



## Praise for the writing of Jeanne Laws

### *The Gateway Trilogy 1: Animal Dreams*

Yummy! This book goes quickly from beginning to end with plenty of loving in between. Ms. Laws has a winner right out of the gate! I can't wait to see what comes next in her Gateway series.

-- Caye Kimberley, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

*The Gateway Trilogy 1: Animal Dreams* is easily one of the best books that I've ever read and is the cornerstone for an exciting new trilogy by Jeanne Laws. Ms. Laws is a talented and creative writer that intuitively knows what the reader needs. From the first page to the last, I was transfixed and could not put the book down.

-- Susan, *Two Lips Reviews*

*The Gateway Trilogy 1: Animal Dreams* is an artful masterpiece of delicious paranormal romance with all the elements to spell great success for this very talented author.

-- Keely Skillman, *EcataRomance Reviews*

The humor in this story rounded out the tale perfectly and launched *Animal Dreams* quickly to the top of my new "must-read" list. This is an amazing breakout book for this wonderful new author – Ms. Laws already writes like a veteran.

-- Tara, *Euro Reviews*

*The Gateway Trilogy 1: Animal Dreams* is now available from Loose Id.

# A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

Jeanne Laws

LooseId  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex).

# A Good Man is Hard to Find

Jeanne Laws

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

Copyright © August 2006 by Jeanne Laws

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-325-4

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Crystal Esau  
Cover Artist: April Martinez

## Dedication

*To Maya, who made sure I got it done and that I got it right.*

## Chapter One

A quick flash of motion from behind was the first sign Kade had that he was being followed. He reacted instinctively, bending low and swinging upward with his arm. His elbow made contact with his assailant, hard. He winced at the streak of pain that radiated up his arm, but the muffled oath and the distinctive sound of a weapon clattering to the ground told him he had disarmed his shadow.

In a fluid movement, he turned, retrieving his gun from its holster. The sight that met his eyes stopped him cold. His attacker was not alone, and Kade's gut twisted as he counted three gun barrels pointed straight at his chest. Kade raised his hands slowly.

The man in the middle, cradling his wrist, made four bushwhackers. In the light from the stars and the lanterns on the street, Kade recognized Big Mel.

"You'll pay fer that, Black Eagle." Mel moved to where his gun had landed and picked it up, examining it closely before turning back to Kade. He raised his arm, pointing the gun toward the darkness at the far end of the alley, and fired. The sound echoed loudly in the confined space, but Kade knew it would be unremarkable to any of the town residents within earshot.

Big Mel, satisfied with the results, smiled fondly at the gun and turned back to Kade. The smile faded at Kade's look of derision.

The limited-edition revolver was a piece of shit. Flashy and expensive, its bulky weight made it slow. Kade knew the model had a history of misfiring. Still, at a range of five feet, he was pretty sure it would do the trick.

The stench of stale beer and even staler bodies was thick in the small alley. Despite the long shadows cast by the Horseshoe Saloon's back wall, Kade could see that Big Mel's eyes were clear and his hand did not waver. There would be no dodging this bullet.

Kade's gut clenched, and a bead of sweat trickled down the center of his back, but he held the gaze of the man before him. He suspected that, at not more than five-foot-six, Big Mel was so named for his girth, not his height. His crimes were wide-ranging, though he was mostly known as a thief and a bully. Mel had always been careful to steer clear of murder, a hanging offense. But Kade knew that some crimes were worse than killing, and he had kept his eye on Mel over the years, bringing him in every chance he got. And now it seemed his dogged pursuit had finally pushed the man over the edge. Looking into Mel's slightly crazed eyes, it was clear that the crook had decided to cross over into murder.

If Ren were here, they'd share a laugh at the irony of the situation. After years working as a bounty hunter, chasing down the most dangerous men in the west, Kade was about to be killed by a complete idiot.

Of course, thinking about Ren was exactly what had gotten him into this mess in the first place.

"Not so smart now, are you, 'breed?" The fat man sneered, lifting his lip and displaying an impressive collection of gold. "Mory, go over there and take his money."

One of the three men who hovered behind Mel moved toward Kade. When he was halfway there, Big Mel continued, "*And* his gun."

Kade's hand flexed reflexively on his weapon, but the sound of the hammer on Mel's piece-of-shit pistol echoed in the small space, arresting the motion. Kade had a knife in his boot, but he'd never get to it before one of the four shot him.

Big Mel grinned.

Kade transferred his attention to Mory, who seemed to be forcing himself to move forward. It was hard to tell in this light, but he would have sworn the boy was no more than twelve. Poor kid looked like he was about to pass out, he was shaking so badly.

Of course, it was no surprise to see such a young boy with Mel. The fat man's penchant for using and inflicting pain on defenseless victims was well known. His abuse of women was generally frowned upon in a part of the world in which women were scarce. Kade had brought the man in more than once after he'd left a woman bloodied. What truly sickened Kade, though, was Mel's abuse of the boys in his gang. Mel seemed to take particular pleasure in twisting and breaking their spirits before he cast them aside. Because of the boys, Kade had made it his personal mission to see Mel go down.

Still, to the young Mory, Kade was the enemy. Most people feared him on sight. The blood of his father's people was strong; the sharp planes of his face and the bronzed tone of his skin marked him as clearly of native blood. He had used that fear in the past, but it would not count here, where he was so outnumbered.

The thing that really ticked him off was that Big Mel was right. Kade knew better than to let his guard down, especially in a shithole like El Cajon. It had been more than a year since he and Ren had been partners. Kade had learned to depend on himself without having a partner to watch his back.

Since his last visit to see Ren, however, he'd found it increasingly difficult to keep his mind on the job. That was why he was in this predicament now. He hadn't been watching to see who followed him as he left the saloon, or paying attention to the shadows that darkened the alley shortcut. He had been thinking about Ren's hand on his arm a few weeks ago. The

look on his face. There had been something in Ren's eyes that Kade had never seen there before. A flash of longing that Kade had told himself he could never expect from the man. That something made his heart race every time he thought of returning to Paradise Grove tomorrow.

Big Mel took the money that Mory had taken from Kade and pocketed it, sneering at Kade as he did so. "He prob'ly stole it anyway, filthy 'breed." He spat on the ground. "An' he won't be needin' it no more."

They were going to kill him now. A torrent of emotions came with the knowledge, but Kade didn't allow any of them to show on his face. Not showing fear would piss Big Mel off more than anything. Bullies like him got off on terrorizing, and whether it was arrogance or pride, Kade wouldn't allow him the satisfaction.

In truth, he wasn't afraid of death. His father's people did not fear the inevitable. It was the regret that bothered him. Three weeks ago, he'd seen something he'd wanted in Ren's eyes. Afraid to believe it, he had walked away.

And now it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the end, Kade supposed, it was best to be shot by an idiot. That way, at least, you had a pretty good chance they'd screw up the job.

They had his money and his gun, and finally Big Mel shot him.

The sound of the gun firing sounded no different than any other Kade had heard in his life. The bullet hit him high in the chest, and the force of it made him stumble against the back wall of the post office. He brought a hand up to cover the wound and clenched his jaw when he felt the warm, thick blood cover his fingers. The shadows were deeper close to the building, and Kade let his body sag against the wall. The darkness gave him a slight advantage. He squinted at Mel through semi-closed eyelids. If they couldn't see him, he'd buy more time.

From the shadowed recess of the building, Kade saw a look of surprise pass over Big Mel's face as he looked down at his gun.

"Damn, Mel, ya did it. Ya killed 'im." The awed tone from one of the gang snapped the man out of his trance.

"Course I did, you peckerwood." Mel spat on the ground again and peered through the dark, trying to find his victim.

The sound of scattered gravel from the street startled them all, and Mel turned with a low snarl. They were far enough from the alley entrance that it was unlikely anyone passing would be able to see them, but Mel was in a hurry now. Swearing crudely, he raised his gun toward the darkness where Kade stood and fired.

The shot went wide, spraying chunks of brick and dust onto Kade, who didn't move.

The sounds at the end of the alley grew louder. When it became clear that someone was approaching, Mel's bravado fled. "Let's get out of here; someun's comin'!"

The four men quickly disappeared down the opposite end of the alley. Kade remained where he was in the shadows. Someone *was* coming, and chances were it was not someone he wanted to see alone while wounded and gunless.

Kade noted in a detached way that the pain in his chest was increasing, and the oozing blood through his fingers remained steady. He was having trouble focusing, but by sheer force of will kept himself from sinking into unconsciousness. He slid his hand along his leg until he could reach the weapon in his boot. If the newcomer wanted to kill him, they'd have to work at it.

When the intruder came into view, Kade's head swam in relief. The cavalry had arrived in the form of Mistress Nell, who owned the Horseshoe Saloon, and her two daughters, Cora and Beth. The women moved cautiously, covering each other's backs. Each held a rifle trained on the darkness.

Kade swallowed thickly. Widowed, like so many women in the west, Nell was a superb marksman, and she'd taught her daughters to be the same. He knew they couldn't see him, and their guns were not for show. These women were ready to kill somebody.

He clenched his jaw and fought against the unconsciousness that was trying to pull him in. His hand fell from his weapon, and Kade finally spoke in a low groan.

"Please don't shoot." Then, horribly, the darkness took him.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Kade surfaced again, he was no longer in the alley. Nell and her girls had somehow managed to move his unconscious body to a small room in the back of the saloon. He scanned the room and realized that, while Nell was nowhere to be seen, Cora and Beth were removing his shirt. Kade felt lightheaded. The trip from the alley had accelerated his blood loss, and the pain in his chest was making it hard for him to think.

The girls gently lowered him back onto the bed. As Cora started to move away, he grabbed hold of her arm. She was a plain girl with pretty brown eyes, which regarded him cautiously.

"You just rest now, Mr. Black Eagle. Ma'll fix you up in no time."

"I need you to send a telegram for me."

Cora's brows drew together, and she flicked a glance across his body to her sister. It was clear she doubted his lucidity. Kade's grip on her arm tightened, and he focused his rapidly diminishing energy on making sure she understood his instructions. "Warren Hayes in Paradise Grove. Tell him ..." Here Kade paused. What exactly did he want to say to Ren? If he told him he'd been shot, Ren would drop everything and rush to his aid. Then he'd kill Big Mel. Kade sighed and stared unseeing at the ceiling. Best keep it simple for now. He would explain later. "Tell him, 'Change of plans. Be in touch.'"

When the woman nodded, Kade allowed himself to slump against the pillow and close his eyes. The door opened and closed, and he didn't move.

"Girls," Nell spoke.

Two sets of hands seized his forearms and held them down with surprising strength. When Kade opened his eyes, Nell stood above him with a bottle of what appeared to be whiskey in one hand and a knife in the other. She was examining the bullet's entry point intently, lips thinned. Nodding to herself, she moved the bottle over Kade's chest. As the liquid hit his torn flesh, he heard her low murmur. "This is going to hurt."

## Chapter Two

At first sight of the modest settlements, Kade knew he'd finally reached the outskirts of Paradise Grove. Feeling the effects of the late afternoon sun, he pulled a bandana out of his pocket to wipe the back of his neck.

Paradise Grove was like every other Gold Rush hub he had traveled through, so he couldn't explain the warm feelings he had for the place. Maybe it was because this was where he'd met Ren. Outcasts, both -- a half-breed and the son of a prostitute -- they had been friends from day one. Kade remembered coming upon the scrawny but ferocious boy who was fighting three much larger opponents. Apparently, the trouble had started when one of the three made the mistake of calling Ren "pretty boy." Heedless of the odds, Ren had started swinging. When Kade appeared, Ren was on the ground, but refusing to give up.

Impressed by the kid's courage, Kade joined the fight. With a loud war cry and a flash of his hunting knife, he'd sent the other boys running.

Ren looked up at Kade with a split lip, a bloody mouth, and not a lick of fear. Then he smiled. "That's a really big knife." They'd been nearly inseparable ever since.

Although Kade's feelings for his friend gradually deepened, Ren never showed an interest in anything beyond a friendship with Kade. With *anyone*, for that matter. The

length of Ren's longest sexual relationship could be counted in days on the fingers of one hand. So, although Kade had come to realize he was in love with the man, he knew Ren was not interested in the kind of long-term intimacy Kade craved.

And to be honest, deep down, Kade had just been afraid to tell Ren how he felt. Afraid to be cast aside, like Ren's other lovers. Afraid that by trying to deepen their friendship, he'd ruin it. He could live with the fear, he had thought, but not the hurt. Big Mel's bullet had changed that. There had been a moment in the alley when he had been certain he wouldn't live to see the next hour, and when he'd woken up after Nell's surgery, he'd known the truth. Regret was the worst kind of pain. He was done being afraid.

Kade rode under the large archway that proclaimed the official boundary of Paradise Grove, impatient to get his first stop out of the way so that he could find Ren.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marianne Black Eagle sat behind a large, battered desk, scowling through her spectacles at the papers scattered in front of her. She absently swiped at a lock of wheat-blond hair that had slipped out of the knot at her nape. Her lips moved as she mumbled to herself. From the doorway, Kade caught the words "pay attention" and "simple test," and smiled.

Although he hadn't made a sound, her head suddenly snapped up. She crossed the room with a loud squeal and threw herself into his arms. "Kade!"

"*Unitsi.*" He held her close and buried his face in her hair. For as long as he could remember, she'd smelled the same -- like lavender and honey. To this day, those scents always made him think of home.

A small, bony fist in his shoulder brought him out of his reverie. "Ow!" He set her down and rubbed the spot, more from surprise than pain.

"You've been gone for almost two months."

Kade frowned in surprise. He'd been gone much longer before, and she'd never had this reaction.

"I sent a telegram,"

Her scowl deepened. "You left Ren alone."

Kade gaped at her. "What are you talking about? He practically threw me out. He said I was making him feel like an old woman. His leg was just fine." At her arch look, a streak of alarm coursed through him. He couldn't breathe. "What happened to Ren?"

His mother's lips thinned, and she shook her head. "It saddens me to realize I've raised such an idiot."

Kade's breathing resumed -- she wouldn't waste time insulting him if something were seriously wrong.

She cocked her head and tapped her lower lip thoughtfully with a forefinger. "Of course, I think it's just the nature of the beast. I really did want a daughter." She sighed heavily, and Kade rolled his eyes.

"Ma, is Ren all right?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Ask him yourself."

Kade clenched his jaw and started to turn.

"If he's there."

Kade turned back to her and searched her face. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he had to deliver a horse to Auburn earlier this week. I don't know if he's back yet."

"Love you, Ma." Kade grabbed her for a hurried squeeze and then turned and walked out the door.

The schoolhouse and Murry's livery stable sat at opposite ends of the business center of Paradise Grove, but in a town this size, the walk wasn't far. Still, by the time Kade reached

his destination, his heart was racing. The sweat that trickled down the center of his back now was not from the heat. He tied his horse and headed around back, past the large service barn, to the training corrals.

As he cleared the barn and the round pens came into view, Kade froze.

A tall man was working in the center of the large, round pen. A young mare circled him at a slightly irregular canter, her rich brown coat glistening in the afternoon sunlight.

A mixture of emotions swamped Kade. Relief. Panic. Desire.

*Ren.*

Ren's white cotton shirt hung on a protruding post in the pen. Ren stood only in boots, and trousers covered by a pair of black chaps. Like the horse, Ren was covered in sweat, and his muscles rippled and flexed as he moved.

Kade's mouth went dry. The chaps hung low on Ren's hips, calling attention to his long, lean torso and his narrow waist. His blond locks curled below the brim of his hat. Ren had lost weight after his injury all those months ago, but across the space, Kade could see no evidence of it now. He looked, in a word, perfect.

As Kade approached the corral, all the thoughts crowding his head drained, as did his body's blood. It pooled between his legs, and his cock ached in his pants.

Ren knew he was there. They had worked together for too long, and the man was as keenly aware of his environment as Kade was. However, Ren gave no indication, continuing to focus his attention on the horse, encouraging it with subtle movement of his hands and body and the low, crooning tone of his voice.

Since Ren didn't acknowledge him, Kade contented himself with watching the man work.

The horse had both ears turned toward its trainer, and Kade couldn't blame her. The sound of Ren's voice was like velvet brushing over his skin.

To an untutored eye, Ren didn't appear to be doing anything other than following the horse's movements from the center of the ring, but Kade saw the subtle shifts in balance, the small hand gestures that directed the animal to slow down or speed up. Ren raised a hand and the horse turned on its haunches to move in the opposite direction. It was like a waltz -- Ren led; the horse followed. Kade was mesmerized.

The horse was beautiful, but Kade's gaze was focused on the long, muscled planes of Ren's back, on the deeply tanned expanse of his skin. In the past, Kade had almost never allowed himself to indulge in a study of Ren. It would have been too painful. Now, his eyes devoured every slope and plane hungrily. He rubbed a hand over his rock-hard cock and shuddered.

The horse slowed to a walk and then to a halt before turning to the center of the ring and walking to Ren. He held out a hand, and the horse moved close, eager for the praise that would follow. The large animal nuzzled the side of Ren's neck, and Ren brought an arm around to pat the horse gently. His head was blocked from Kade's view when he spoke.

"You gonna hide in the shadows all day, Black Eagle?"

Kade's gut clenched at the sound of his name on Ren's lips. He bid a silent farewell to life as it had been and stepped into the light.

"Who's hiding? I'm just not stupid enough to stand out in the middle of the sun, waiting for you to finish playing with the horse."

Kade's low, sexy drawl reached across the space and wrapped itself around Ren's dick. Ren clenched his teeth to hold back a groan. He couldn't stop the tremor that passed through his body, however, and the young horse shifted uncertainly. With a great deal of effort, Ren relaxed his body and stroked the animal.

The moment Kade had reached the livery stable, Ren had known, as he always did, that the man was near. It was like a sixth sense, honed over years of living and working together.

A flash of excitement had raced through his body, but he'd quickly buried it and continued his work with the young mare. He wouldn't beg, goddammit.

The fact that he wanted to suck Kade's cock more than he wanted his next breath was making nonchalance difficult. When his friend stepped out of the shadows, Ren's fist tightened in the horse's mane.

Kade moved with a languid grace that never failed to mesmerize Ren, and as Kade moved closer, Ren stifled an urge to moan. The unremarkable black pants and vest only accentuated Kade's tall, athletic build. He was stunning. His dark hair was shorter than it had been two months ago, barely brushing the tops of his ears, and the planes of his face were slightly more pronounced. Ren's eyes narrowed.

Kade reached the edge of the round pen and propped a boot on the bottom rung. He leaned against the fence, his full, sexy lips curving into a slow grin, but there was a tension in the expression that gave him away. Kade was nervous. Ren's eyes flickered down below Kade's waist, where his cock appeared to be trying to poke a hole in his pants. Ren smiled. *This could be good.*

Ren's smile was as potent a weapon as any of the guns and knives he had amassed over the years, and Kade was as helpless against it. Those sky-blue eyes danced with mischief, and Kade's heartbeat kicked up another notch. God, he had missed him.

Kade watched in silence as Ren began to halter the horse. When the rope was secured, Kade unlatched the gate and opened it for the pair. "You done for the day?"

Ren grunted and nodded, and Kade followed him to a hitching post, where Ren began to rub the horse down. He crooned to the animal as he worked, and Kade watched from the side.

"How long do you get to keep this one?" Kade asked.

A scowl darkened Ren's face, but he kept his voice calm. "A week, maybe two, tops."

Kade had expected as much, and he shook his head in commiseration.

Ren gave the mare a firm pat on her rump as he moved behind her. “This girl’s smart, and she’s fast. As soon as Murry sees her go, he’ll be lookin’ to sell her to some rich sonofabitch.”

Kade watched the grim set of Ren’s face and hoped this boded well for his plan. “You up for a bite at the hotel?”

Ren continued to rub the horse, and as he hit just the right spot on her belly, she groaned, lowering her neck and closing her eyes in ecstasy. Ren peered at him over the horse’s back. “Are we celebrating something?”

Kade shrugged a casual shoulder. He had played enough cards opposite Ren to know it was too early to tip his hand. “Just didn’t feel like any of your crappy cooking tonight.”

Ren smiled, a flash of white that made Kade’s dick throb painfully in his pants.

“Aw, now, Kade, you know you miss my rabbit stew.”

### Chapter Three

Despite the expense, Kade had chosen the hotel over the saloon because it offered a bit more quiet and privacy. When they sat, he did a quick scan of the other tables and noted with satisfaction that only a few were filled.

It wasn't long before a short, graying man with bright green eyes approached their table. "Kade, me boy. A pleasure t' see you."

Kade grinned and held out a hand to the man, who shook it in a strong, warm grip. Bill O'Flannery had been running the Desert Rose Hotel and Restaurant since Kade was young, and time had done nothing to weaken the sound of Ireland in his voice.

"What brings ye back this way? Not a bad'un, I hope." His round face was alive with the same mixture of apprehension and morbid curiosity that accompanied most queries about Kade's work as a bounty hunter.

Kade smiled easily and leaned back in his chair while he decided how much to say. He hadn't told Ren yet of his decision to quit his job, and he didn't want to tell him this way. "This trip is all pleasure, no business."

O'Flannery's smile relaxed. "Well, then, I suppose you boys'll be wantin' a couple o' pints?"

They both nodded, and he bustled away, leaving Kade and Ren alone.

Silence between them had never been uncomfortable in the past, but now Kade felt it like a physical presence. Trouble was, now that he sat face-to-face with Ren, he didn't know where to begin. The carefully worded speeches he had rehearsed on the ride to Paradise Grove deserted him. All he could think about was how much he had missed Ren. He knew, without a doubt, that his entire future happiness depended on Ren accepting his offer.

"You're thinking so loud, it's hurting my ears." Ren leaned forward and steepled his hands on the table. He pinned Kade with his gaze. "What's on your mind, Kade?"

Kade couldn't stop a small smile. Trust Ren to cut to the chase. Ren smiled back, and Kade felt his tension ease. Maybe now was as good a time as any. "I got a job for you."

A brief flair of surprise, and ... something else ... flashed across Ren's face, and just as quickly was gone. He smiled at Kade, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I've got a job." His voice held an edge of steel that belied the casual remark.

Kade's stomach pitched. *Fuck.*

"I know you've got a job, but this is something better. More money, more --"

"I don't need money."

"I know you don't need money, goddammit!" Buffalo Bill had been very generous when Ren had been injured. "This isn't about money, Ren."

They stared at each other across the table, with the silence thick between them. Kade could hear the muffled chatter of guests across the room and the bright, busy sounds from the kitchen.

Even tense and stubborn, Ren looked so damn good. Kade swallowed hard against the need to beg.

Ren's beard and mustache, worn short and close to the skin, created a tempting shadow across his jaw. Kade remembered running his hand along the planes of that jaw. Ren had been knocked out from the morphine the doctor had given him. It was the only time Kade

had given in to his desire to touch Ren, and he'd treasured the memory of that touch -- the contrast of the coarse hair against his palm, the softness of the full lips under the pad of his thumb -- through many a night over the past months.

"Then what is this about, Kade?"

Two tankards of beer clanked on the table. Kade looked up, startled, into the face of Maddie O'Flannery. "What kin I get for you boys?"

Ren flashed her his charming smile, rubbing a hand along his stubbled jaw. Kade's gut clenched. "Mrs. O'Flannery, you still make that delicious beef stew?"

"You know I do, Warren."

"Then that's what I'll be having."

She turned to Kade. He smiled tightly, nodding. "I'll have the same."

Maddie half turned toward the kitchen, and stopped. Putting a hand on the back of Kade's chair, she said, "You pass through Jackson on your way here?"

Ren's tankard paused on the way to his mouth and he looked over at Kade. Startled by the unexpected question, Kade frowned and shook his head.

Ren took a drink of his beer and set the tankard down, looking up at Maddie.

"Something happen in Jackson?"

"You didn't hear about Big Mel." It wasn't a question. Maddie smiled.

Kade stilled, thinking fast. Had word gotten out? He was fairly certain that Nell and her girls wouldn't talk. Maybe one of Mel's gang had bragged about the encounter in the alley. Or this could be something else entirely -- had the son-of-a-bitch beaten another woman? Kade frowned, moving his beer aside and leaning forward.

"What about Big Mel?"

Maddie's eyes gleamed. She loved being able to serve up tidbits of information along with her hot stew. "I heard there was a big duel -- someone challenged Big Mel and three of his men." She paused and leaned in, her voice a whisper. "Killed Big Mel."

Kade stared at her for a moment, stunned. Shit. He had spent much of his recuperation considering what to do about Mel and had come to the conclusion that the man needed to be dead. Now it was done. But who was the bastard who had done it? Whoever it was had bested Mel and his gang -- chances were, this new king of the mountain was even crazier and, more worrisome, smarter than the one he'd killed.

An image of the young Mory flashed in Kade's head, and he refocused on Maddie. "What about the boys? What happened to Mel's gang?"

Maddie pursed her lips with a frown. "I don't rightly know. Mel's the only one I heard got killed." She shrugged. "I guess they got away."

Kade clenched his jaw. It was never-ending. This was just one more reason his plan had to work. Kade looked over at Ren, who met his gaze, his blue eyes serious. Undoubtedly, Ren's thoughts had traveled down the same grim path as his own. Surely that would help his cause.

After a moment, Ren turned to look at Maddie, who stood by, anxious for a reaction to her news. He gave her another charming smile. "Well, it sounds to me like someone did us all a favor."

\* \* \* \* \*

As it turned out, they probably would have had more peace at the saloon. The same busy-body instinct that had Maddie pumping Kade for news from his travels had her pointing the two of them out to all of the dinner guests. Having celebrities dine in her establishment was good for business. While having a bounty hunter in their midst was enough to elicit a small thrill, Ren's presence inspired real excitement. It wasn't long before the whole room knew that he had been in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and that he'd been famously injured rescuing people from a tent fire. As a result, the two men didn't spend another minute of their meal alone.

At first frustrated by the unwanted intrusion, Kade finally stopped fighting it and sat back to enjoy watching Ren. The light in his eyes when he smiled at the curious visitors warmed Kade, and the sound of his laughter brushed, feather soft, down his spine. Even the way he ate was appealing. Kade watched in jealous fascination as spoonful after spoonful of Maddie's Irish stew passed through Ren's lips. Kade only remembered to eat when Ren raised a brow toward his plate, but he didn't taste a thing.

It was much later when they entered Ren's home in silence. Kade set his saddlebags down just inside the door and then studied the interior. The bed, table, and chairs were all unexceptional. The only thing that marked the place as Ren's was the large gun cabinet in the corner.

Not much had changed in the small space in the two months since he had been here last, but Kade frowned. The cot he had occupied while he helped Ren recover from his injury was gone. Although it was unreasonable, the absence of that trace of his presence rankled.

Ren walked around the room, lighting the kerosene lanterns, and then moved to the bureau at the far end and began to remove his clothes.

Still near the closed door, Kade stood arrested. As he watched, Ren tossed his discarded shirt over the back of a chair and moved his hands to the buckle of his chaps.

His back was to Kade, and his movements were not deliberately seductive. After traveling together for so many years, they had seen each other undress countless times. There was no reason for this to feel different. But it did.

Ren bent to remove the last of his clothing, his tight-muscled ass on display. The light of the lanterns played seductively over the long length of his legs.

Kade's dick was rock hard. A strangled moan escaped his parted lips before he could stop it, and Ren froze, still bent. Kade didn't dare breathe, for fear he'd start whimpering.

“You say something, Kade?” Ren’s voice was the soothing velvet from the corral. Kade felt it like a caress, and his cock twitched.

He swallowed. “Nope.” It came out as a hoarse growl. Kade was sure Ren could hear the roar of his pulse from across the room.

Ren didn’t seem to notice. He straightened and moved toward the bed. Ren stretched out naked on his stomach on top of the blanket, and Kade imagined his lips tracing the length of his friend’s spine, moving slowly downward ... He was so caught up in the vision that he did not immediately hear the knock on the door behind him.

Ren turned his head and pinned him with a gaze that burned. His eyes moved to Kade’s mouth and then slowly downward, finally coming to rest on Kade’s very noticeable erection. His gaze returned to meet Kade’s, and he smiled.

“Could you get that?”

Kade blinked through the sexual haze that held him prisoner. Those weren’t the words he had hoped to hear, and he stood for a moment, staring dumbly.

Ren’s grin broadened. Another knock sounded at the door.

Kade heard the sound this time, and comprehension dawned. Scowling from a mixture of embarrassment and frustration, he opened the door and stared at the woman on the stoop. She waited patiently.

“Anna,” he said finally, stepping aside to allow the small, pretty woman to enter.

She smiled up at him, amusement clear in her large, exotic eyes.

“Kade. I didn’t know you were back.”

“He didn’t bother telling us he was coming.” Ren watched from the bed, and Kade squirmed uncomfortably.

Anna patted Kade’s arm and moved over to the bed, where she set down a small basket.

Though Ren’s mother had died some years back, the women of the Painted Lady had done their part to care for him since his injury. The cooking, cleaning, and laundry had been

helpful, but the contribution that had proved most useful was Anna's knowledge of healing massage.

She sat on the bed next to Ren's knees and rummaged through her basket. She pulled out a brown glass bottle, uncorked it, and poured a honey-colored liquid onto her hands. Kade recognized it as her massage oil even before the warm vanilla scent reached him across the space.

Anna rubbed her hands together, warming the liquid, before she placed them low on Ren's thigh. Kade stepped closer, drawn by the heavy smell of the oil, the flicker of the lanterns, and the movement of Anna's hands on Ren's skin.

From a few feet away, Kade could see the scars disfiguring the back of Ren's thigh where the burning roof had collapsed on him. He knew that the only pain that remained was where the muscle had been torn, but Kade felt the need to kiss the mark away. And, though he knew Anna was a very nice woman, a part of him hated her for being able to help Ren, and for the unforgivable crime of touching him the way Kade himself wanted to.

## Chapter Four

Though Ren had blatantly teased Kade as he'd stripped, he knew there had never been a more important moment in his life. He had to hold it together for just a little while longer.

After all the years of hiding his feelings from Kade, holding it together should have been old hat. It wasn't. His year away from Kade had taught him one thing -- Kade Black Eagle was the other half of his soul, and without him, nothing else made sense.

The real irony of the situation was that he was pretty sure it was his *own* fear that had kept them apart all this time. Ren knew that he was probably screwed in the head from his years growing up in a brothel. He'd worried that any intimate relationship with Kade would be like the others he'd witnessed -- short-lived and destructive. Kade's friendship was the thing he needed most in his life, and he had not been willing to sacrifice it. But being with Kade, without being able to touch him and tell him how he felt, finally became so painful that he'd broken off their partnership and gone to ride with Buffalo Bill.

Now Kade was back, and Ren wasn't letting him go again.

Although Anna's evening visits were usually a time of relaxation for Ren, tonight his muscles remained stubbornly tensed under her ministrations. Her deft hands worked in the

same strong, loosening strokes, but under the weight of Kade's gaze, Ren's body remained tight as a bow.

He could feel the heat of Kade's gaze as it traveled over his body. He felt it linger on his thigh as Anna's hands worked, and soon the burn traveled higher, over the swell of his ass. Pressed against the mattress, Ren's dick throbbed, and he felt the tension in his body increase. He ached to rub against the rough blanket, to get some small amount of relief, but he held himself under rigid control.

The tension in the room was thick, and Ren found that Anna's hands had become an annoyance. Instead of relief, they only reminded him that what he really wanted was Kade touching him. He wanted Kade's hands to stroke the length of his muscles, Kade's fingers to caress his body with the touch of fire.

Mercifully, Anna ended the session earlier than usual. And though Ren suspected that she was all too aware of the dynamics in the room, she didn't say a word.

Anna picked up the bottle of oil and began to put it back into her basket. She paused, looking over her shoulder at Kade. Leaning forward, she placed the bottle on the bedside table. "I'll just leave this here, in case he needs it later."

Ren made a choking sound and Anna ignored him, standing swiftly. She walked past a bewildered Kade and opened the door. "See you boys tomorrow." The sharp snap of the lock slipping into place was followed by silence.

Kade's gaze went back to Ren, where he lay on the bed. The oil painted a light sheen on his thigh, and Kade hungrily watched the play of light dance over it. His fingers flexed and unflexed, aching to touch that thigh. What would Ren do if he did?

"Something on your mind, Kade?"

Kade almost laughed. *Something?* Try everything. Everything he ever wanted lay on the bed in front of him, and Kade didn't have a fucking idea what to do next. He felt panic closing in and beat it back ruthlessly.

The silence stretched as Kade reviewed his options. Knowing he had to say something, he cleared his throat and said the first thing he could think of. "I've got a job for you."

If possible, the silence became heavier, more tense. The panic returned, and Kade barely contained a growl of frustration. *Fuck!* He had to try again. He opened his mouth, but snapped it shut as Ren began to move.

Ren rolled into a seated position and pushed himself to his feet without looking at Kade. As if he had just awakened from a long nap, he slowly stretched his arms above his head. The muscles of his torso and abdomen stretched flat, drawing Kade's eye down to a very notable erection. Kade's breath caught in his throat, and his pulse throbbed a roaring crescendo in his ears. He felt the matching beat in his dick as it kicked eagerly against the confines of his pants.

"All right."

Kade's eyes snapped to Ren's face. Ren was watching him avidly. Kade's gaze followed Ren as he moved, and he found himself both annoyed and thrilled that his friend made no move to hide his arousal. Ren propped a shoulder against the nearest wall and held Kade's gaze. The casual recline left his body openly displayed. With one hand he began to lazily stroke his chest, and he cocked his head to the side. "Why don't you tell me about this job?"

Kade stared. The job. *Right.* He frowned and tried to focus. If he could concentrate, he might be able to make this discussion work. The key to that would be to keep his eyes on Ren's face. He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders. "Here's the thing -- I've had my fill of bounty hunting, and I came up with an idea." He paused, trying to gauge Ren's reaction. Ren seemed to understand this and nodded for him to continue. Kade wanted to, but Ren's hand began to move, drawing Kade's gaze away from his face. Ren's hand traveled

slowly downward from his chest and began to stroke something else. Kade's jaw went slack, and his mind went blank.

"You had an idea," Ren prompted.

Kade closed his eyes; the image of Ren's hand slowly stroking his cock was just as vivid. Clenching his jaw, Kade opened his eyes to meet Ren's gaze. This time, the connection was electric.

Kade did not hide his shudder from Ren. He noted that his friend appeared to be breathing heavily. "I bought some land -- good horse land." Somehow Kade managed to force the words out. He had to finish this. "I want you to come train horses with me."

When Kade finished speaking, Ren's arm ceased its mesmerizing motion. His eyes never left Kade, and when Ren smiled, Kade knew things were out of control.

"That's sure a nice offer, Kade, but I do believe I told you -- I've already got a job."

Kade stared helplessly at his friend across the room. He felt a dull ache in his chest. Ren was smiling calmly.

"At the *livery stable*? Is that the job you're so wedded to? Working with the animals only until they can tolerate a saddle, and then watching them sold to the first cowboy that has the coin?" Kade's voice had risen steadily with each question, and he knew he was in danger of exploding.

Ren remained unruffled, but his eyes held a light that Kade didn't understand. "Why do you want me to come with you?"

Kade ran a frustrated hand through his hair, and he shook his head in bewilderment. "I can't do it by myself. I need another horse trainer."

Ren nodded slowly, and he rubbed a hand along the side of his jaw. "I know some people. I can give you a few names."

The pain in Kade's chest had become blinding, unbearable. His anger and barely leashed desire drove him forward until he stood directly in front of Ren.

Ren crossed his arms and met Kade's glare, in open challenge.

Kade struggled to keep the pain from his face, but when he spoke, his voice sounded harsh. "What's your goddamn problem, Ren?"

A sense of calm overtook Ren. Kade stood less than a foot away, his hands fisted at his sides in an uncharacteristic show of anger. Ren could see the pain and confusion on his face and knew that, for better or for worse, they were about to finish what he'd tried to start two months ago.

Ren cocked a brow. "I'm not the one who seems to have a problem. You want me to drop everything I've got going here and come train your horses." He dropped his arms to his sides and pressed them to the wall behind him, lifting his chin. "And I want you to give me one good reason why I should."

The air between them was charged with desire, frustration, and anger, but Ren's chief emotion was the hope he had suppressed for so long. This game was unnecessary. If Kade hadn't come back, Ren would have gone to him. Nothing was more important. But now that Kade was here, Ren had a powerful desire to make him ask for what he wanted.

Though Kade wasn't touching him, Ren could feel Kade's tension coiled like a spring. He was wound too tight, and Ren knew the decision was at hand now. Kade slammed a fist against the wall to the right of Ren's head, followed by another to the left.

Ren didn't flinch. Even though he was effectively caged, he defiantly held Kade's gaze. They were both breathing heavily now; it took every ounce of Ren's self-control not to close the small space between them. The next move had to be Kade's. Still, he could grease the wheels.

Ren bent his head forward so that his mouth was inches from Kade's ear. A wave of longing hit him hard; he forced it back and whispered, "Why do you want me?"

## Chapter Five

A shudder wracked Kade's body as Ren's breath brushed his ear and neck. Kade was holding on by a thread, and he knew it. Damn it! He didn't know exactly when his plan had gone wrong -- probably that first glimpse of Ren in the sunlight -- but Kade no longer cared.

He turned his head and looked into Ren's eyes, inches away. The heat in the deep blue gaze was blinding. The dark, salty scent of male wafted from Ren's body and teased Kade's nose. Underneath it, he could still smell the vanilla-scented massage oil. If his hands hadn't been on the wall, he knew they'd be shaking.

Kade swallowed thickly; he was powerless to resist Ren. Even if he ended up just another notch on a bedpost, there was no turning back. His eye caught the movement of Ren's pulse on the side of his neck; it beat in a quick, staccato rhythm. Without conscious thought, Kade moved close until his lips hovered, hesitating.

"Do it." Ren's strangled whisper shredded the last vestige of his control. With a low groan, Kade closed the distance.

His lips touched the soft pulse point, and Ren's body jerked, his breath coming out in a low hiss. Kade brushed his lips against the spot, savoring the texture, before opening his

mouth to taste. The flavor of Ren was just as heady as he had known it would be, and he felt his knees go weak at the mixture of sweat, sun, and pure male.

He pulled back to create a small space between them and took his left hand from the wall to bring it to the side of Ren's face.

Ren's eyes reflected the same heat and anticipation that he felt, and something ... more. Kade froze. That had never been there before, had it?

Ren held his gaze, and there was that *something* again. And for the first time, Kade understood. Ren whispered raggedly, "Please don't stop."

Bringing his other hand up to frame Ren's face, Kade let himself go.

Hunger and desire roared in his ears as he sucked Ren's lower lip into his mouth. He bit down roughly and then traced the soft, lush skin with his tongue.

Ren groaned and began frantically working at the buttons of Kade's vest. When he had it undone, he shoved the vest down over Kade's shoulders and started on the shirt. He grumbled around nips and licks about "all of the goddamn clothes," and Kade couldn't help laughing. He had never felt so happy or so alive in his entire life.

Ren bit Kade's lip sharply and then sucked the spot into his mouth to soothe. He arched a warning brow. "Laugh it up, Kade. I'm the one doing all the work here."

Kissing Ren was like discovering the act for the first time. They explored each other, curiously, hungrily. Beneath it all, for Kade was the knowledge that this was Ren's mouth. He was tasting Ren's lips, and his tongue was dancing with Ren's tongue.

Kade moved to kiss a path along Ren's jaw to the base of his ear. He rubbed his face against the soft skin of Ren's neck and then opened his mouth and nipped the sensitive spot. Ren arched into him. Kade heard a loud rip as Ren got tired of the buttons. Ren ran his hands down the length of Kade's chest, and Kade's breath caught in his throat. He closed his eyes, clenching his jaw. Ren's touch was enough to make him come just like this. But Kade wanted

so much more. He pressed his body into Ren's, against the wall, and they both groaned at the rough contact.

*"Kade."*

They were similar in so many ways. Though Ren had started out small, the men now stood eye to eye. Tall and lean, they were built very much the same. Kade pulled back far enough to look down the long length of Ren's chest and torso to where his cock arched proudly between them. Kade's mouth watered, and he slowly licked his lips.

If Ren was dreaming, he never wanted to wake up. He watched impatiently as Kade kicked off the rest of his clothes, and then he couldn't wait anymore. In a deft move, he reversed their positions so that Kade's back was to the wall. The man's eyes widened briefly in surprise, and though he looked wary, he allowed the switch.

Ren brought a hand to rest on Kade's collarbone and slowly slid south, his thumb tracing a path down the center of his friend's torso until his hand rested flat on Kade's lower abdomen, inches from paradise.

Kade groaned. *"God, Ren."*

Ren slid his other hand along the length of Kade's ribcage and back up, brushing a thumb across Kade's nipple. Ren smiled at Kade's shuddered breath. He brought his hand down again and allowed it to rest on his lover's hip. He had wanted this for so long, he could hardly believe he was holding Kade in his hands, touching him, making him hard. On that last thought, Ren dropped to his knees.

Kade's dick jumped eagerly in front of Ren's lips. The skin on Kade's dick had pulled back, revealing the large, rounded head. Ren greedily eyed the small bead of pre-cum that oozed out of the tip, and he felt Kade's hand thread through his hair. It was all the encouragement he needed.

He leaned in and swirled his tongue around the hard tip. The salty liquid was ambrosia, and Ren opened his mouth wide, in a quest for more. As inch after slow inch of Kade's cock slid past his lips, Ren's own cock throbbed. How many nights had he slept next to Kade, hard as a rock, dreaming of this? No dream could compare to the reality of this moment.

Ren savored the hard, complete sensation of Kade filling him. He took a firm grip on Kade's ass and held him as he explored with his mouth. Kade was longer than most -- at least eight inches. Ren relaxed his throat and took Kade's cock all the way to the balls. Then he swallowed. Kade's shuddered groan sounded pained.

Ren had dreamed of this for so long, he wanted it to last forever. He moved slowly up and down, sucking Kade hard and making him writhe. Ren took the shaft deep and moaned, humming low in his throat.

Kade made a strangled sound and his grip in Ren's hair tightened. His hips, which had been thrusting shallowly against Ren's hands, started moving more powerfully, forcing a faster pace.

Ren felt the urgency as well and began to move up and down on Kade's shaft with purpose. Drawing hard, with a flick of tongue in just the right place, it wasn't long before Kade gasped a warning.

"God, Ren -- Ren, I'm coming!" Ren took him in all the way. The sound of Kade's groans made his own cock pulse almost painfully. Kade began to spurt into his mouth, and Ren eagerly swallowed his lover's cum. With Kade's cock still in his mouth, Ren dropped a shaky hand to his own throbbing dick, and it only took one firm stroke before he was coming harder than he could ever remember onto the floor.

They collapsed together on the floor, and it was long moments before either recovered enough to speak.

Kade brought a hand up to cup Ren's face, and Ren met his eyes with a smug smile. Ren cocked a brow, still breathless. "Worth the wait?"

Kade laughed, and he was suddenly in the mood to play. "Hmm, I'm not sure yet."

Ren sat back, clearly affronted.

Kade got to his feet, offering him a hand up. "I think we should try again."

Ren stood without the proffered hand and put his hands on his hips. He was not going to cooperate. "Do you now?"

Kade took a step closer. "I definitely think so." He was lightning-fast, but Ren must have anticipated an attack. While Kade meant to shoulder him onto the bed, Ren dodged and, turning the tables, toppled Kade to the mattress.

They fought for dominance halfheartedly, as wrestling naked was distracting. Winning seemed less and less important as they caressed and explored each other.

But finally, sweaty and panting, Kade managed to get Ren where he wanted him -- flat on his stomach on the bed. He straddled his lover's back and sat to keep him down.

"Hey!" Ren indignantly pushed up onto his forearms.

Kade put a hand between Ren's shoulder blades and shoved him back down. "Don't be a baby."

Ren stopped struggling and watched as Kade reached for the brown bottle Anna had left on the bedside table.

Kade moved backwards so that he sat lightly on Ren's calves. He opened the bottle and rubbed the oil between his hands. Looking up the length of Ren's body, he decided to take his time. He stroked a thumb firmly from the base of Ren's thigh, to the curve of his ass. He couldn't resist giving the flesh a squeeze. Ren's face was buried in the pillow, and he groaned, wiggling his butt upward into the contact.

"Uh-uh. Not yet."

Kade enjoyed the feel of Ren's firm leg muscles under his hands as he massaged his lover using the same long strokes he had watched Anna use so many times. At first Ren held himself tense under Kade's touch, but as Kade continued to caress him, Ren relaxed. Kade worked on both legs in turn, starting with Ren's long, muscled thighs and then his calves. He loved the sight of his darker hands on Ren's oil-slicked skin. Kade wasn't satisfied until he could feel the tension completely drain from all the leg muscles. He even rubbed Ren's feet.

Ren had managed to spread his legs while Kade worked, and now lay completely relaxed, sprawled across the bed. If he didn't know better, Kade would have sworn the man was asleep. Kade sat on his knees, devouring the sight before him. He ran his hands along the backs of Ren's thighs with firm, upward strokes. His goal was no longer relaxation. When he reached the dark cleft where Ren's thighs met, Kade gently parted the cheeks, using his thumbs.

Ren groaned into the pillow and arched his hips to give Kade better access. Kade grabbed the bottle of oil and poured some on his fingers. His hand shook slightly as he brought it down and traced a line from Ren's tailbone down to the tiny hole. Kade rubbed his fingers over the hole, coating it with oil.

"Kade." Ren was panting now. "Need you, Kade."

Instead of answering, Kade began to press and slowly entered Ren's ass with a forefinger. The ring of muscles held him tight, and Kade found himself trembling with renewed need. He slid the finger in and out, slow and deep, and then added another digit. Kade couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight of his fingers stretching Ren's hole. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, and the tip of his cock dripped with pre-cum. He needed to fuck Ren so bad.

"Kade ... God, Kade, *please*."

Even though Ren couldn't see, Kade nodded shakily. He didn't trust his voice to speak the words. With unsteady hands, he guided Ren to his knees. He coated his cock liberally with the scented oil and aimed the tip at Ren's puckered hole.

He worked his way into the tight, hot spot. A large shudder wracked his body. The pleasure was so intense that Kade feared he would embarrass himself. He froze, halfway in -- he had to slow down.

Ren had other ideas. He managed to gain leverage on his knees and thrust his ass backwards, impaling himself fully on Kade's cock.

"*Shiiiiit*, Ren!" He was all the way in, his body flush with Ren's. Ren's body held him like a hot, tight fist, and Kade's tenuous grip on control was a thing of the past. Kade held Ren's hips roughly, pulled out and pushed back into him hard. Ren's moan of pleasure went straight to Kade's dick, and he began thrusting in and out in short, rough digs. Ren met him stroke for stroke. Kade leaned low, bracing one hand on the bed next to Ren's head, and groaned at the slick slide of his chest against Ren's back. As he continued his staccato thrusting, he licked Ren's shoulder and then bit down, savoring the salty tang of his skin. Ren jerked on a groan.

Kade reached around and found Ren's cock with his hand. Ren was rock hard and already oozing pre-cum. Kade gripped him firmly, moving his hand up and down in rhythm with his hips. And then it was too much. The orgasm hit him like a steam train, a pleasure so intense that it bordered on pain, and Kade roared his triumph as he pumped Ren full of cum.

They collapsed together, a sweaty, panting heap on the mattress. Kade's hand was warm and sticky as he held Ren's relaxing cock in his hand. He nuzzled Ren's nape and smiled. And then, he slept.

## Chapter Six

The sun had just begun to work its way over the horizon, and Ren could hear the sounds of morning outside.

He knelt at the foot of the bed and admired his handiwork. Kade lay on his back, his arms spread wide above his head. Ren studied the relaxed planes of his body fondly. This man sleeping so soundly was everything he had ever wanted in his life. Now he intended to make sure his lover knew it, too.

He eased forward on all fours so that his knees were between Kade's thighs and his hands were braced on the bed on either side of Kade's chest. Ren watched it rise and fall as Kade breathed, and he marveled at the collection of scars the bounty hunter had amassed over the years. He zeroed in on the newest, slightly off-center. Too high to be a kill shot. White-hot anger shot through him at the sight. He bent low and placed a gentle kiss over the puckered flesh. Kade stirred beneath him, and he knew it was time to get down to business.

Ren shifted slightly so that he was directly above Kade's left nipple. Leaning low, he turned his head to the side and brushed his cheek over the sensitive tip. Kade arched beneath him, and his eyes flew open. His gaze met Ren's and a slow smile began, but ended in dawning shock. Chains rattled at the headboard, and Ren smiled at Kade's look of disbelief.

“What the fuck?”

“Awww, come on. Don’t be such a baby,” Ren crooned, mimicking Kade’s earlier words. “They’re only handcuffs.” Ren stroked the nipple again, this time with his tongue. The bed shook as Kade thrashed against the bonds.

“This isn’t funny, Ren.”

Ren blew across the moistened tip, and it beaded up tight and hard. He cocked a brow over Kade’s chest. “You don’t think so?”

He slowly slid his legs out so that he lay flat on top of Kade’s body. Kade was already hard and ready, and Ren felt his lover’s cock jump aggressively between them. Ren indulged in a slow slide against Kade’s dick, and Kade shuddered, thrusting hard up toward him. Ren took a deep breath and rested his head against Kade’s chest. This was going to be over before it began, if he wasn’t careful.

Refocused, he resumed his assault on Kade’s nipple, sucking and nipping, blowing and rubbing, until Kade was writhing and begging him to stop, to never stop. Then he moved to the other side, treating the right nipple to the same torture. With one hand he tweaked and teased the abandoned peak, mercilessly.

“Ren, *please*.”

Ren’s dick throbbed at the sound of need in Kade’s voice, but he steeled his heart against the plea. He looked up to meet Kade’s fevered gaze. “Tell me about this job.”

At Kade’s blinking look of confusion, Ren ducked his head to hide a smile. He licked a trail from Kade’s breastbone to the hollow of his neck. Kade shivered and thrust against Ren’s stomach. Ren lifted his weight and waited.

Kade caught on. “I -- I want to work with you.”

“Hmmm.” Ren reversed his path down the hard expanse of Kade’s chest, his muscled abdomen, bending to lick teasing circles around Kade’s navel before he stopped.

Kade spoke up immediately. “I want to be with you.”

Ren took the tip of Kade's dick into his mouth, and the bed shook again with the force of the chains. Kade whimpered when Ren pulled back.

Ren's mouth hovered, and he met Kade's eyes over the length of his body.

"Tell me." He nuzzled Kade's cock with his nose and licked the underside from base to tip. Kade was shaking when Ren pulled back. He met Kade's gaze again, willing him to understand. "Tell me."

Kade swallowed, but he held Ren's gaze. "I love you, Ren. I want to live with you. I want to work with you. I want to be with you for --" The last was cut off as Ren slid up his body lightning-fast and captured Kade's mouth in a long, hard kiss.

Ren pulled back and allowed his feelings for Kade to show openly on his face for the first time. Kade's eyes widened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ren cocked his head. "What, and spoil the surprise?" He leaned in and gently brushed his lips across Kade's before he spoke again. "I love you, Kade. Always."

His smile became wicked. "Now, I'm going to have some fun."

Kade's body tensed under his, and Ren watched the muscles in Kade's arms bulge in an instinctive attempt to escape. Not that Ren blamed him -- being cuffed to the bed was not a position any bounty hunter wanted to find himself in. In this vulnerable position, Kade was at his mercy.

Ren's gaze flicked back to Kade's face. His friend watched him intently. The heat was still there, but his eyes were now tinged with wariness. Kade was breathing heavily, and his arms strained against the pieces of metal holding him in place.

Ren stretched up until he could reach one of Kade's handcuffed wrists. He stroked the soft skin on the underside with his thumb and made a low, soothing sound. "Relax."

Kade stilled, his dark eyes watchful.

"I won't hurt you, Kade."

They studied each other for a long moment. Kade searched his face so intently that Ren wished he knew what the other man was thinking. Kade had said that he loved him, but Ren suddenly realized he needed more.

Throat tightened with emotion, his voice was barely a whisper. "You trust me, Kade?" Ren's gut churned as he held his breath and waited for the answer.

He didn't realize he was still stroking Kade's wrist until he felt the muscles in the arm under his relax. And as he watched, the wariness left Kade's face, leaving only the heat and ... *love*.

"I've always trusted you, Ren. Always."

Ren released his breath on a long sigh, and he closed his eyes against the surge of emotion that ripped through him.

They lay silently together for a long moment. Ren was startled when he felt Kade raise his hips, rubbing his hard cock against Ren's.

Ren's breath left him in a soft hiss, and he opened his eyes.

Kade waggled his eyebrows. "So ..." He used his chin to gesture down their bodies. "... you gonna do anything 'bout this, or are you just gonna stare at me?"

Even handcuffed to the bed, Kade was trying to take control of the situation. Time to put a stop to that.

Ren turned his face into his lover's neck and inhaled. "I don't know ... you've kept me waiting a loooong time, Kade." He let his breath whisper over Kade's skin; Kade bucked under him, and Ren smiled, pressing his lips to the other man's neck. "Serve you right if I just left you tied up here for a while."

Kade's body tensed again, but Ren only laughed softly now. His eyes flashed up to meet Kade's. "Lucky for you, I need to fuck you too bad for that."

A shudder rippled through Kade's body at the words. Ren turned his head and swirled his tongue in the notch at the base of Kade's neck, reveling in the heady taste of the man.

His lover arched his neck to give him better access. Ren hummed his approval and then continued to lick a path all the way up over Kade's Adam's apple to the rough stubble that began under his chin. Ren rubbed his nose over the surface in a brief caress and then gave the skin an open-mouthed, wet kiss.

Kade moaned his name.

Ren hadn't had a chance to explore Kade's body yet, and he wanted to take his time, but Kade felt so damn good under him, he knew he wasn't going to last. Kade was doing his best to hurry him along; even though his hands were tied, he was using his lower body to arch his hips and thrust against Ren. Their bodies were already bathed in a fine sheen of sweat, and their cocks slid against each other in a delicious glide of skin on skin. The sensation was driving Ren to the edge, and it was all he could do to maintain his tenuous grip on control.

*"Sonofabitch,"* Ren hissed.

Kade laughed, and Ren bit his shoulder. Determined to regain the upper hand, Ren pushed up on his elbows. His body screamed in protest at the separation, his arms shaking with barely contained need.

Ren reached an unsteady hand down between their bodies and wrapped it around their cocks. He gasped as his body arched at the contact. It was almost too much -- his dick rubbing against Kade's, his hand binding them together. He groaned and began to move his hand, sliding his grip up and down their shafts. Ren looked down the length of their bodies, in the narrow space that separated them, and watched their cocks slide together in his hand.

Kade was breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he thrust into Ren's fist. The sight sent a ripple of pleasure through Ren's body, and he lowered his head to Kade's shoulder with a low moan.

"Need you, Ren." Kade sounded desperate, and Ren's body shuddered at the sound.  
"Need you so bad."

Ren nodded against Kade's shoulder and raised his head to look down at his lover.

Kade's eyes were hooded. He had caught his bottom lip between his teeth as he continued to thrust into Ren's hand. The planes of his face had a harsh set in the pale light provided by the lamps. He looked fierce, dangerous. And he belonged to Ren.

Ren couldn't contain his growl as he dove for Kade's mouth.

Kade made a startled sound that turned into a long moan. The kiss went on and on.

Ren began to thrust his tongue into Kade's mouth in time with the jerks of his hand and the tandem thrusts of their hips. The pleasure was so intense, it bordered on pain. He broke away from Kade's mouth and arched his neck, eyes closed as he began to bring them toward release.

"No, Ren!"

He almost didn't hear Kade through the sound of blood pulsing in his head.

"Ren!"

He froze, dazed.

Kade was holding himself rigidly still. With effort, Ren opened his eyes and looked down, sweat now dripping from his face onto Kade's body.

Kade swallowed hard, his breath coming out in small gasps. "Want you inside me." He paused, pinning Ren with his gaze. "Want you inside me when I come."

With those words, Ren thought he might lose control right then. He stared at the need in Kade's face. It was a sight so beautiful, he couldn't speak. He managed a jerky nod before he dove in for one more hard kiss, and then he was sliding down Kade's body. He groaned when he was finally nose to cock. He licked the length of Kade's shaft from root to tip and couldn't help taking him deep once. Kade was already oozing, and Ren moaned at the salty taste of cum in his mouth.

Kade's body shook, and he growled a low warning. "*Ren.*"

Ren pulled free with a last lingering lick, and then he scooted farther back, moving Kade's legs over his shoulders. He licked a path from his lover's ass to his balls and groaned as this deeper, musky flavor mixed with the taste of Kade's pre-cum already in his mouth. The need to be inside his lover's body was nearly overwhelming. Ren zeroed in on Kade's puckered hole and licked the surface again and again, pressing his tongue down into the tight opening on each pass.

Kade was thrashing now, moaning with every stroke. Ren tightened his hold on Kade's thighs to keep him in place and began thrusting his tongue in and out of his lover's hole.

Kade tried to move with Ren, but the handcuffs kept him from getting enough leverage. He spoke in panting gasps. "Ren, now. Inside me. Now."

Ren was so desperate that he couldn't even tease. He needed this, too. He pushed himself up to his knees and, hooking his arms under Kade's thighs, lifted his lover. When he had their bodies aligned, Ren set him back down. Kade's legs were splayed, leaving him completely open. Ren looked up the length of Kade's body and held his gaze as he reached for the bottle of oil and poured some into his hand. He reached down and slowly stroked himself once. The sound of his hand sliding wetly over his oil-slicked cock sent a jolt through him.

"You ready for me, Kade?"

Kade answered with a moan. Ren planted a hand on the mattress next to Kade's head and used his other hand to guide his cock to Kade's opening. He pushed in slowly. It seemed to go forever, the tight, dark slide into Kade's welcoming heat.

"*Fuuuuck*, Kade. You're so tight."

When he was all the way in, he stilled, breathing hard, but Kade wasn't in the mood to wait. He tightened around Ren in deliberate provocation.

Ren let go. Rearing up, he grabbed Kade's hips with rough hands and began slamming in and out of his lover's body. He felt driven, possessed. With every thrust, he tried to lodge

himself deeper inside Kade. He twisted his hips, looking for the spot that would drive his lover to the edge. He knew the minute he hit it; Kade's eyes appeared to roll back in his head, and his whole body spasmed. Ren growled and made sure his cock hit the same spot again and again.

Kade's head was thrown back, the cords of his neck standing out aggressively under his glistening skin. He groaned with every stroke, his mouth forming words Ren couldn't hear. But he understood the sentiment. It had never been this good.

Sweat dripped down Ren's back as he reamed Kade in long, hard strokes. The sound of their wet flesh slapping together was a delicious counterpoint to the squeaking of the bed frame.

Ren felt the tightness start from deep within and knew he wouldn't be able to hold back this time. He moved a hand to grip Kade's cock and began to stroke him forcefully.

Kade's eyes flashed open to meet his, connecting them completely. "Love you, Ren."

At the sound of Kade's hoarse whisper, Ren's body shuddered, and then the world exploded, destroying him, making him whole. Kade's bellow of release rang in his ears as Ren came and came and came in his lover's body.

Ren didn't even remember collapsing onto Kade, but when he finally opened his eyes, his head rested on warm, sweat-slickened skin.

"Ren?" Kade's chest rumbled under Ren's ear.

"Hmm?" Ren smiled, drifting happily on afterglow.

"Um, you want to uncuff me now?"

Ren bolted up, fully awake now. "Aw, shit!" He lunged for the key on the bedside table. He cursed his unsteady limbs as he reached for the handcuffs at the headboard. After freeing Kade's wrists, he examined them and cursed fluently at the red marks.

He looked at Kade's face and scowled at his lover's look of amusement. "Shit, Kade."

Kade tugged a hand out of Ren's grasp and pulled him down to lie on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it.” Ren could hear the smile in Kade’s voice. “The way I figure it, next time, it’s your turn in the cuffs.”

Ren groaned. He was in for it now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, Ren headed outside to heed the call of nature, and Kade got out of bed. He stretched his arms, arching his back lazily. His body ached in the most wonderful way, and he couldn’t stop grinning as he walked around the room.

He stopped in front of Ren’s gun cabinet and eyed the assortment. Ren had started his collecting at a young age, and he now had one of the most extensive collections in gold country.

Kade frowned as he scanned the weapons. Something had been added, but it took him a moment to figure out what it was. Finally, he spotted a shiny limited-edition revolver toward the bottom. Kade froze and then bent to get a closer look.

He stood with his hands on his hips. Ren reentered and moved behind him, wrapping his arms around Kade’s waist. He nuzzled the side of Kade’s neck, and Kade tilted his head to give him better access.

“You’ve got a new one.”

Ren rubbed his stubbled jaw against Kade’s skin and then traced the space with small, open-mouthed kisses. “Sure do. That was one I just had to have.”

Kade sighed and knew there was nothing else to be said. With his tongue in his cheek, he couldn’t help adding, “It sure is a *pretty* gun.”

Ren laughed, the sound vibrating against Kade’s back. “It is darn purty, in’t it?”

Ren rubbed his erection against Kade’s ass, and Kade thrust back against it. The sound of Ren’s low moan close to his ear made him shudder. Twisting so that they stood face to face, Kade nipped his lover’s jaw tenderly.

“That’s not the only pretty thing around here.”

“No?” Ren sounded curious.

Kade moved to bite his lip, before sharing a long, tender kiss. “But this one’s all mine.”

Ren didn’t seem to have a problem with that at all.

 THE END 

## Jeanne Laws

Jeanne's love affair with books started from the day she could read -- as a child she would blow her whole allowance at the local book store, and things haven't changed much now that she's an adult. A former middle school and high school English teacher, characters and stories have always been her loyal companions, but it was only after having her kids that she decided to give her dream of writing a shot.

Though she has lived in four different states, from the Northeast, to an island paradise, Jeanne currently resides in Southern California. When she is not reading or writing, she can be found with her three kids, two dogs, her horse -- and her sexy and very accommodating husband.

Jeanne loves to hear from fans. You can visit her website at [www.jeannelaws.com](http://www.jeannelaws.com).