching him. It was a move of domination. Brody wanted him to submit. Not out of a sense of cruelty. Brody had never been cruel to him. Johnny wouldn’t submit, but he would still make sure they both got what they wanted. He gripped the back of Brody’s neck, holding him in place for the hard kiss.

Brody responded with a grunt of satisfaction, his thick tongue pushing between Johnny’s lips. Fifteen years fell away, and he wrapped his arms around Brody out of habit. His mouth was big and rough, and his whiskers aggravated Johnny’s chin. He smelled like he had been traveling, and he held Johnny with strong hands. Hands that could break a person. It had been five years since he had seen Brody, but those years didn’t matter. Because he still knew exactly how to kiss Brody, still knew how to adjust to a taller partner, a partner who demanded more than he gave, a partner with

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broad shoulders and a whipcord body.

Brody's prick was hard where it pressed against Johnny's hip. For all Johnny knew, Brody had been hard since the moment he rode into town. Johnny's body responded in kind, his cock straining against his pants. His hands moved on his own, sliding down Brody's back to cup his ass. His fingers flexed, pulling Brody closer, grinding against his thigh, but that didn't help relieve the pressure.

"We have to go back upstairs," Johnny said, once he finally tore his mouth away.

"Like this?"

"It'll be worse if we don't go now."

"What happened to you?"

"I got married."

"You're still holding on to the past."

"Maybe that's the problem." Johnny shoved Brody away from him.

"No, I don't think so. Not your problem, anyway."

"Come on. You'll feel better after you eat."

"I feel fine now."

Johnny didn't. He picked up the lantern, and resolutely moved toward the stairs. He heard Brody behind him, his boots shuffling against the dirt floor—at least Brody was following him instead of daring Johnny to drag him out.

"Hey, Johnny?"

"What?"

Brody grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Their mouths clashed once again, like it was already a foregone

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conclusion. Brody's other hand went to Johnny's wrist, gripping it so hard that he dropped the lantern. It clattered to the ground and rolled away. Johnny was dimly aware of the shadows moving in around them right before the wick snuffed out. Brody pushed him back until he felt the steps pressing to his calves.

"Brody..."

He barely had out the protest before Brody pressed him down. He tried to shove Brody away, but the man was too strong for him. And the longer Brody kissed him, the more he forgot why he should even push the man away. His mouth tingled from the onslaught, and he barely noticed the edge of the stairs pressed into his back. Brody fell forward to his knees, straddling Johnny, pinning him in place. He rocked, sliding the bulge in his pants against Johnny's stomach.

*What do you want from me?* Johnny didn't have to voice the question, because he knew exactly what Brody wanted from him. He tugged at Brody's buttons, pulling them free, then worked the smaller buttons of his underwear open. His cock was hot and heavy against Johnny's palm, the vein on the top pulsing, the head already slick. Gripping Brody's prick felt natural, like he had been holding Brody this way every night for the past fifteen years.

"God, that's it, boy."

"No. My name."

Brody lifted his head, but there wasn't enough light to see his eyes. "Johnny."

He stripped Brody's cock, quickly pumping his wrist.

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Johnny heard Elizabeth walking above them, her heels clicking on the wood floor as she moved back and forth. Brody had her pegged—she wasn't a girl who needed things explained to her. But she was his wife, and he wasn't going to lose sight of that. Because he was quite certain that the next part of Brody's plans included talking Johnny into getting on that train. And the hell of it was, Brody could be very persuasive when he wanted to be. But not more persuasive than the life he had now. Sheriff's shit-stain son notwithstanding, Johnny quite liked his life.

He liked Brody's lips, too. Each time their mouths came together, Johnny responded like it would be the very last time they would have. Like each kiss would have to last him nothing short than a lifetime. They rocked together faster and faster, Johnny's prick aching for attention. He stroked Brody with the same intensity, the same firmness, that he longed to feel from Brody's hand. In another time, an earlier time, they would have both been naked at this point, reaching with greedy hands, harsh demands punctuated with choked breaths. But now they were mostly silent, both too aware of the woman just above their heads, both too aware of the fact that five years were wedged between them.

Brody's breath became harsh grunts, but Johnny still had the presence of mind to grab Brody's bandana. He wrapped it around his prick and pumped him once more, catching the come as it shot from his cock. Brody shuddered once, and then collapsed on him, his body suddenly old and tired. Johnny didn't move, but he did close his eyes.



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“Sorry.”

The soft word was enough to startle Johnny’s eyes open.  
“What?”

“I am.” He pushed Johnny’s hand away and straightened.  
“I am.”

“Brody...”

“That’s what I stopped to say.” He tucked himself back into his pants and shoved the bandana in his pocket. “I didn’t stop to do...this, no matter what you might think.”

“No...no, I believe you. You’re still going to South America?”

“Yes. I was telling the truth about that, too.”

“I’ve never called you a liar, Brody.” Johnny pushed himself to his feet and stretched his back. “Not once.”

“I thought that’s what you meant.”

“You’re not the only one who needed to get out. I couldn’t have stayed up in Deadwood, and you know that.”

“You could have mentioned it.”

“I thought you would figure it out, one way or the other.”

“I’m not sorry you left town. A week after I realized you were gone, the Marshalls came to find you.”

“I hid with the Mormons for awhile, and then I went up into the mountains with the miners. Burrowed down. By the time I stuck my head up again, there weren’t any more wanted signs.”

Brody nodded.

“But you found me,” Johnny murmured.

“I know how to look for you. I’m the one who taught you

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how to hide.”

“Speaking of hiding, Elizabeth is going to come down and look for us any minute.”

Brody nodded and gestured for Johnny to go up the stairs. He emerged from the cellar with a deep breath, half-expecting Elizabeth to be waiting for him with folded arms and questioning eyes. But, of course she wasn't. She was still in the back room, preparing a plate for Brody. Like he was nothing more than a friendly caller soon on his way.

He would be soon on his way, but he wasn't caller. And Johnny wasn't convinced they were on friendly terms.

## CHAPTER 3

Johnny sat across the table from Brody, trying to act normally. Elizabeth set a cup of coffee in front Johnny with a small lift of her mouth. A knowing smile, but a small one.

“If you need anything else, Brody, please just say the word.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He dug his fork into the biscuit, but paused as Elizabeth moved from the table. “You’re not going to join us?”

“I have chores upstairs. I got to see to my girls.”

“They can’t wait a little longer?” Brody offered his most disarming smile. “If you eat breakfast with me, I promise to see to your girls myself.”

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“Stay,” Johnny said softly, not in a big hurry to be left alone with Brody again. There were too many stale memories that he had no desire to relive. He had already been subjected to too many of them. Somehow, he thought Elizabeth would help keep those memories at bay.

“Tell me how a woman like you got tangled up with someone like Johnny,” Brody invited amicably.

“About how you’d expect. I was working in a saloon in Tombstone. He kept showing up, every single night, until I figured it’d be easier for both of us if I just went with him.”

“The only piece of advice I ever gave him was not to fall in love with a lady of the evening.” Brody sipped from his coffee. “I guess it’s a good thing he didn’t listen to me.”

“It wasn’t the only piece of advice,” Johnny said. “But then, I didn’t listen to the others, either.”

“Maybe I should have spent more time listening to you. Maybe I wouldn’t be on the run to South America.”

“Why are you?” Elizabeth asked with the expected boldness. “Where are you running from?”

Brody grinned. “I was framed, ma’am.”

“There seems to be a lot of that around here. I wonder why law never seems to be interested in getting the actual guilty party?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. But I’ve always been the type that attracted trouble. I guess that’s why Johnny fell in with me in Deadwood.”

“Murder?” Johnny asked.

Brody shook his head. “No, I was riding with a guy who

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goes by the name of Tex Wolf. Small time. But I wasn't really looking for a big name. He stopped a train in Utah, on the spur of the moment. I told him it would take some planning, but he just sort of went on a whim. Things started bad and they got worse."

"How much worse?"

"Three dead. None by my hand. But that doesn't make a difference."

Brody shifted in his chair and winced. Johnny frowned. He hadn't noticed Brody in pain before, but the way his face twisted now confirmed there was something wrong.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked immediately. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Johnny said softly, his gaze on his coffee cup.

"It's a flesh wound," Brody muttered.

"Can I see?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's in a rather delicate location, ma'am."

"I've seen plenty of delicate locations," Elizabeth reminded him. "I can't help you unless you show me."

Brody looked from Elizabeth to Johnny and back again. Johnny kept his face impassive. If Elizabeth wanted to help him, Johnny wouldn't stop her. But if Brody wanted to keep the injury to himself, that was fine, too. He did expect Brody to expertly fend her off, but he dropped his fork and stood. For the second time that afternoon, his pants came undone and he turned his back to Elizabeth. Not out of a sense of modesty—

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

he'd be shocked if Brody had any—but because the so-called flesh wound was on the fleshy part of his upper thigh.

Elizabeth caught her breath. “How long ago did this happen?”

“A few days.”

“How have you been able to ride?”

“That’s why I took the train.”

“Johnny...” The word was sharp with concern, and Johnny stood immediately and positioned himself to see the gash on the back of Brody’s leg. It was still seeping blood, and the edges were red, indicating the possibility of an infection. His pants were stained, and dry rivulets of blood painted his skin.

“I’ll have Sarah get a bath ready for him upstairs. He’s going to need to clean up before I can do anything.”

“Don’t talk like I can’t hear you.” He pulled his pants up and buckled them.

“I hope you didn’t have plans to go out and find more trouble,” Elizabeth said, turning away from him, her mouth lined with concerns.

“I was going to go take care of that little jerk. He challenged me to a duel, after all.”

Johnny shook his head. “You’re getting old. With your luck, you’ll catch a bullet in your shoulder and it won’t kill you. It’ll just get infected and fester for the next dozen years.”

“That tends to be how it goes.”

“I’ll be right back,” Elizabeth promised as she bustled out of the room.

“Is she good with a needle and thread?” Brody asked.

*FOUR O'CLOCK*

“She’s good at everything she does.”

“She’s certainly good at breakfast. I can’t remember the last time I’ve had a meal like this.”

“Enjoy it. You’re not going to get anything like where you’re heading.”

Brody shoveled more food into his face. “That sounds like a threat.”

“No...just a fact. Nobody can cook like my Elizabeth. Even in South America.”

“Maybe I’ll stick around then.”

“Is that a threat?”

Brody winked. “I guess we’ll see.”

\* \* \*

Sarah was already awake, dressed, and using the small stove in her suite to begin cooking breakfast for the other five girls in the Oriental’s employ. One look at Elizabeth, and she abandoned the stove and wiped her hands on her skirt.

“We heard the fight outside,” she greeted.

“Fortunately, it didn’t come to anything.”

She covered her left eye self-consciously. “Was it Spencer?”

“Could it be anybody else? I need you to draw a bath and get my sewing kit.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “Was somebody hurt?”

“No, well, yes, but not this morning. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. I haven’t caused any problems, have I?”

## *FOUR O'CLOCK*

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, no problems. Just get that bath taken care of, and then come find me as soon as it’s ready. Get a few of the girls to help.”

Sarah immediately bustled into action, exactly as Elizabeth knew she would. Instead of returning to the kitchen, she slipped into the small room that functioned as her office. She kept her most prized books there, as well as her accounting books, and her journal. There was also a miniature of her father on the desk, staring at her with a stern look of disapproval. That was his natural look, but if he knew that she was using her education to run a brothel, his disapproval would be very real.

Even if she was good at it.

Elizabeth shut the door and sank to her seat. Johnny’s past never posed itself as a threat. The fourth night he came to her, lingering in her bed long after she should have kicked him out, he revealed that he had made a clean break. Or as a clean a break as he could. The authorities had moved on to bigger fish, and he was keeping his head low. He hadn’t admitted to running with Brody James—a name that meant something to her even then.

For all the miles, all the mountains, and plains, all the Indians and outlaws, all the trains, the mining camps, the religious extremists, and the soldiers, the west was a remarkably small place. And she had lived in Tombstone for a very long time, dragged out into the frontier by a father who was always chasing some nameless dream. At some point in that time of Before—before Johnny, before marriage, before



#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

the Oriental—she had met Brody James. More than once.

Brody didn't remember her. That didn't surprise her or hurt her feelings. They hadn't shared any great moments. And he probably knew a number of whores. But when he had smiled and said that her reputation preceded her, she almost thought she saw a hint of recognition. Of course, she had been much younger then. And the woman she would become was only a hint on her girlish face and figure.

Elizabeth did not believe Brody was only passing through. Johnny hadn't given her any details of his life with Brody, but it would make sense for Brody to swoop in to claim Johnny again. She didn't believe Johnny would allow himself to be claimed, but the two men shared something that Elizabeth was outside of. Away from. She supposed that was why she was hiding in her office instead of flirting with Brody, and watching the interplay between her husband and the cowboy who had been his teacher and closest friend.

A soft knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts. "Elizabeth? The bath is ready."

"Thank you, Sarah."

A few of the girls were hovering around the bedroom with the tub in it. Elizabeth shooed them away before going back downstairs to the kitchen. She found Johnny and Brody exactly where she left them, except the tension between them had become palpable. Brody's face was a mask, but she knew Johnny well enough to know the tension wasn't entirely caused by negative feelings. Something had happened while they were in the cellar—or something hadn't happened and

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

now they both were dealing with that regret.

“The bath’s ready,” Elizabeth said brightly. “It’s just up the stairs and the first door on the right.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, ma’am. But I’ve been having some difficulty with stairs.” He looked directly at Johnny as he spoke, like he expected a specific response.

“I’ll help him up.”

“My sewing kit is up there, too. If you want to stitch him up.”

Johnny shook his head. “You should do it. You have a better hand than I do.”

“I don’t care which one of you does it, as long as I get a bottle of whiskey while it happens.”

“I’ll do it,” Elizabeth said, because if Brody had been any other cowboy seeking help, she wouldn’t have even offered the opportunity to Johnny.

The three of them made their slow ascent up the stairs, and Elizabeth sensed the curious eyes of the girls watching them, but they wisely stayed out of sight, behind mostly closed doors. She was sure any one of them would help Brody relieve himself of a few pieces of silver before he continued on to Galveston. Maybe after his bath, she would send Sarah into the room. That would distract Brody from Johnny, and distract her from Brody.

Brody undressed without help, but he did need Johnny to support his weight as he stepped over the tub’s high edge. “Where’s that whiskey?” he asked, once settled into the warm water.

## *FOUR O'CLOCK*

"I'll get it."

Elizabeth followed her husband out of the room, the image of Brody's nude body burned into her mind. Not because Brody was such an attractive man, but because he had once been quite beautiful to her. Now he was gaunt from his years in the saddle, the flesh thin on his bony frame. His ribs and hips jutted out, and his entire body was caked in dust, betraying just how long it had been since he had a bath. And a real bed, presumably. The wound on his thigh was not the only mark on his body, but none were quite as serious. Still, Elizabeth knew she would have to see to cleaning all of them in order to stave off the risk of infection.

"Thank you," Johnny said, as soon as she shut the bedroom door.

"For what?"

"Helping with him."

"He needs it."

"Elizabeth, I should tell you..."

She touched his arm and shook her head. "No. If we need to talk about anything, we can talk after he leaves."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Now go get his whiskey before he insists on stomping down there and getting it himself."

Johnny kissed her cheek gently. A tender caress that made the bands around her chest loosen. She wanted to drag him into her office and kiss him properly. Even though she couldn't do that, the kiss warmed her, lingered with her long after he turned away and head back down to the bar.

## FOUR O'CLOCK

When she returned to the bedroom, Brody hadn't moved from the spot where she left him. His head had fallen back, and his eyes were closed. Steam rose up around the tub, and she noticed hints of gray in his whiskers, and the hair around his ears.

"You asleep?"

"How could I sleep, knowing you would be returning?"

"You look like you're tired."

"I am. Tired to my bones."

"You think you'll make it down to South America?"

"No."

Elizabeth dragged the chair over to the tub and settled, trying to look relaxed. Or at least casual. Brody didn't seem the least bit perturbed by the view she had. "You tell Johnny that?"

"No."

"You're going to leave and let him think you're spending your twilight years in the jungle?"

"A cattle ranch, actually. Not that Johnny has asked for specifics."

"What if he asks you to stay?"

"He won't."

"But what if he does?" Elizabeth pressed.

Brody trained knowing eyes on her. "He won't, because he has you now."

Elizabeth caught her breath. "Do you recognize me?"

Brody inclined his head. "Of course, I do. A person doesn't forget a girl like you. And a man won't ever pass you

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

over, if he's smart."

"I didn't think you'd know me."

"I didn't think Johnny would be smart enough to marry and settle down with a girl like you."

"He's smarter than a lot of people give him credit for."

"I know that. And those people who don't give him the proper credit usually end up dead."

Elizabeth looked away at the reminder. As far as she knew, Johnny hadn't killed anybody since they met. But that didn't mean she was ignorant of the fact that he could. That he had the capacity to shoot a man down in the street like a cur.

"I guess I'm surprised you remember me," Brody continued.

"You shouldn't be." Elizabeth grabbed a cloth and the cake of soap, trying to work up a lather.

"You remember all the men you knew?"

"No. But I couldn't forget somebody like you. Now lean forward. I'm going to try to get a layer of dirt off."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you tell Johnny you recognized me?" Elizabeth asked.

"Course not. Sometimes, it's best not to remind a man of the truth, even if he already knows it."

Elizabeth was about to ask what that meant, but Johnny opened the door, a bottle in one hand, a shot glass in the other. He filled the glass and passed it over to Brody, who took it with a small nod of gratitude, and then sat on the edge of the bed. She saw the tension in his body, in the way he held his

## *FOUR O'CLOCK*

head, and the angle of his shoulders. She tried to ignore it, focusing instead on the darkening water, as dust and blood mingled together.

“How are you feeling?” Johnny asked.

“Better now. The bath and the booze helped.”

“A good bed might be better still,” Johnny commented.

Brody glanced over his shoulder, meeting Johnny’s steady gaze, and the knowing light in his eye sent a shiver down her spine. She felt like she shouldn’t be in the room, between them, but at the same time, she didn’t feel like they wanted her to leave them alone.

“He’s right,” Elizabeth murmured. “You’ll feel better if you get some rest.”

“I’ll rest...but only because you insist, ma’am.”

“Good.”

Silence settled over the room. Elizabeth wasn’t surprised. She considered saying something—anything—to disrupt the tension, but when she opened her mouth, nothing came out. Perhaps it was her own past with Brody weighing down her tongue. Or maybe it was the very real fear that neither man was talking because neither of them needed to say a word—they both knew exactly how this day would end. Four o’clock. How it would all end at four o’clock.

Elizabeth finished Brody’s back and shifted to focus on his front while he poured himself another drink. His cock was hard, the head just poking out of the water. Elizabeth pretended she was a nurse instead of an ex-whore, and ignored his arousal, focusing on cleaning the dirt and dry blood away

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

from his healing injuries. But she couldn't quite meet his eyes. She wasn't afraid of what she might see, but she was more than a little worried about what Brody might see in her. She didn't look up to meet Johnny's gaze, either.

"There. All done."

"I'm mighty obliged, ma'am." Water splashed over the side of the tub as Brody stood. He looked like a new man, but his prick jutted in front of him. Elizabeth turned away, blindly reaching for the towel. From the corner of her eye, she saw her husband staring at the other man. This time, he didn't mask his hunger. Or maybe he couldn't mask it. She had seen that look in Johnny's eyes before, but never, ever directed toward another man. And she had seen men look at each other like that over cluttered card tables in smoky saloons, but never anything this intimate.

Elizabeth unfolded the towel and held it open for Brody. He took it, wrapping it around himself, and carefully stepped over the side of the tub. The bed creaked as Johnny stood, moving out of the way so Elizabeth could tend to Brody's thigh. Brody stretched out on the mattress, the towel beneath him, his face buried against his arm. Johnny stood on the other side of the bed, watching.

He had never seemed so far from her.

## CHAPTER 4

Johnny winced every time the needle disappeared into Brody's skin. He had seen worse. He had done worse. He had even felt worse. But that didn't stop his sympathetic reaction each time Elizabeth threaded the wound. Brody didn't react at all. Maybe the whiskey had served him well, and he was already numb from the booze. Or maybe he was just trying to be stoic. But he didn't twitch as Elizabeth expertly brought his flesh back together. He didn't even flinch when she dumped whiskey in the wound to clean it out.

Johnny watched with a sort of double-vision. He saw Brody's body plainly—he saw the ribs beneath his thin skin, saw the scars and the injuries, saw the gray hair on his legs



#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

and chest. At the same time, Johnny saw the man he had first encountered when he was only fifteen, and Brody was a mere twenty-five, and he was vibrant and healthy. Johnny supposed he would always see Brody that way with his mind's eye.

"How are you doing?" Johnny finally asked.

"Been better." His words were a little strained, but not heavy with pain.

"I'm almost done," Elizabeth assured him softly.

More silence, only broken by the faint clanging of the mission's bell, counting off the morning hours. Four o'clock seemed like a lifetime from that moment, but at the same time, Johnny didn't know what he would do when it finally came. Would he walk Brody to the platform and wave the train farewell? Or would he let Brody slip away without a single good-bye? He thought maybe that was the way it should be. Like when Johnny left Deadwood. If they had tried to talk, if they had tried to say everything that needed to be said, it would only have caused more suffering.

"There, all done," Elizabeth announced.

"Thank God," Brody muttered.

"Perhaps we should go now and let Brody rest," Johnny said.

"Wait." Elizabeth reached over the narrow bed and grabbed Johnny's wrist.

"What?"

Elizabeth didn't answer him. She didn't even acknowledge the question. She just pulled him closer, guiding his hand to Brody's back. As soon as his fingertips touched the scarred

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

skin, a shock went up his arm.

“Elizabeth...”

She looked up, holding his gaze. Her eyes were clear, as though she expected him to find all the answers he needed in their shining depths. She looked at him with sympathy. And with understanding. Brody twitched beneath him, lifting himself off the bed slightly to encourage the contact. Now that Johnny was touching him, he didn't want to stop.

Elizabeth slowly released his wrist. He didn't pull his gaze away from her, but he continued to run his fingers down Brody's spine. Instead of stopping him, she inclined her head. Offering more than just her understanding—she was giving him permission.

Johnny tilted his head. “You're sure?”

She nodded, then turned away from the bed, but he grabbed her elbow with his free hand. She turned back, a question marring her brow.

“Don't go,” he murmured.

Her eyes softened, and she nodded. When he released her, her fingers went to her throat, and she began the slow process of unbuttoning her dress.

“What's going on, boy?”

Johnny knelt on the bed, leaning to put his mouth close to Brody's ear. “We're going to tie up the loose ends.”

Brody lifted his head, his eyes quizzical, and Johnny took advantage of the opportunity to press their mouths together. Brody didn't question that. He turned on his side and gripped Johnny's arm, holding him tightly as he opened to the kiss.

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

His mouth was hot, and he tasted bitter, like the whiskey he had demanded. Johnny didn't know if Brody understood what Johnny had meant. He didn't know if Brody understood that this was a real and proper good-bye. But Johnny knew he needed to take advantage of the opportunity—the gift Elizabeth was offering him without judgment.

He heard Elizabeth's dress fall to the floor—a familiar swish of material that always brought goose bumps to his skin. He didn't look up, though. He didn't take his attention from Brody's hot mouth, which was demanding more from him by the second. Without separating from Brody, he stretched out on the bed, lying on his side, his chest pressed against the other man's, his arm looped around Brody's waist.

Johnny lost track of Elizabeth until he felt her light hands on his body. She reached around the front of him and unbuckled his gun holster with expert fingers. Once she pulled that from his hips, his hat followed, and then his boots. Johnny ran his fingers through Brody's damp hair. It was longer now that it was heavy with water, hanging all the way to his shoulders. He held the back of Brody's neck and plunged his tongue into Brody's mouth, searching for more. Aching for more.

Brody, for his part, clung to Johnny. Despite his injuries and his obvious exhaustion, there was still a great deal of strength in the man. He used it now, ensuring Johnny didn't go anywhere. Ensuring Johnny didn't even have the option of moving. Johnny skimmed his hand down Brody's spine, counting the knobs as he went, absorbing the warmth from his

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skin. The warmth he had absorbed from the steaming water.

The bed dipped behind him as Elizabeth settled her narrow body on the mattress. He could tell without looking that she was completely naked. He was the only one still wearing clothes. The only one who couldn't feel the heat and smooth texture of skin against his bare body. He wished he could do two things at once. He wished he could kiss them both, wished he could taste his past as well as his present, but his mouth was locked on Brody's, his body still hungry for the man he had been missing for the past five years.

Elizabeth's fingers fluttered down his chest, unbuttoning his shirt with the same quick precision she used to unbuckle his belt. He shivered as her warm hand smoothed over his chest, her fingers lightly tangling in the thick hair she found there. He shrugged the material from his shoulders, eager to feel the soft texture of her tits against his back, and the familiar hardness of Brody's chest pressed to his.

"Missed you, boy," Brody murmured, when they finally broke apart for air. He reached up, cupping Johnny's face, his hand surprisingly light. There was no tension in his touch, no pressure. It was nothing more than a caress. Brody's rough, hard-hewn fingers shouldn't have been capable of such a gentle touch. "Johnny."

Johnny almost broke. Every bit of love he had ever felt for the older man came flooding back, and right on the edge of that, was every bit of desire and need he had ever had. "Missed you, too."

With his shirt gone, Elizabeth moved on to his pants. Her

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knuckles brushed against his prick, and he throbbed in response. Brody bypassed Johnny's mouth to focus on his jaw, and his throat, and his neck. His beard scraped across Johnny's skin, and he knew by the time they parted ways, he would have a serious whisker burn. Johnny closed his eyes and tilted his head back, basking in the mingled pleasure and pain, the contrast between Brody's mouth and the bristly hair surrounding his lips.

The contrast sharpened as Elizabeth kissed his shoulder. It was a familiar caress in a familiar place, but his body tightened immediately, responding as though he had never felt her mouth before. He wanted to return the favor for both of them. He wanted to kiss them, wanted to find the sensitive points on each of their bodies. But he couldn't do anything except be overwhelmed by their touches, by their generosity.

"Keep touching him," Elizabeth whispered. "Show him...I don't want you to have any regrets."

He should call a stop to the whole thing, turn around, and reassure Elizabeth that he loved her, that he didn't regret being with her. He never regretted marrying her. But when he turned his head, she touched his jaw and gently forced him to turn his head back to Brody. His gaze landed on an old scar on Brody's upper arm. It had been courtesy of a knife. Johnny vividly recalled the moment it happened, the fight, the bar. The man he had beaten to a pulp before Brody dragged him away, his arm drenched in blood. Johnny had been willing to fight anybody for Brody, but ultimately, Brody had been the one looking out for him. Johnny tilted his head and kissed the

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scar reverently, in memory of everything they had shared between them.

Brody moaned, the sound vibrating through Johnny's body. Johnny knew what he needed to do. He took Brody's shoulder and gently eased him backward, to the mattress. Brody allowed himself to be moved, but he refused to release Johnny, and his mouth was still attached to Johnny's neck as he settled on his back.

"Does that hurt your thigh?" Johnny murmured.

"It's fine."

He hoped Brody was telling him the truth, but ultimately, it didn't make a difference. He kissed the scar on Brody's shoulder again, mouthing the mark before tracing the raised skin with his tongue. Brody shuddered, and Johnny kept moving. He kissed a lazy path to Brody's nipple, and there was a small scar there, too. One that Johnny couldn't resist licking, and then gently scraping with his teeth before he closed his lips around Brody's nipple. He sucked it until the flesh hardened, and Brody moaned again, his large hands moving over Johnny's shoulder, cupping his head, moving farther down his spine.

Johnny switched attention to the other nipple, briefly flashing to the way Elizabeth always responded when he sucked on her nipple. She arched her back, her fingers clawed into the bed, his name escaping her mouth in short, hungry gasps. He looked up at her from the corner of his eye and was a little surprised to see she had bent her body to afford her a better view. Now she watched him, her eyes shining, a high

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flush on her cheeks. When their eyes met, he was forced to look away. Did she understand? She must, because she'd started it. But he didn't want to hurt her. He never wanted anything to happen to her.

Elizabeth must have sensed his hesitation, because she touched his head with gentle fingers, encouraging him to continue his exploration. He didn't want to resist.

"Please...Johnny..." Brody whispered. Those two words told Johnny everything he needed to know. Told Johnny all about his need—a need that wasn't just about sex. He needed human contact. He needed somebody who understood him, who would just let him be.

His stomach wasn't just flat—it seemed hollow. When they rode together, Johnny was always responsible for scaring up food and making sure they ate at least once a day. Now, Johnny supposed, Brody was fending for himself. And Brody was never very good at remembering to take care of himself. But what Johnny really wanted to know was why Brody never found a new partner to ride with. He could have taken up with any number of people in Deadwood. But Johnny had more than enough visual evidence to think Brody had turned himself into a lone wolf.

He slid farther down the mattress, until his mouth was level with Brody's hard cock. How many nights had he spent in this position, a low burning fire casting orange light over Brody's skin, and the moon fat and yellow overhead? So many times that now this felt like second nature. It felt like what he should have done the moment Brody stepped into the saloon.

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

He gripped the base of Brody's prick and directed the tip toward his mouth. He licked at the drops of water still lingering on Brody's smooth skin, his tongue circling the wide head until he reached the slit and a fresh drop of pre-come.

Johnny looked up through his lashes, expecting Brody to be watching him. But he wasn't. In fact, he wasn't paying attention to Johnny at all. He held the back of Elizabeth's head, and their mouths were sealed together in a surprisingly hard kiss. Johnny froze, unable to move while countless conflicting emotions sliced through him. Jealousy immediately slammed into lust. He had never been jealous of Elizabeth's past, even when she was still working as a whore, but this was different.

As they kissed, he realized why. They didn't kiss like they were practically strangers. Brody kissed her the way he had kissed Johnny earlier.

"You two know each other," Johnny said flatly.

They broke apart and Elizabeth's eyes were clouded. "We've crossed paths before, Johnny. Once or twice. But it wasn't..."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He wasn't anybody except another cowboy. That's all. But I can go..."

"No," Johnny said quickly. "No. I was just surprised. That's all. You can...we don't have to stop."

"You're sure?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes," Johnny said, and meant it. He had loved exactly two people in his life, and now they were both in bed with



#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

him. Why shouldn't they enjoy each other? To show that he truly did mean it, he lowered his head, seeking Brody's crown with his tongue. He cleaned the skin of the tangy, clear liquid before closing his lips around the head.

As soon as he felt the familiar pressure against his tongue, a series of memories flashed through his mind. Including the first time. They had been in a tiny room above a saloon in Denver. The bed was just an old straw tick—and the straw smelled like it hadn't been changed in years. Johnny hadn't cared. He had only wanted to collapse and sleep for a full twenty-four hours. When Brody had collapsed beside him, he had been startled. When Brody had wrapped his arms around Johnny, he had been confused. And when he unzipped his fly and pulled out his hard prick, Johnny had been shocked and afraid.

That fear was long forgotten, though. There wasn't even a niggles of it in the back of his mind as he moved his mouth along Brody's thick length. He swallowed slowly, making it last for as long as possible, savoring the taste of each inch. Once he reached the base, he looked up through his lashes to see if they were still kissing. They weren't. They were watching him. Brody's eyes were half-closed, and Elizabeth's were wide, taking in every detail.

"Don't stop," Brody whispered. "God, don't stop."

Johnny didn't want to stop. He hollowed his cheeks, sucking hard on the shaft—it always made Brody jerk and thrust his hips, and now was no exception. Johnny put his free hand flat on Brody's stomach, a small reminder to keep still,

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though he applied no pressure. Brody still had the freedom to push into Johnny's mouth, to bury himself in Johnny's throat. He bobbed his head, losing himself in the rhythm like there had never been a break in their relationship.

He felt Brody shift, and he looked up to watch Brody's sun-baked hand cup his wife's breast. Elizabeth gasped, her head dropped back as Brody kneaded the flesh. He knew Elizabeth liked sex. That was one of the reasons he had come back to her again and again, despite the warning to never fall for a whore. When he was with her, it hadn't felt like business as usual. She was responsive. She was aggressive. She was sweet. She made him feel special, and she once confessed that he made her feel special, too. Now her beautiful body strained for Brody's touch, and her eyes fluttered with pleasure as Brody's thumb swept over her nipple.

Johnny shifted, grinding against the bed. His cock throbbed, and he knew pressing the slick tip against the mattress wouldn't actually help, but he couldn't help himself. He ached for Elizabeth's familiar touch, or Brody's rougher handling. If he climbed up Brody's body and reclaimed his position between them, they would both be happy to give him exactly what he needed. He promised himself he would do exactly that in a few moments. In the meantime, he would fully enjoy the salty taste of Brody's body, the smell of soap on his skin, and his gasps of pleasure.

Johnny had never done this for another man, and he couldn't imagine a time he ever would. Though he loved every second of it, he didn't enjoy it the same way he enjoyed a

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woman's body. And he never trusted another man the way he trusted Brody. He could focus on nothing more than giving and receiving pleasure when he was with Brody—especially since he always took such great satisfaction in the way he made Brody feel. Each swallow of Brody's length fanned the flames heating his blood, subtracted another day from their separation.

“Fuck, Johnny...if you want anything more from me, you gotta stop now.”

Johnny slowly lifted his head, letting Brody's prick fall from his mouth a half inch at a time. His tongue caught the head, and he dragged the flat of it over Brody's crown, enjoying the salty taste one more time before straightening.

“What more do you want from him?” Elizabeth asked with a note of curiosity he had never heard in her voice before. Like for the first time in her life, she didn't know the answer to a question. Or maybe, for the first time in her life, she couldn't believe the answer to her question.

Johnny returned to the spot between them, sighing as they both pressed against his body. This felt right. More natural than anything he had ever experienced. This time, he faced Elizabeth instead of Brody, and he caught her chin between his finger and thumb, holding her in place while he claimed her mouth. Her arm snuck around his shoulder as she opened to the kiss, and he tasted the faintest hint of whiskey on her breath—Brody. His wife tasted of Brody's kisses, and far from upsetting him, it amplified the ache between his legs.

While Elizabeth distracted him with her delectable mouth,

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Brody's long fingers slid between his buttocks. Johnny draped his leg over Elizabeth, allowing Brody easier access to his ass. The callused fingers disappeared for a moment, and when they returned to his waiting body, they were slick. Johnny tried not to tense, but as soon as the tips worked into his tight hole, his body went rigid.

Elizabeth immediately lifted her head. "What's wrong?"

"I just..."

"You just got to relax, boy. Trust me."

"I do," Johnny answered automatically. Though he still didn't relax.

"Do you want this?" Brody asked.

"Yes. I've missed it."

Brody kissed the back of his neck, a surprisingly gentle gesture. "Then you've got to relax."

"Let me help you," Elizabeth whispered.

Before he could ask how she intended to do that, she slid down his body, her mouth leaving a hot trail along his chest. He watched her, his breath caught in his throat as her blonde head reached his groin. She didn't tease him—not like he had teased Brody. She just opened her mouth and swallowed him down in a single, easy motion. The wet heat of her mouth immediately distracted him from Brody's probing fingers. Almost as soon as he felt the silky pressure of her throat, Brody pushed past Johnny's clenched muscle, filling his channel.

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut, trying desperately to catch his breath. It felt like he had just been thrown off his horse, the

#### FOUR O'CLOCK

ground rushing to meet him before he had the chance to brace himself. Knowing this was the beginning, that it would only get better, didn't help. The thought of burying himself in his wife while Brody claimed his ass made his balls tight. Strengthened the illusion of falling, of slamming hard into the ground, without a single chance at catching himself.

Elizabeth swallowed around him, the muscles of her throat gripping him like a vise, just as Brody added a second finger. New pain stabbed through him, as it always had. He didn't tense again. He didn't try to push Brody away. If he could ride out this new sensation, the edges would dull and the pleasure would return.

Another soft kiss on his nape. A third finger in his ass. Words forming against his skin that was meant for his ears only. *I won't forget this. I won't forget you. I know I shouldn't have stopped here. You should have sent me away.* If Elizabeth heard him, she didn't give any sign. Her eyes were closed, her pale lashes brushing against her hollow cheeks. He pulled the pins out of her hair. She didn't like it when he did that, but he loved to watch the thick curtain of her hair falling down her shoulders. She looked at him from the corner of her eye, but without a hint of reproach. Johnny smiled, his fingers tangling in her hair as he caressed her cheek.

"Do you want me to be inside you?" Brody murmured.

"Yes."

"Has there been anybody else?"

"No. Can't you tell?"

"I can tell. I'm leaking for you." The head of his cock

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dragged across Johnny's skin, slick just like Brody had promised.

"I...I think I'm ready...Elizabeth..."

Johnny didn't know how the three of them should be positioned. He didn't know how it would work. They had shared a girl a few times in the years they rode together, but never like this. The girl had always been between them, a tantalizing shield, giving them everything they needed, but blocking them from what they really wanted. Now Elizabeth wouldn't be in a position to shield them from each other—but that didn't tell him what position she should be in.

Once she was eye level with him again, he cupped the side of her face and pulled her into a slow kiss. "I don't know what to do," he murmured against her mouth.

Elizabeth tilted her head, studying him for a moment before understanding dawned in her eyes. "Remember when we took the train to California? How we slept in that narrow bed?" Johnny nodded. "We'll do that. I'll spoon against you, and you spoon against him."

"Yes. Good."

Elizabeth kissed the corner of his mouth before turning to face away from him. He skimmed his palm down her ribs and over her hip, marveling at how soft she felt against him. No matter how hard the world made her, no matter how the desert wind cut and shaped her, she always felt so soft when she fit against his body. And she always fit against him like they had literally been made one for the other. Like he had traveled through the territories and the rugged west just so he could

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

find her, at the edge of the desert, waiting for him.

Brody's fingers were still buried in his body, and he stroked in and out, slowly fucking him. Need eclipsed the pleasure. It felt good, but he already wanted more. He knew once he slid into Elizabeth, he would be ready for more. With a deep breath, Johnny entered his wife, thrusting until he was fully sheathed. Elizabeth gasped and clenched around him, her muscles fluttering, her body perfect against his.

Brody slowly eased his fingers from Johnny's body. Johnny tightened his grip on Elizabeth's hip, holding her back against him so she couldn't move away. His balls ached, and Elizabeth's swollen lips brushed against his skin, her arousal coating him. She was always excited for him, but he couldn't remember the last time she had been quite so aroused. The smell of their coupling wafted around them, and he buried his face in her hair, taking another deep breath as Brody's cock slid between his cheeks.

Nobody spoke. Silence blanketed them, and Johnny wondered if he should say something. If he should whisper soft words in Elizabeth's ear, or look over his shoulder to encourage Brody to continue. Words were beyond him, but he didn't need to speak. He let his hold on Elizabeth tell her everything he would have said, and he shifted his hips, doing the best he could to position himself for Brody.

Brody spread Johnny's cheeks, and then the blunt tip touched his stretched hole. Brody groaned and eased forward, pushing and pushing, working past the resistance of Johnny's body. It was different, and it was the same, and it hurt, but it

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didn't hurt. It overwhelmed him. Brody's flesh was as hot as Elizabeth, and his body absorbed as much of the heat as it could. His blood sizzled. Everything tingled. And as Brody slid forward, the heat flared into something so bright, so unbelievable that Johnny was finally forced to cry out.

Elizabeth placed a soothing hand on his hip, and Brody's coarse fingers joined hers. With a final grunt, he fully sheathed himself inside Johnny. Once they were all still, all where they belonged, indecision against seized Johnny. How should he move? Or should Brody move? Should all three of them move together? Would they know how?

"Just take care of your wife," Brody said, his mouth still at Johnny's neck. "That's all you need to do."

He rocked back, losing some of her heat, and then forward again. Brody didn't move. But he didn't have to. Johnny controlled the tempo as he rocked with Elizabeth. Brody just held him, letting Johnny move his hips at will. Each stroke on Brody's cock was shallow. There was barely any friction between them, but Johnny was satisfied. More than satisfied. He had missed the contact, missed that feeling of being full, missed the pulsing heat of Brody's body, and the shiver of delight when the other man's balls brushed against his.

"Johnny...Johnny...Johnny..." Both of them whispered his name as he moved back and forth, their voices mingling until it sounded like one voice. He kissed Elizabeth's shoulder and neck, and Brody's warm mouth mimicked him, touching Johnny everywhere Brody could reach. After his short session with Brody in the basement, Johnny thought they would both



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move too fast and demand too much, afraid of what would happen if they didn't take advantage of every second. But Johnny didn't feel any of that urgency. Once the three of them were joined, Johnny didn't want to do anything to rush it. To end things. He wasn't in a rush to see four o'clock.

He was desperate to prolong their joining, but his hunger overpowered that need. The faster he moved, the faster he wanted to move, until the three of them were grunting and thrusting against each other. All three of them were slick with sweat, and their shouts of pleasure mingled. His heart beat a constant tempo, demanding more, and Elizabeth made those soft sounds that were never quite words, but always meant that she was ready for him to unleash himself. Brody's fingers were impossibly tight on Johnny's hip, reflecting the strength of twenty hard years riding the range.

Johnny didn't know just who would shatter first, but he knew he wanted it to be Elizabeth. He pushed his hand between her thighs, his thumb strumming her clit. She jerked with each touch, gasping and moving her hips out of time with him.

“Faster...just a little bit...”

Johnny complied, but he wasn't just giving her what she wanted. The harder he pounded into her, the harder he fucked himself on Brody's thick cock. Elizabeth's voice climbed higher and higher, until it disappeared in a harsh breath. Her body went rigid, and her muscles tightened and convulsed around him, squeezing him until his eyes crossed and his balls pulled tight. He was just about to let himself go, when Brody

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wrapped his arm around Johnny's waist and yanked him backward.

"Not quite done yet, boy."

That was Johnny's only warning. Brody pulled him from Elizabeth's body and rolled to his back, bringing Johnny with him. With both hands on his hips, Brody slammed into him. Johnny felt like he was nothing more than a rag doll with broken joints, unable to do anything except let Brody take his body. He dropped his head back, crying out, unconcerned with who could hear him. The whole town could hear him—at that moment, Johnny was beyond caring. He was beyond everything except physical need.

Each time Brody slammed forward, pleasure exploded beneath his skin, and his teeth jarred, and his toes curled. He wound his arm behind him, his fingers closing in Brody's gray hair, and he held on tight as Brody moved his hips faster and faster.

"What you do to me... Fuck... what you've always done..." Brody grunted.

Johnny rolled his head to the side, his gaze meeting Elizabeth's. Her eyes were still soft from her climax, and she watched without a hint of judgment. Johnny could only watch her for a few moments before he was forced to close his eyes again. But he still saw her, watching Brody as he spent himself inside Johnny's body. Brody's cock jerked hard in Johnny's channel. The cry of absolute pleasure torn from Brody's throat sent Johnny over the edge. His own cock twitched, and then

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his stomach was coated in hot fluid and the pleasure rolling through him seemed like it would never stop. Not as long as they were locked together.

## CHAPTER 5

Elizabeth poured herself a shot of whiskey, downed it in a single gulp, and then poured another. The alcohol warmed her, clouding her already foggy brain. Brody was asleep upstairs, and Johnny had been happy to lay beside his old friend—his old lover—for a little while. They both knew he would need to get up soon, but Elizabeth wasn't in a big hurry to tear him away from Brody. Especially since she needed time on her own to come to think about what had just happened.

The sex was amazing. It was always good with Johnny, but things had been taken to a new level, and Elizabeth wasn't sure why. She didn't want to think Johnny was only truly happy when he was with Brody. Especially since he hadn't

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

treated her any different. He touched her like she was precious. He had kissed her like he couldn't get enough of the taste of her. She hated Dead Man's Corner, and sometimes, she hated the saloon, but Johnny made everything worth it.

What would happen after four o'clock that afternoon? She didn't believe Johnny would leave her for Brody and a new life in South America, but would he always wonder? Would a part of him be gone anyway? Or was she just asking for trouble by obsessing over the question? Elizabeth hadn't made it this far, hadn't survived so many years, by obsessing over things out of her control. But then, she had never been in this sort of situation. She had never watched her husband with his male lover before.

Johnny's past had never been so close to their lives.

Elizabeth traced the rim of the glass with her finger, staring in the amber liquid. There was work to be done—there was always work to be done. She didn't have time to stand around and let her mind wander. She didn't like sitting still. Even when she was taking care of the bookwork for the brothel. But now she just couldn't get up the motivation to sweep the floors, polish the glasses, check on the girls, and prepare for the trickle of customers that always began after lunch. She wished Johnny would come downstairs. She was sure she'd be able to concentrate if he was in his regular spot behind the bar.

"Well, where's Johnny?"

Elizabeth looked up, startled out of her thoughts. Spencer stood at the door, flanked by two very tall, very wide men.

#### FOUR O'CLOCK

The Gorman brothers. Elizabeth always winced when they climbed the stairs up to her girls. She had never been able to kick them out, but only because they had never quite crossed the line. They danced on it, though.

“Seeing to some business. Do you want a drink?”

“What do you say, boys? Do we want a drink?”

Both of the men grunted. Elizabeth calmly overturned three fresh shot glasses and filled each one. “That’ll be fifty cents.”

“And we want three girls.”

The Gorman on his left grunted, and Spencer’s smile widened. “Make that four girls.”

“I told you last night that you’re not welcome in the brothel,” Elizabeth said tightly.

Spencer downed the whiskey and then reached for the glass Elizabeth had poured for herself. After gulping that down, he slid it across the bar. “You were serious about that?”

“I was. You know the rules, Spencer. I don’t like anybody roughing up my girls.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes. You’re more than welcome to stay down here, drink, play cards. But you can’t go upstairs.”

Spencer darted across the bar, moving faster than Elizabeth thought he could. His fingers closed around her throat, tight enough to block her air, and brought her face close to his. “I don’t like women who think they can tell me what to do.”

“Spence...” She clawed at his hand, trying to force him to release her, but he didn’t budge. Her throat burned. Her lungs

## *FOUR O'CLOCK*

burned. "Please..."

"What's that? I don't think I heard you."

He lifted his arm, picking her off the floor. Her eyes widened, and she redoubled her efforts to free herself. She clawed at his iron arm with both hands, her nails tearing long strips from his skin, but he didn't even flinch. He barely seemed to notice at all as he dragged her over the bar, sending the shot glasses crashing to the ground. Once he had her on the other side of the bar, he released her without warning. She didn't have the chance to catch her breath before he punched her in the stomach, sending her to the floor.

"Hold her arms, boys."

They immediately dropped to the floor beside her, meaty hands pinning her to the hard wood floor. Elizabeth tried to fight back, but she couldn't even breathe. Each gasp hurt her bruised throat.

"Spencer...Johnny's upstairs..."

"Is he?" Spencer looked up to the ceiling. "I don't hear him. What's he doing up there? Fucking one of the girls you won't let me touch."

"If you...go...I won't tell him. Just go."

"Or..." Spencer dropped down to straddle her. The added weight forced more air from her body. "I'll just make sure to do my business before he gets here."

"You...don't understand..."

"No..." Spencer leaned forward, his bitter, hot breath fanning across her face. He was so close, she could see the crumbs in his beard, and the drops of whiskey lingering on his

## FOUR O'CLOCK

moustache. His eyes were colorless, expressionless. They reminded her of a dead animal's. Her stomach clenched, and it was all she could do to swallow back the bile. "You don't understand. I need a woman and you won't let me have one. So..."

"He's going to kill you," Elizabeth tried.

Spencer laughed. The sound reminded her of a coyote, and his eyes reflected his good humor. Even the Gormans laughed. "He wouldn't dare. Not even if I do this."

With each of the brothers holding her in place, Spencer forced her legs apart, and shoved her skirt up her thighs. He bent and inhaled, licking his lips with a disgusting grin. "I'm not the first person you've fucked today, am I?"

Elizabeth took the deepest breath she could manage and shouted Johnny's name. She only got the first syllable out before one hand went over her mouth, and another went over her throat again.

"What the fuck was that?" Spencer hissed. "I already told you he's not going to help you." He unbuttoned his pants, allowing his prick to spring free. He stroked himself, and licked his lips. "Keep her still, boys, and you can have a turn, too. Who knows? Maybe we'll make Johnny watch."

Elizabeth tried to scream again, but she couldn't even moan. Her vision blurred. She couldn't see Spencer's face as he pulled her legs around his hips.

*Johnny. Johnny. Please. Please...*

She closed her eyes, repeating Johnny's name like a prayer, wondering how she could have let herself get in this



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situation. She knew she would puke as soon as he touched her, even with the hand clamped around her mouth so tight that her jaw ached. There would be bruises on her face and throat. Reminders. Every time she looked in the mirror. Reminders. Every time Johnny looked at her.

Three gun shots shattered the air, so close together that she almost couldn't tell if there had been three. Except the hand on her hips fell away, and the one on her throat loosened, the one on her mouth slipped down to the floor. Blood, hot and sticky, covered her face, her hair, and her dress. She didn't move. She just stared up at the ceiling as numb relief swept through her.

"Elizabeth?"

"What happened?" Sarah's voice from upstairs. The question was echoed as the rest of the girls rushed out of their rooms.

Then Johnny filled her vision. He took her under the arms and dragged her away from the three bodies. "Are you all right? Oh, God. Elizabeth?"

"Fine..." she rasped.

Johnny gathered her up in his arms, unmindful of the blood, and held her tight against his chest. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have been down here."

He held her close to his chest, and she wanted to reassure him that she was fine. She wanted to tell him that he had been in time. She wanted to tell him she loved him. But she could only return his embrace, with her face buried against his shoulder. Scalding tears rolled down her cheeks, but they weren't for the pain in her throat, or a delayed reaction to her

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earlier fear.

“You shot him,” she finally whispered.

“I wish I could shoot him again.”

“But...the sheriff.”

“Sarah! Get down here!”

Elizabeth heard the girl's rapid descent down the stairs, but she didn't lift her head. She didn't have the strength. “Help Elizabeth upstairs.”

“Johnny...” Elizabeth didn't want to let him go.

He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair. “I know. But I've got to take care of these bastards, and you need to get cleaned up.”

“I know, but...”

“Please, sweetheart.”

Elizabeth nodded and, with Johnny's help, she stood. Sarah immediately wrapped her arm around Elizabeth's waist and, together, they made their way upstairs. Elizabeth paused often, watching Johnny as he dragged the bodies out to the back of the saloon. He worked with a grim frown, and she felt like he was dragging their dreams out of the building. One by one. Everything they had ever worked for.

“It's going to be all right,” Sarah murmured. “You'll see. Mr. Johnny will make it all right.”

“I know.” But for the first time since she met Johnny, she didn't think she believed he could work a miracle.

\* \* \*

Johnny dug a shallow grave—just deep enough for all

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three bodies—and covered it over with dirt and rocks. It was a hasty job. He didn't intend for those bodies to stay hidden. He just needed to make sure nobody noticed them until after four. God must have been smiling down on them, because nobody had come running when he fired the shots, and nobody had investigated while he dug the grave.

After he finished covering over the bodies, he scavenged through the kitchen until he found enough rags to clean up most of the blood. He should have let Brody shoot that bastard when he had the chance. Why hadn't he? Brody could have fended for himself against the sheriff. And, Johnny had to admit, he would rather see Brody in jail for killing Spencer than see his wife, pinned and helpless, with a bruised throat and hurt eyes. He'd kill everybody in town, including Brody, if he could have saved his wife from Spencer's attack.

What he couldn't mop up of the blood—and the brains—he covered with sawdust. It was a slipshod job, but Johnny wasn't trying to completely cover his ass. He couldn't. He just didn't have the time. They had to leave Dead Man's Corner, and they had to do it fast. But they had built up from nothing before. They could do it again.

Even if they ended up in South America.

By the time Johnny made it upstairs again, the girls were huddled in one room, and Elizabeth was in the room with Brody. He was awake, fully dressed, and his mouth pulled in the hard line that meant violence was imminent. Even if all the assholes were dead.

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," Brody

## FOUR O'CLOCK

said.

“I know.”

Elizabeth looked up with miserable eyes, then returned to studying her feet. She had changed her clothes, but the bruises on her throat were more vibrant. “I’m sorry.”

Johnny immediately rushed over to her and knelt at her feet, reaching to fold her hands in his. “No, I don’t say that.”

“But I am.” Each word was a strained whisper. “You were right about him.”

“He was a worthless cur that should have been drowned the day he was birthed,” Brody spat.

“What are we going to do?” Elizabeth asked.

Johnny brought her hand up to his mouth and tenderly kissed each knuckle. “We’ve got to catch the four o’clock train. If we don’t...well, you know I’m not going to get a fair trial here.”

“What about the girls?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’ll give them enough money so they can leave if they want.”

“What should I do?”

Johnny shook his head. “I’ll take care of everything. I’ll pack what we need and make sure we get to the train.” He pulled his watch from his pocket and checked it. “We have a little over three hours.”

“Ma’am?” Brody sat on the bed beside her, though he didn’t try to touch her, despite their earlier intimacy. “I know you’re scared about leaving your home, but I promise you, I’ll do anything I can to help.”

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

"I can't believe we have to go on the run. It's not fair."

"No," Johnny agreed. "It's not. It's not fair at all. But if we stay..."

Elizabeth cupped his cheek, her thumb brushing over the corner of his mouth. "I know. I'm sorry to leave, but...I want to be where you are. You're the only home that matters to me."

Johnny covered her hand with his and turned his head to kiss her palm. "I'll be back soon. I promise."

Brody rose and moved to follow, but Elizabeth caught his hand. "Thank you. For your offer."

"I know something about running. Sometimes, it's the only smart thing to do."

Elizabeth pulled Brody closer, forcing him to bend so his face was near hers. "I know Johnny loves you. I know we don't really know each other but..."

"I think it's best if you rest your voice," Johnny said, alarmed more by the strain on her words than the words themselves. He did love Brody, and he had no doubt that the other man knew it.

"We're going to get to know each other just fine." Brody smiled down at her, and the years disappeared from his face. "I'm going to go help your husband now."

As soon as Johnny closed the door behind them, Brody shook his head. "We've got to find a nice home for that girl."

"I'm not leaving her behind. Anywhere."

"I never said you should. But that girl deserves a proper home. So do you."

#### FOUR O'CLOCK

“What do you know about proper homes?” Johnny asked.

“I know I never had one. And neither have you.”

“Then how do you know what she needs?”

“I know that I want to take care of her,” Brody said softly.

Johnny inclined his head. “Come on. We’ve got a train to catch.”

“Right. Where are we going?”

“I don’t want to go to South America,” Johnny said.

“No, me neither. I don’t know any Spanish.”

“What about Mexico?” Johnny asked.

“You’re not worried about the *banditos*?”

“You ever get in trouble in Arkansas?”

Brody shook his head. “Not yet.”

“That one sounds promising then.”

“You know...we’re probably going to end up in South America anyway.”

Johnny looked to the closed door with a sigh. “Yeah, I know. Come on. Let’s get moving.”

## CHAPTER 6

Elizabeth stood on the edge of the platform, anxiously watching for the train. Johnny had given her his pocket watch, but staring at the clock's face didn't actually make time go by faster. She wished Johnny and Brody were at her side, but they were both on the other side of the platform, watching the town. Waiting for the sheriff's posse.

Elizabeth knew the only reason they were waiting for the train was because of her. If they didn't have to worry about her, they would have been long gone, riding their horses hard through the desert. But Elizabeth knew she couldn't keep up with them, and they knew it, too. A part of her wanted to tell them to leave. Sheriff Hutchins wouldn't hang her, even if he

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wanted to avenge the death of his son. She hated being the reason they were stuck there. She hated feeling so weak. Even with one of Johnny's pistols, she felt ridiculously, stupidly weak. She hadn't felt like that since she was a little girl.

Johnny and Brody both wanted to take care of her, the attack awakening every single one of their instincts to protect her. She didn't blame them. She even appreciated it. But she didn't think she could tolerate it for another moment, much less for the rest of her life. She had been attacked before. She had fought off men before. She had seen things, experienced things, been told things no person should have to put up with in a lifetime. And she had lived. More than that, she had survived. What choice did she have before? What choice did she have now?

But she had never lost her home before. Nobody had ever taken anything from her that really mattered. The secure, safe world she had relied on was entirely askew now. And it may never be right again. South America? How could she ever hope to live in South America? Even with Johnny?

A shout from Brody pulled her attention westward. A cloud of dust was gathering at the other end of town. One big enough to be hiding an entire posse. Elizabeth's palm suddenly felt sweaty against the handle of the gun. Johnny had told her she wasn't supposed to shoot. Only in defense. Otherwise, she needed to get on the train. Even if that meant leaving Johnny and Brody behind, she needed to get herself on the train. She needed to take her bag—which was full of all the gold and cash they had managed to save—and get as far



#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

east as she could. Elizabeth had agreed. She had even promised she would do as he said, but as the riders approached, she knew she could never leave her husband.

He would never leave her, after all.

The distant whistle of the train drew her attention from the approaching riders. She couldn't see it yet, but she knew the posse would reach the platform first. Spencer had been right. He could get away with anything. There couldn't be a fair trial in a town like Dead Man's Corner. It was just another example of her helplessness. What good did it do to fight in a town that punished people who had the courage to stand up for themselves? What good were morals? What good was hard work?

Elizabeth pulled herself a little straighter. She wasn't going to be run out of town like a common criminal. They could take her home, the saloon she had helped build until her fingers were raw and bleeding, but Sheriff Hutchins couldn't take her self-respect.

The train whistled again. Slightly closer, but still out of sight. Johnny and Brody both had their guns ready, but there were only two of them. She knew Johnny was the best shot within a hundred miles, and Brody was apparently the fastest draw in the West—if rumors were to be believed—but it was still an uneven fight. Her men were outnumbered.

Elizabeth abandoned the bags and crossed the long platform. Neither of the men looked up to greet her, but they were both aware of her.

“What are you doing?” Johnny asked.

## FOUR O'CLOCK

"I'm a good shot."

"You should get back where it's safe," Brody said.

"No. I'll go on the run, but I'm not going to be run out of town. Not like this."

"It's dangerous."

"Yes, it is. But if we're going to run together, if we're going to live together, then we need to fight together," Elizabeth said, drawing the hammer back on her gun. "Or we're going to die together."

"Nobody's going to die today," Johnny said, his tone resolute.

For the first time since Spencer sauntered into the saloon, Elizabeth smiled. She believed him.

\* \* \*

A part of him wanted to send Elizabeth back to wait for the train. Or inside the depot, where she would be safe. But Johnny knew she wouldn't go. He recognized the light in her eyes for what it was. Elizabeth was a fighter, just like him. Which was why they had survived together for so long. He couldn't ask anything less of her.

He heard the rumble of the train behind him just as Sheriff Hutchins's face came into view. His eyes were narrowed to mere slits, and he reminded Johnny of a snake. Slow moving and sleepy in the sunshine, but with the uncanny ability to strike before anybody even knew he was there. He was elected sheriff because nobody else wanted the job, and even if anybody else did, nobody would be stupid enough to

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challenge him. Johnny supposed he did a good job, too. Dead Man's Corner was mostly a peaceful place. Now that Spencer was dead, it'd probably be one of the best places to live in the territory.

There were three men with him. Two deputies and his brother. Each man was well-armed, and Johnny knew them well enough to know they were well trained with their weapons. He didn't quite believe they would beat him, but what about Elizabeth? She was standing there, armed, her intention clear. They wouldn't avoid firing at her out of some misplaced sense of chivalry. The urge to send her far away, to protect her, to put his body between her and them, returned.

"You're sure beating a hasty retreat out of town," the sheriff drawled.

"We're traveling with a friend," Johnny said.

"Who's going to take over your saloon while you're gone?"

"Nobody. You can have it."

Hutchins leaned off the side of his horse and spat rusty tobacco juice. "I don't want it. I'd let Spencer have it, but I'll be damned if he hasn't disappeared."

"Probably out riding with the Gormans," Johnny said.

Mark Hutchins twitched, his hand going to his sidearm. The sheriff caught his arm, stopping him from drawing. "I didn't come out to kill you, Johnny. Just hand over Brody James, and we'll forget all this ever happened."

Johnny blinked. They thought Brody killed Spencer? It made sense. Johnny had always gone out of his way to avoid

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fighters with Spencer. And probably a dozen people had seen him interfere in the fight between the two men earlier that morning. Brody was a wanted man, with a bloody past, and an argument with the hot-headed, young Spencer. Of course they assumed he was the guilty party.

Hutchins smiled at his hesitation in an almost paternal way. Like he understood why Johnny was hesitant, but if Johnny only listened to him, then he would see the error of his ways and repent. "You don't want to leave your saloon behind. We all know how hard both of you have worked for that. I hear you used to ride with James, but you think he wouldn't have already thrown you to the wolves if you were in his shoes?"

Brody had been in Johnny's shoes. In Deadwood. Instead of abandoning Johnny to his fate, he had caused the distraction Johnny had needed to run. He had risked his own life to make sure Johnny made it out of town, out of the territory, out of the reach of the law. And he had done it without discussion.

"I have a better idea. You let the three of us leave now, and there won't be any more bloodshed this afternoon."

Hutchins spat again. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Don't kill the girl." That was from Bill, one of the deputies. "I want her."

"Why do you get to have her?" The other deputy demanded.

"We'll share," Mark said, his eyes glinting with the same cold light Johnny had seen in Spencer's one too many times.

"The hell you will," Johnny muttered, his hand working on

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its own accord. He drew, fired, and watched Mark fall from his saddle before he finished speaking.

There was a beat of silence as the three men on horseback stared at their fallen companion. And then hell broke loose.

The mission bells began to ring, counting off the fourth hour of the afternoon. Each clang was deep and long, echoing off the buildings and the distant mountains. Behind them, the train rumbled and whistled. It was higher than the deep bells reverberating through the town. Elizabeth shouted beside him, and a flurry of gunshots sounded like thunder rolling down from the mountains. The horses, terrified, reared back, dropping their hapless riders, trampling the ground, their neighing almost like screams of pain.

Johnny kept firing. The gun felt hot in his hand, and he desperately wanted to check his right, and his left, but he stared straight ahead, and he kept firing. As long as he heard gun blasts from beside him, he wouldn't be distracted by his fear. Bullets whistled through the air, adding to the cacophony, adding to the chaos. Adding to the horror. But Johnny kept firing. Time slowed. Even when the bells stopped, they still echoed in his head. The clock didn't advance. It couldn't. Everything was stopped at four o'clock.

Johnny hit Sheriff Hutchins in the brow, sending a bullet through his head. The back of his skull exploded, and he slumped forward, then dropped from his horse. Killing a lawman would put every bounty hunter and every U.S. Marshall in the territory on his tale. Three holes erupted in Bill's chest, almost instantaneously. From the angle, Johnny

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

knew it had to be Elizabeth's doing. When the dust cleared, she would have a bounty on her head as well. On his other side, Brody shot twice. The man never wasted bullets. Two shots were all he needed.

It was over before the echoes of the bells faded.

Johnny holstered his gun and grabbed Elizabeth's hand. It was clammy, and her fingers were trembling. Not just her fingers. Her entire body. Turning, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight against his chest.

"We got to get out of here," Elizabeth said.

"I know. Are you...are you hurt?"

"No. No, they didn't hit me."

Brody took his shoulder. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did."

"The train's waiting," Brody said.

The train was waiting. And it wouldn't wait forever. "Let's go."

Brody went ahead of them, but Elizabeth caught Johnny's arm, holding him back. "I'm glad you didn't turn him over."

"I never could."

"I know."

"Don't ever get involved in a shoot-out again," Johnny said.

"Why don't we all avoid shoot-outs in the future?"

"I can't make that promise. Trouble seems to find us no matter where we go. Or it follows Brody. I haven't been able to figure it out."

"And you'll follow him."

#### *FOUR O'CLOCK*

Johnny stopped short. "You don't want to go with him? We don't have to. He's going south, we can go north."

Elizabeth took his hand. "That's not what I meant. But it's true, isn't it?"

Johnny sighed. "I suppose it is."

"That's fine. Because I'll follow you. And the three of us... we'll stay out of trouble together."

"Even in South America?"

"Wherever we're going to be," she promised.

Elizabeth insisted on taking the seat next to the window, her bag resting on her lap. Johnny sat beside her, but he didn't look out the window. It was best not to look back. That was one thing he had learned. It was best to not look back to their home, and their lives, and the broken bottles shining in the sunshine behind the saloon. It was best not to think of the shallow grave, and the girls who relied on them because at least Elizabeth never let anybody get rough with them.

Johnny knew it was best to not look back. He curled his fingers around Elizabeth's, and he let his other hand brush against Brody's thigh. They'd built a home once, they could do it again. Except maybe this time, it wouldn't feel like a small piece of him was missing in the process.

## PEPPER ESPINOZA

Pepper Espinoza lives in southern California with her husband and her cats. She has spent the last year working as a full time author, and intends to start graduate school in the fall.

You can learn more about Pepper by visiting her website:

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\* \* \*

**Don't miss *Surrender's Edge*  
by Pepper Espinoza,  
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*Geoffrey Kirk has been in love with his best friend, Nash, since almost the moment they met. Convinced that Nash would never return his feelings, he forced himself to move on, and fell for his assistant, Sunny. Despite his strong feelings, he never acted on them, and when he discovered Sunny and Nash together, he thought he lost his chance for happiness forever.*

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