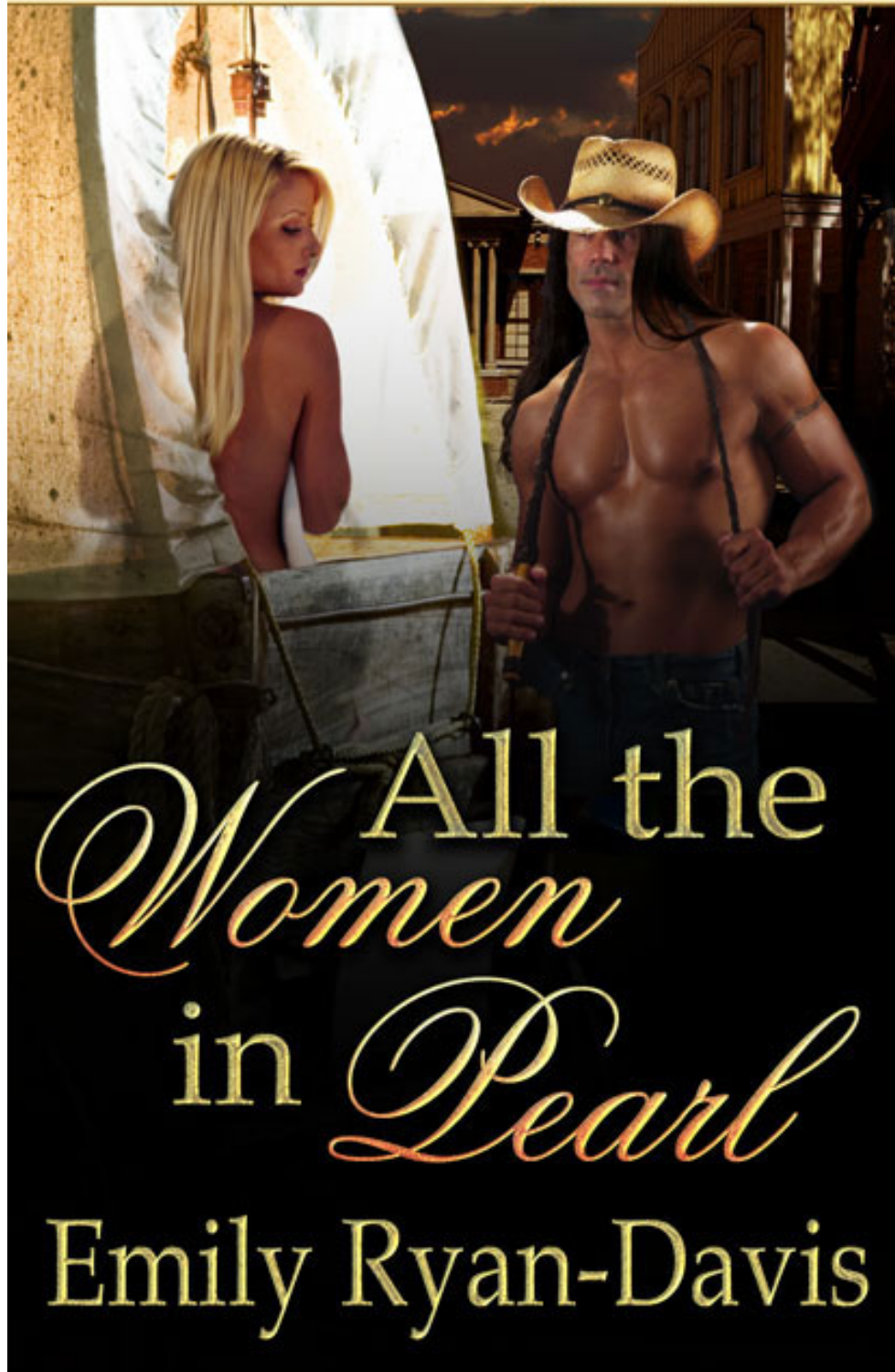


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



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All the Women in Pearl

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ALL THE WOMEN IN PEARL

Emily Ryan-Davis

Chapter One
Colorado Territory
Spring 1869

"Pretty, isn't she?"

C.C. Carver's dainty wrist flexed as she snapped open her fan. The bit of flower-painted silk did little to hide the pale swell of her breasts, which rose and fell with every shallow breath she drew. A cloud of smoke wreathed her head and shoulders, likely stinking up the black wig that covered the dark blonde braids she'd worn the last time John Raincrow saw her.

The question didn't bear answering, but the cowboy beside him kept talking. "She's been here the last four nights, her, the other woman, three men. They show up together and leave together. Three times out of four with more winnings than the house."

"This'll be their last night, then." John called for another drink.

While he watched, C.C. bit her pink-painted bottom lip and leaned forward to place her bet at the faro table. Her lashes were lowered, giving the impression she was absorbed in the game, but John noticed the way she stole glances at the men standing to either side of her. Either she was a cheat or...

He checked the eight pairs of feet spaced around the table. The toes of her slippers curled as if her feet were bunched inside her shoes.

Or she was scared as a rabbit and searching for a bolt-hole.

Her gloved fingers trembled slightly as she pushed an errant black corkscrew behind her ear.

Scared.

While the dealer turned cards, John watched her reflection in the mirror behind the bar and considered his feelings one by one.

Irritation.

He was halfway to his destination, the patch of land waiting for him outside Trinidad, where he finally meant to build something of his own. The letter he'd received from his old friend's widow gave him a deadline of thirty days and he'd already used most of them saying his farewells to Pearl. He had to show up and stake his claim, however, or the parcel would be lost to the courts. Turning around wasn't part of his plan. C.C. Carver wasn't part of his plan. Not anymore.

Obligation.

But there she stood, flanked by a pair of men who were most definitely not brothers, hopefully were not lovers, and likely were not friends. The other woman at the table might have been a friend, but she simpered and batted her lashes and allowed a smirking man's hand on her ass while she stretched to choose her square.

Resignation.

In the absence of Ethan, who was wrapped in his new wife's arms, and James, who'd gone Christ knew where, John had a responsibility. He might've said his farewells but he hadn't walked away from his ties. The Carvers were friends. Family. In Pearl, before they scattered and took their own paths, they had each other. In Pearl, C.C. Carver would have had a brother. Family friends and neighbors who would at least treat her with the same regard a brother would.

In Pueblo, all she had was him.

Lust.

And he hadn't felt brotherly toward her in years. Young man desire for a young lady...that was a soft emotion. He'd known those gentle feelings eleven years ago, before C.C.'s mama left her boys to the West and spirited her girl to Europe. Before he devoted four years of his life to the Union's cause. That soft desire had faded eventually, crawled away to a corner and made room for harder feelings.

The cowboy kept talking, recounting the game play-by-play while John considered the return of desire and weighed it against more tangible wants.

C.C. Carver wasn't a braid-wearing girl anymore. She wasn't the same person he'd known, wouldn't have the same interest in riding bareback and naming the barn cats that she'd had then. She was a woman. Maybe not even a virtuous one, given her current company and the costume she wore. Her bodice dipped low enough that he saw the shadow of a nipple behind lace. She licked her bottom lip. The movement recalled memory, the sweetness of honeysuckle on her tongue, vivid like yesterday instead of years ago.

Mine.

No matter that she couldn't possibly be the same person. He still wanted her. Couldn't have her. Whatever she was doing in a Pueblo saloon, he had an obligation to the family to see its members safe.

Twisting his freshly filled glass, he pushed the problem of Trinidad aside and counted the table's occupants. Four men, C.C. and the other woman. All four men carried firearms. Two didn't look willing to pull a trigger. If he surprised the others he might be able to relieve them of C.C.'s company without bloodshed. Not that the possibility of blood mattered. She was his.

"Collette Cecelia Carver."

Three soft words. A low, deep voice. The speaker's body heat warmed her back but she shivered hard. Collette glanced to her right. Lewis Medford, her stepbrother, focused intently upon the dealer's box as the losing card slid into view. If he had heard the man behind her speak her name, he gave no indication. To her left, Lewis' cousin Edward whooped in victory when he saw the winning card. She clenched her fan tighter and stared straight ahead at the dealer's chin, unsure whether to acknowledge her name or ignore it.

Who could know her here? Pueblo was still days away from Pearl, and she hadn't been in Colorado in more than ten years. One of her brothers? She tried to spot the man's reflection in the bar mirror, but the glass wasn't angled to her advantage. He

didn't sound like Ethan or James, but she couldn't discount either possibility. Time had a way of changing the way a body heard.

The dealer called for the last bet of the deck. Collette put the last of her funds on the table and angled closer to Lewis, trying to increase the range of her peripheral vision. The man behind her wore a faded shirt and a well-mended vest. Dark hair bristled at his throat. Not her brothers. Ethan and James shared her fair coloring.

While she stood confused, the last cards played.

Lewis' sister Elizabeth clapped her hands and squealed. "Edward, you've won!"

The casekeeper returned his beads to neutral territory and the dealer called for a break.

"We'll sit out the next game," Lewis declared. He broke from the table. She hurried after him, needing distance between herself and the stranger who knew her name. Lewis' family circle was not a safe haven but it was familiar.

Harrington, her fifth traveling companion and another of Lewis' cousins, had been holding a table for them. He stood and held a chair for her. Collette sat reluctantly and Harrington claimed the seat at her side.

Harrington smirked. "You had an admirer. Shall I invite him to join us?"

"I think I'll invite myself."

Her chin jerked up. A tall man stood on the other side of the table behind Lewis.

Harrington gripped her thigh, hard enough that she could feel the blunt edges of fingernails through her skirt and petticoat. "Not very polite of you," he said.

Collette ignored Harrington. As she studied the interloper, she began to piece together memories of long, straight black hair and walnut eyes.

"C.C." His eyebrows drew together beneath the brim of his hat. "Stand up from that chair."

The old nickname made her throat tighten. He didn't wear his hair long anymore. The short cut, the absence of the braids he'd favored, the hardness of a man's features in place of the softness of a boy's, detracted from the physical proof of his native heritage.

"Seems someone's taken an interest in you," Lewis remarked.

To Lewis' left, his sister Elizabeth ducked her head and stared at her hands.

"I think you're confused," Harrington said evenly, addressing John. Harrington's neutral tone masked the hardness of his eyes. He stared at Collette while he spoke. "The woman belongs to me."

A chill crawled down her back. She looked to Lewis for denial, but he had nothing to say.

Harrington offered her a lazy smile. "The announcement was supposed to be a surprise. No harm this time."

Lewis' cousin had frightened her from the moment he mistook her for a maid in the Medford household and wrestled her beneath the stairs. The housekeeper corrected him posthaste, but Collette did not forget the violence of his touch so readily.

Harrington smirked as if he knew her thoughts. She gathered her senses and looked away. The fright of that encounter was behind her. He would never again have opportunity to corner her in the dark, no matter Lewis' promises to the contrary.

"I'm not confused." John tilted his head, commanding Collette's eyes back to his. "And I'm not in the mood for games. You'd be smart to put your hands up on the table and sit tight while I relieve you of your problem before she becomes a problem."

Collette gripped the edge of the table. He misunderstood her situation but she didn't want to correct him. Not until she was free of the Medford family.

She wasn't entirely without a plan. She had agreed to travel with Lewis, his sister and his cousins, who sought to claim gold territory in New Mexico, because she needed familial escort. She hadn't intended to continue with them beyond the Colorado territory, however. Her mother left her a goodly sum of money, which she had wired to

a bank in Denver. Just that morning she had finally finished wording a telegraph to her brother Ethan. She was days away from freedom.

John Raincrow.

He had changed her timeline.

Mortification burned her ears. Her fingers itched to spread across her chest, to hide the expanse of skin revealed by her low bodice. John's gaze shifted, studying her cleavage as if he'd heard her self-consciousness. Behind the layers of her chemise and dress, her nipples tightened. Just as they had when he'd touched her bottom one summer day in one of the stables. She didn't think he'd be as tentative now as he had been then. He didn't move like a boy anymore. He didn't look like a boy anymore.

Harrington moved. He cupped the back of her neck, his hand heavy and too hot in the smothering room. John's eyes glinted, his jaw hardened, and his hand flexed toward the gun strapped at his hip.

"Miss Collette is a valuable asset to our little group," Lewis said, amusement in his voice. "We're not holding her against her wishes, but we would require compensation for her...services."

The saloon fell silent, all in a rush like a blanket dropping over a fire. Silence put out the games of cards, the whispers of business terms, the clink of glasses and the chime of spurs.

Fury flushed John's cheekbones red. Collette closed her eyes, her stomach sinking as she imagined what he must think. She'd heard the whispered words plenty since Chicago when Lewis and his cousins had first conceived their plan to cheat their way west. Harrington and Edward had declared she and Elizabeth should dress like trollops in order to distract their marks. But John didn't know that. He only knew what he saw. She had hoped to divorce herself from their foolishness before her association with them made its way to Pearl.

"How much?" John growled.

She'd known he would ask. Shame tightened her throat. She dug her fingertips into the sticky surface of the table, sharp tears stinging behind her eyes. The safety, the familiarity of John Raincrow, of home sealed her lips together against the objection her pride wanted to raise. John would take her home. If he didn't turn away from Lewis' price in disgust.

Harrington rather than Lewis named a number large enough to buy a sizeable tract of land. Someone at a nearby table snorted. A few people on the other side of the room shifted, their chair legs scraping the floor. They were probably preparing for a firefight, preparing to duck beneath their tables or flee for the door as soon as they could hide amidst the chaos.

The silence at her table stretched so long she wondered whether John had decided to slip away without lowering himself to a response. Her lashes lifted just in time to see a folded document fall quietly onto the center of the table.

Lewis' fingers twitched to retrieve the papers. He moved slowly and unfolded them with careful movements then slid the offering to Edward. Harrington glowered.

"Oh my," Elizabeth said.

Edward worried the edge of the top page with his thumbnail. After a moment, he passed the document to Lewis. To Collette, he said, "Time for you to move along."

Harrington swore. "That must be a forgery."

Heart pounding, not stopping to consider the coldness with which Edward had dismissed her, she stood. She couldn't look at John, who had not yet relaxed from his weapon. They were in a saloon he'd quieted with his confrontation. He wouldn't draw his firearm unless someone tried to stop them, but she wasn't sure he wouldn't shoot her dead once they reached open air. Anger shook from him, rattling her bones worse than the train she'd ridden from New York to Chicago.

When she reached his side of the table, John caught her upper arm in a hard grip. His hand was bigger than she remembered, stronger. His touch scattered her thoughts and she had to work to bring them back to the moment.

Everything she owned was locked away. Her funds in a Denver bank, her material goods in the room she shared with Elizabeth. Her gowns, her lotions, her mother's journal and the jewelry she had acquired as second wife to Lewis' and Elizabeth's father. She couldn't leave them behind.

Worse, everybody she knew sat at that table, conversing in quiet tones, closing against her as John marched her away. She didn't want to stay. She'd been slowly making her way home. Still, they were more familiar to her than this man holding her, who was not the same boy he'd been at last sight.

Behind them, Elizabeth squealed gleefully.

Collette jerked and swung around to see what was happening. Harrington met her eyes but the others didn't spare a glance. John snarled a warning, hauling her against his body. When they reached the exit, his fist shot out and knocked the door open.

She swallowed. John released her and wrapped his arm around her waist, anchoring her bottom against his pelvis. Outside, he moved with her into shadows and stilled. His heart thudded against her back. Hot breath warmed the nape of her neck. Inside the saloon, the music resumed.

John pushed his fingers into her hair and tugged. The pins pulled, bringing tears to her eyes, and the wig she wore came away. He tossed it on the ground.

"John!"

"You're not going home looking like...that," he said tightly, his voice somewhere above her head. He shifted and his other arm came to rest across her breasts, shielding the expanse of her cleavage with his sleeve. "Or dressed like this. Where were you staying? Do you have any respectable clothes?"

People bustled in the street, spreading out to crowd it when the lane was clear of buggies and horses, contracting back to the edges when a recklessly fast rider raced through. Thunder underscored the rhythm of hoofbeats. Even at dusk, under threat of a storm, the town was busy and alert. Collette breathed deep, pulling the odors of dust

and horseflesh and John into her nostrils. He smelled like whisky and leather, and she couldn't help herself. She started to cry.

Behind her, he stiffened and blew out a harsh breath. His arms gentled, softening at her waist and shoulders. Collette hung her head, her chin connecting with his forearm. Tears salted her eyelashes and lips. They wouldn't stop coming.

John squeezed her shoulder and her hip, and promised, "You're safe, C.C."

She didn't feel safe. She felt stupid and foolish and alone despite his embrace. Her brothers wouldn't take her, not like this, not the way John had seen her—in the company of rough-looking men who had implied that she serviced them as well as anybody who could pay. Lord, and they had made John pay.

"I can repay you. I can make this right," she managed through her tears.

"Can you?" he whispered, soft against her ear. "How many services do you think it'd take to meet that price? How many did you think you'd have to pay to buy your way home?"

A sob stopped in her throat, hitched her breath and pushed a fresh well of tears down her cheeks.

To their right, the saloon's doors swung open and smacked the outside walls of the building. John cursed low. He half turned, putting his body between her and the door, and said brusquely, "We can't be out here. Clean up, C.C. Where were you staying?"

She swiped at her cheeks, smearing dust and salt back to her temples. "The Piedmont."

"That's where she was staying," Harrington said from the door. "She's your responsibility now. Her possessions were not included in the sale price."

Collette stiffened and squirmed until she could see Harrington over John's shoulder. The other man's cruel mouth made her want to hide against John's chest but she tried to ignore the fear. "Why are you doing this? I hold no value to you, have nothing to offer."

"Ah, you're wrong. You are as valuable as the price I named." His eyes raked her body, narrowing where John's arms crossed her chest and waist. "More, but I clearly underestimated your man's ability to pay. To make up the difference, I'll be keeping your belongings."

"And," he continued, shifting his attention to John, "if I discover the deed's a forgery, the sale is cancelled. I'll find her."

"You missed the chance to negotiate terms." John moved, putting himself between Collette and Harrington. "There'll be no finding, no taking back. Whatever she is to you, she's been mine longer."

"We'll see, won't we?" Harrington asked.

"I suppose you will."

John stood silent until Harrington went back inside then he took her arm and pushed her in the direction of the Piedmont.

She had to plead with the clerk at the front desk to unlock the room for her because Edward kept all the keys on his person. The reluctant clerk milked John for a bribe before agreeing to admit her to the room. Collette winced as coin exchanged hands, but she didn't offer repayment a second time.

The room she and Elizabeth shared was cramped with furniture and trunks of clothing. She navigated clumsily around the narrow bed, uncomfortably aware of John's size making the room smaller.

"You stayed in here alone?" he asked after a while, breaking the silence that stretched as she hurried to pack her belongings.

She shook her head "no". The air changed so quickly she looked up in alarm to find a terrifying expression twisting John's features. Urgency leapt in her stomach and she hurried to amend, "I shared with Elizabeth. Not anybody else."

He passed his hand across his face, rubbing his temples with thumb and forefinger.

Her cheeks flamed but self-defense prompted her to add, "I'm...not a...I'm still, ah...chaste. My situation is not as it appeared."

John's chest swelled, his lungs filling with the last of the air in the small room. Collette felt her head lighten and sat hard on the edge of the bed. She swallowed. "I have heard a woman's chastity is very...valuable...on some markets."

He turned away from her, braced his hands on the wall at either side of the door. "Do not play with me. Get your things. Now."

Collette shivered. She might have possessed physical innocence, but she wasn't ignorant of either the interests of men or their responses. John wanted her, out of true lust or an extension of anger or...the motivation escaped her. Perhaps he'd been too long without a woman if he'd been traveling.

Perhaps he was on his way home. To a wife.

Her skin crawled with self-loathing. Quickly, she sorted her few possessions from Elizabeth's vast assortment and stuffed everything haphazardly into a small trunk. She indicated her readiness with a small sound, unable to bring herself to words. John hefted her trunk and exited the room, leaving her to follow.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the street. The air smelled of rain to come. John growled at her to stay close. Dogging his heels, she trailed him to a smaller, less ostentatious but more respectable hotel located on a small street off the main thoroughfare. Her presence raised the clerk's eyebrows but didn't warrant a comment. John sent her ahead of him up the narrow stairs and pointed her into a room less thickly furnished but smaller than the space she'd shared with Elizabeth at the Piedmont.

They didn't speak. John dropped her trunk in a corner, locked the door and pointed her to the bed. He opened the room's single window to admit the rain-rich breeze then turned a hard, high-backed chair and sat, facing the fluttering curtains.

She sat stiffly at the foot of the bed, watching him a long time. John didn't move once. His right cheek flexed on occasion as if he were grinding his teeth, and his hands worked into fists on his thighs, but the whole of his body remained still.

"Are we leaving in the morning?" she asked quietly, desperate for something to alleviate the strain in the air.

John jerked his chin. A nod, she supposed. Collette blew out a breath and tried again.

"Are you married?"

He responded curtly to the negative.

She bit her lip and curled her toes in her slippers then eased her feet from within the binding confines. The wind outside picked up and brought the scent of rain with it. A bead of perspiration tickled her nape, trying and failing to cool her hot skin. John continued to face the window.

"Are you watching for something?"

"One of your companions wasn't happy to see you leave," he said.

Harrington. "Do you think he followed us?"

"He believes he has something to reclaim. What do you think?"

She shook her head, not altogether confident in her response. John, facing away from her, didn't see the movement. Nor did he repeat the question. The question stirred doubts. What had Lewis promised? And how badly did Harrington want her? He had named the extent of her worth, but thinking about it, she suspected he hadn't expected John to match the demand. Would Harrington split from Lewis and Edward to come after her? Fear climbed into her throat.

Rising in search of a distraction, Collette found tepid water in an urn on the room's small secretary. A stout glass sat beside it. Behind her, John's chair creaked. She poured water to half fill the glass and slowly drank while studying the dim detail of the wallpaper. He hadn't bothered to light a lamp when they arrived and didn't seem inclined to do so.

She squinted at a small mirror mounted behind the secretary. Her hair was a snarl of pins and lank, limp curls mashed from the wig she'd worn. She set her glass aside

and removed the pins. Her hair fell heavy on her back, tangled. She cast a hopeful eye toward her trunk but it was close to John, closer than she wanted to venture. He had a comb on the table beside the bed. She palmed it and set to work on unbinding the knots she'd acquired during the day.

Tending her hair had always soothed her nerves, and the repetitive motion, the meditative rhythm did no less that night than it ever had. Soon her head emptied of uncertainty and concern. Her thoughts meandered homeward, and she heard herself ask, "What of my brothers?"

John sighed. "What of them?"

"Are they well? Have they married?" She wished the questions unnecessary, that she knew more of her family than she did, but time and distance created such gaps between people. Letters had gone unanswered for years. The last time she received a response from her father had been before her mother met Mister Medford when she still intended to board a ship and travel to Europe. Meeting the New York barrister had changed her mother's plans. She and Collette lived for a while under the widower's protection and later under his roof as newcomers to his family.

She tried to tell herself her misgivings about reuniting with her brothers were unfounded. She would be welcome in Pearl—her mother assured her of it, reminding her every day that they spent away—but welcome and familiar were different matters.

"Ethan took a wife recently. Her name is Margaret."

"And James?"

"Seeking adventure."

She frowned at the vague reply but didn't press for details.

Ethan had married. She smiled faintly at the notion and tried to recall the girls she'd known. Which of them had he chosen? She didn't remember a Margaret. Perhaps the small town had grown. Perhaps—

"Why are you here?" John asked, interrupting her thoughts. "Why were you with those men?"

"It's...a bit of a tale. When Mama passed away, I wanted to go home. Lewis...he is my stepbrother. Elizabeth, his sister, Edward and Harrington, cousins. They were proper escorts. Family by marriage. It was part of their play to suggest I...worked for them." She shrugged and replaced the comb to the bedstand. From the corner of her eye, she saw John move.

He shifted on the chair, angling his body away from the window and toward her. "You were supposed to be in France."

"I've long believed Mama did not understand the full reality of such a journey. By the time we reached New York, her funds had declined and she had grown weary. I wanted to go home. She was determined to avoid such a fate and married again." Relations with her mother had been strained for years, stretched thin by arguments. Collette yearned for home, for her father and brothers and friends. Her mother wanted the East more. While the crowded city sapped Collette's will to fight, it strengthened her mother's resolve.

John began to turn away. Unwilling to face his back again, she hurried to say, "I need to thank you."

He paused then stretched his long legs and crossed them at the ankle. His forearm rested along the length of the windowsill. He angled his head and looked at her, his eyes glittering in the dark. "So thank me."

Challenge. She wrung her hands. "I'm unsure how."

"They're only two words, C.C."

"They are, aren't they?" She untwisted her fingers, smoothed her skirt, and spoke to his knees. "Thank you, John."

"For what?"

"For..." *Buying me*. No. He hadn't done that. It was a terrible insult to permit herself the thought that he had. "Taking me home."

She glanced at the door, out the window, and added, "But I can't accept it. I'm going to ask Lewis to return what you paid. I shouldn't have allowed matters to proceed so far. They weren't holding me prisoner. I was free to leave when I chose. I planned to leave in the morning, to wire Ethan and ask that he see me from Pueblo to Pearl."

"A man doesn't surrender land once it's in his hands," John said flatly. "You won't speak with them again."

"Land?" She covered her mouth, understanding.

His attention returned to the window. Collette cursed herself, her unfortunate silence and her ill-timed tongue. She rounded the bed and touched his shoulder, unsure why she did it but knowing she needed contact. Maybe he did too.

The muscle beneath her hand bunched. He tucked his chin closer to his chest. "Go to sleep. We're leaving at sunup."

"To go back to Pearl. But that's not where you were going, is it?"

"That's over. Now I'm going back to Pearl."

She sank to her knees beside him, her skirt nudging his legs. If he wouldn't look up, she would go down.

John did turn his gaze upon her when she touched his thigh. The quickening breeze pulled at her hair. He reached for the flyaway strands and wrapped them around his fist, studying her from beneath heavy lashes.

"What are you about, girl?" He returned her hair to her shoulder, smoothing the strands with a slow caress over the curve of her breast. Collette stopped breathing. The heel of his palm centered on her pebbling nipple, resting there. "This isn't innocent. It's a paying pose."

Throat dry, she whispered, "And that's an accepting touch."

Chapter Two

John stared at the top of her bowed head, fighting with himself. Of all the women in Pearl, the young man he'd been had only wanted her. Before this moment, he had believed he'd known what the man he'd become wanted.

Land. Something of his own.

Women had become incidental acquisitions, afterthoughts when his body took to an urge, forgotten once the urge was sated. Family...family required a woman. One he wanted to keep beyond the fulfillment of the urge.

As he'd stared into C.C.'s hazel eyes, he'd known land wouldn't mean a damn thing if he claimed it instead of her. Grass grew anywhere. Collette Cecelia Carver though...she was as elusive as rain during a drought.

He was afraid to move his hand. Afraid he'd grasp for more of her flesh, that he'd shame himself, take more than she offered, take what he shouldn't have. Afraid she wasn't offering as much as he wanted. All that fear made touching her a bad idea, but he didn't want to stop.

Her chest rose and fell as she swallowed. Her fingers curled around a chair leg, stabilizing her uncertain posture. John carefully removed his hand from her breast, one finger at a time, and relocated to safer territory. Her shoulder rounded, small and uncertain in his grasp, but better to touch her there than anywhere more tempting.

John cleared his throat. "I wanted to marry you one day."

Her shoulder jerked. He needed more. Bare skin. The pad of his thumb crept across her collarbone and sought the pulse at the base of her throat. "But you went away. For a long time."

"I did," she whispered.

"And now you're here again."

She nodded. "I am."

He cupped her chin, lifting her face so he could see her eyes. She bit her lip. John studied the tender curve, wondering how it would give way to his bite, how it would taste, how long he would have to coax with his tongue before it softened to let him inside.

"I want to kiss you," he said. Her throat worked, another swallow coming hard and slow. Her pulse raced, her breath quickened. He didn't think he'd have to work long. Already he saw the edges of her teeth, the glistening pink of her tongue. Eager. He sighed, his breath stirring the hair at her temple. Too eager.

"But you're here alone. Nobody else but me. Nobody to advise you. No light of day to convince you to think beyond this." He squeezed her chin gently. "I could convince myself real easy that you want it, but tomorrow you could convince yourself just as easy that you didn't."

Her eyes lowered, veiled by thick lashes. "I won't."

She was breathless, shivering in his hand. John shook his head slightly. She would if he moved the wrong way. But if he moved the right way...

"Compromise," he suggested. The word came difficult to his lips. His muscles fought it, raging for something more complete, more permanent. Ignoring the way his cock strained inside his pants, he stood and pulled C.C. to her feet. "What do you think of compromise?"

She hummed a wordless response. Her small hands found his stomach, braced there against the muscle. John kissed her closed eyes and walked her backward toward the bed. His thumb traced up and down along the deep line drawn between her breasts, seducing her. Except she hadn't needed intimate touches to sway her. She was his from the minute she let herself cry in his arms. He'd known it. He'd also known this moment, right now with his free hand working the fastenings of her dress, was inevitable. Her insistence of chastity was a promise, not a defense.

Tomorrow, he'd give her sunlight and quiet time to examine herself and determine what she really wanted, but tonight, he gave himself permission to be a bastard. A little bit of one.

Lace and stiffer materials fell slack from her breasts. John pulled the material down her arms and shoved it to her waist. Another layer of undergarment still confined her, still squeezed and pushed her breasts and constricted her waist. He backed her up until her calves hit the side of the bed then bent to put his mouth on her shoulder.

She shivered, her muscles bunching, lifting flesh firmly into his kiss. He liked that, that she rose to meet him. He didn't like that his hand shook, fumbling and impatient on her underclothes.

"John." She spoke against his ear. The single word rubbed down his back until he shuddered.

"What?"

"Leave that alone. Call it part of your compromise."

Probably for the best. Nodding, he raised his head and set her back from him, examining what he'd managed thus far.

Blonde hair fell over her shoulders. They were bare. So were the tops of her breasts, the slope of her chest, the slender curves of her arms. She twisted the fabric at her waist restlessly. Her skirt covered too much. He bunched the layers of skirt and underskirt in his fist and drew them high, pushing them behind her, but still he could only see the lower half of her legs, her small feet still inside their stockings.

Frustration rumbled in the back of his throat. "I want to see more."

"Give me room."

Reluctantly, he stepped back a pace. C.C. lowered her head and raised her shoulders forward, her breasts mashing together as she reached behind her back and worked the remainder of the fastenings securing her dress. The dark edge of her areola

peeped above the lace trimming her corset. He decided he'd have that part of her too. Soon.

Finished with her buttons, C.C. straightened. She held her skirt in place and examined him, her gaze lingering at his waist, at the proof of his arousal. The tip of her tongue appeared to moisten her bottom lip. His cock jerked, answering the signal by releasing fluid of its own.

C.C.'s eyes widened. "You're—"

"In no condition to let you ask questions or make observations about it," he said, heading her off. He needed to redirect her attention. He needed to feel her against his skin.

"Take that off," he instructed, and tore at the buttons of his shirt. He was bare before she managed to step free of her skirt dress and petticoats. A thin shift reached the tops of her thighs, stopping short of the garters that held her stockings in place. He wanted the stockings gone. The shift too, but it was layered beneath the evil contraption that kept her breasts from him, and its presence was probably for the best.

John kicked the pile of her clothes aside and reached for her thighs. Minus the layers of skirting, he could smell her arousal. She might have logical regrets come morning, but her body was warm and completely willing.

"I can't wait," he muttered, and grasped her hip, his fingertips digging into a rounded ass cheek, holding her still for his exploration. The slippery wetness between her legs scalded his fingers.

"Hold on to me." He shouldered beneath one of her arms, unwilling to release her long enough to force the embrace. C.C. hugged around his neck. The lace edging her breasts scratched him. He didn't care. It was what he deserved, counterpoint to the silkiness of the cream at his fingertips.

"This doesn't feel like compromise," she said, breathing quick and erratic, hiding her face against his neck.

She felt too good against him to allow space between, so he drew her up on her toes, notched his cock into the vee between her legs, and returned from behind her, long fingers curving past the round of her ass to burrow once more into her wetness. She rocked her hips, sliding her pussy back and forth along the pads of his fingers. Every time he caught on the edge of her entrance, she jerked and moaned.

"What does it feel like?" he asked, kissing her shoulder, the curve of her jaw. He sank inside her to the knuckle. She closed tight around him, the squeak returning to her breath. John closed his eyes. He wanted deeper. The urge twitched within him, powerful, reaching for control of his muscles. His finger slid to the second joint. C.C. moaned, her knee pressed hard against his thigh, rocking unsteadily. "Tell me what it feels like."

"Like...oh. Ohhh. *John*. I know there's more. *Please*." She tried to climb his body, squirming and frustrated, unable to find purchase.

Like her, he needed more.

Twisting, he scooped her into his arms and arranged her on the bed, finally granting himself the view of her breasts that he wanted. C.C.'s hands fluttered at his as he scooped her flesh from concealing lace. He ignored her nervous fingers, brushing them aside. Small, tight nipples rode high, crowning each globe. He wanted to lick but restrained himself, instead turning his attention to spreading her legs, making room for his body between them. The scent of her cream rose sharp and alluring, confusing his senses.

He wanted to suck her nipples into his mouth, but he also wanted to shove his tongue into her slit. A glance at her face found her watching him. He smiled slowly and nudged his thumb into the crease between her labia, stroking slowly down the line of sensitive flesh.

"I'm going to kiss you," he promised. "Do you want it here, or do you want my mouth on your breasts?"

Her eyes widened. She struggled onto her elbows and stared down the line of her body. *"There?"*

"Is that your answer?"

"Will it...will you..." She shook her head, frustration pulling at the corners of her mouth. *"I don't know. What will you like?"*

John lifted a shoulder and flicked the pad of his thumb across her clitoris. C.C. jerked. His smile widened. *"Anything that makes you do that."*

Her thighs flexed and she spread them farther, answering his question without words. Holding her gaze, John lowered himself between her splayed legs and parted her labia with a fingertip. Her abdomen flattened, drew in toward her spine as she tensed. Above the rim of her corset, her breasts trembled. He breathed deep and exhaled, focusing the blow across wet, silky flesh. Goose bumps climbed her thighs. *"You smell good. Touch your nipples for me,"* he suggested, and licked the very tip of her clitoris.

She blinked. Jerked. The quick rhythm of her breath punctuated the pulse in his cock. When she tentatively raised her hands and cupped her breasts, he rewarded her by flattening his tongue over her entrance. She thanked him by releasing a fresh flow of cream, which hit all the sectors of his tongue. Sweet at the tip. Salty, slightly bitter as he savored and swallowed. He wanted sweet again so curled the tip of his tongue and burrowed deep. C.C.'s breath left her in a rush. She squeezed her nipples for him and squirmed until her hips raised high. Committing the vision to memory, he closed his eyes and worked his whole face against her pussy, abrading the thin tissue below her entrance with the whiskers on his chin, sucking with the whole of his mouth, nudging her clitoris with the end of his nose.

Her thighs rose and wrapped around his head, the heels of her feet digging below his shoulder blades. John steadied her, holding her waist and pressing her into the bed to prevent her escape. At some point she abandoned her breasts and tore at his hair, but

it didn't matter. In his mind's eye, she still pinched her nipples between her fingertips, she still watched his dark head buried against her blonde curls.

He'd expected her climax to come easy, but C.C. hung on, held him off, prolonged the edge until he pushed lower and licked the pucker between her cheeks. At that touch, she yelped and arched her hips hard, banging her pubic bone against his brow. The rain that had been coming broke, spilling across Pueblo, and she broke too, cream spilling thick and hot into his mouth.

John gentled her gradually, lapping at the sweetness that continued to come, squeezed into fragrant being by her fluttering contractions. She relaxed her grip on his hair. Her thighs loosened their hold on his head. She exhaled a long breath, whispered an uncertain question that he didn't quite hear over the sound of rain on the windowsill.

Once she stilled, he repositioned himself to stretch alongside her. C.C. rolled into his arms. He pulled her tight and closed his eyes, willing his body to stop shaking. He needed, but it would wait.

C.C. nuzzled his ear, whispered, "What was that?"

He smiled. "Compromise."

Her fingers trailed low on his stomach. "Can I...compromise...for you?"

A shudder shook him from shoulder to toes. He opened his eyes to find her face close to his, her eyes closed, her lips parted and inhaling. Smelling herself on him. Christ.

"I shouldn't let you," he muttered, and repeated it twice, silently, for his own benefit, searching for strength to refuse her. She opened her eyes then and her palm grazed the aching flesh restrained inside his pants, and he heard himself say, "Please."

Collette moistened her lips. "Is there a correct way? Do you have instructions?"

John groaned. His hips twitched, pressing the bulge of his erection firmly into her palm. She first thought to retreat, but the size of him intrigued her, tempted her fingers to close more firmly over his hardness. She bore down, maneuvering for purchase, trying to find a good handhold through his clothes.

"No right or wrong. Tell me if you run out of ideas," he rasped.

She raised her eyes to watch his face, interested in the pained line of his lips, the tight flex of his jaw. His expression changed according to the squeeze and press of her hand around his cock. Stretching, she kissed the flat plane of his abdomen and fumbled to open his pants. The buttons were awkward in her fingers. His breath caught and rushed half a dozen times before she was able to part the cloth.

Thick and hard, the length of him reached for her. Collette rested on her elbow, fascinated by the...everything. Prominent veins wound from the nest of dark hair at the base, climbing and ultimately giving way to a broad, flared crown. She ran her tongue around the inside of her lips, wondering how far her mouth would stretch, wondering what he would taste like, wondering...

John touched her hair, sifted it through his fingers, cupped her nape. She looked up from his erection, uncertain. "Did you change your mind?"

He shook his head. "Did you?"

She shook her head.

"Are you worried?" he asked, stroking the slope of her throat with slow, gentle motions.

"I'm not sure how to begin."

"Remember how I began?"

She flushed, squeezing her thighs together as memory pulsed to her sensitive center. "With your hands."

He brought his free hand between them and caught his shaft in a loose hold. The sight made her breath stick. She covered his fingers and he stroked up toward the

crown. Collette twined her thumb around his, anchoring their hands together, and scheduled her breathing to match the rhythm. Up. In. Down. Out. John moved slowly, touching himself at leisure, allowing her to ride the motion, to soak in the heat, to test hardness and resilience. It wasn't enough.

Greedy, she brushed his hand aside and sought his soft hardness for herself. His skin was hot, silky, and he jerked in her grip where he hadn't in his own. She liked that.

Gaining confidence, she ventured further than he'd guided and tightened her fingers, slipping up to clasp his crown in the circle of her thumb and forefinger. Moisture glistened, a bead welling up from a slit she hadn't noticed in her previous explorations. Recalling the way he'd first touched his tongue to her intimate spot, she lowered her head and whisked the tip of her tongue across his crown, sweeping that dot of fluid into her mouth. John inhaled sharply. His length swelled, grew in her hand.

He tightened his grip on her hair. "Do that again."

Shivering, aroused by the directive, the prospect of tasting him a second time, she pressed an open kiss to the head.

John's thighs flexed. "Keep doing that."

She glanced up to find his head thrown back, his throat arched in a taut curve, his lips parted. Listening carefully, she detected the shallow rhythm of his breathing. If she licked while kissing him, would he moan?

Hoping, she adjusted the angle of her lips and pulled at him in a light, suctioning kiss, dipping her tongue to slip across his tiny slit. A strangled sound vibrated in his throat. He fumbled to cover her hand with his free one and urged her fingers to move. Up, down. She inhaled deeply, opened her mouth wider and pulled his crown past the rim of her lips. John swore softly, a vulgar word that thrilled her, and she turned it into a game. The more of him she swallowed, the harsher his responses. The head of his cock prodded the back of her throat and he fell silent, kneading her nape and caressing her wrist, encouraging her with short, broken breaths.

"Good. Good," he mumbled, releasing her hair. Both his hands fell to the bed, his chest hollowing as he stretched and reached to hold the edges of the mattress. Instinctively, she knew he was close to that rushing pinnacle she'd experienced, and she wanted to deliver him. Fumbling for the waist of his trousers, she tugged and coaxed until she managed to pull the fabric free of his hips. She couldn't see, but she felt the softness of his sac beneath her chin, felt it tighten and pull toward his body as she worked her free hand into the tight space between his clothes and his groin. The memory of the light touch at her anus sparkled through her as his head swelled deep in her mouth.

Holding on to the sparkle, she tapped his pucker lightly. Pressed harder. John's hips bucked. He grabbed her head with both hands and swore, pulled, but she felt him and latched on. His shaft jerked. The muscles surrounding his anus clutched and relaxed a single instant, enough that her slim finger dipped past the contracting ring. Something hot and strong jetted against the back of her throat, startling first, pumping steadily after. His shout rang in her ears, but she couldn't soothe him, was too busy swallowing his climax before it could choke her.

John tugged on her head again, and she allowed her jaw to fall lax. He pulled her off him and drew her up his body, arranged her atop his chest, wrapped his arms across her back.

"Damn it all," he said, sighing into her hair. "You shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have let you."

Collette hid her face, the warmth of self-satisfaction cooling rapidly. She didn't know what to say, whether to apologize or hold her tongue. The rain had died away sometime before his climax, leaving her with the silence of the room, the low sounds of the city, the evening pace of John's breathing.

His penis nudged her inner thigh, damp from her mouth, softening but still alert. A cooling streak of moisture grew sticky on the inside of her other thigh. That wetness was hers too, vulgar in the aftermath, punctuating his regret.

He rubbed her back and blew a second sigh. "I'm sorry, C.C."

She turned her face away, staring out the open window. Good sense told her to keep quiet, not to respond, but the injury in her heart was less interested in dignity and it spoke louder than the voice in her head. "I did it wrong, didn't I?"

John stiffened. He cupped her cheek, tipped her head and raised his so their eyes met. "No. You didn't do anything wrong. But I've treated you like a...like someone not worthy of respect. You trusted me and I went too far."

He rolled onto his side, depositing her on the bed, not looking at her. "I need to take you home. People have missed you. People will care for you."

But you won't?

She didn't ask the question, didn't want to hear the answer. Instead, she turned away and sat, twisted her arms behind her back to loosen her stays and found a nightgown to pull over her head. It tangled around her limbs in the heat but cushioned her against the weight of his regard.

Neither of them slept and morning was slow to arrive.

Chapter Three

John purchased passage on a stagecoach and handed her into it as the sun rose. She crowded into the cramped confines with six other travelers and he hung back, intending to follow on horseback. Collette rested her head against the high bench and closed her eyes. She would have preferred the open air, the strength and speed of a horse beneath her, but these were the plans John had made.

When she got home, she'd treat herself to a long ride. The prospect brought a smile to her lips. As a girl, she had on occasion dressed herself in her younger brother James' clothes and raced the valleys with the abandon of a boy. She wanted to do that again, but the plan might necessitate more stealth to accomplish. With Ethan in charge, she'd have a difficult time getting away with any impropriety.

Thoughts of her eldest brother returned her to John. What would he tell Ethan about the circumstances of their meeting? John intended to call her his wife during their journey in order to minimize challenges to his right of protection and guardianship. Would he include that detail in his recounting to Ethan?

Her smile faded as she considered the roles they would play. When the stagecoach stopped, they would share meals. At night, they would share quarters. She swallowed dusty air as the coach lurched into motion. A morning, an afternoon and an evening between now and the next time they could be alone.

Heaven help her, but she wanted to be alone with him again. Her desires were hardly rational, but she couldn't deny them. The quiet pain of their previous night's parting softened and began to make sense by the bright of day.

John was an honorable man. He'd worked her family's animals and land like his father before him. He considered her brothers friends, and the Carvers regarded him as

family. Or they had. She had little reason to doubt the sentiment had changed in her absence.

He was an honorable man, and in his honor, he saw duty to protect and deliver her. In unharmed, undamaged condition. As a result, he'd pushed her aside in a belated effort to remind himself of the responsibility he had undertaken. How to tell him she didn't feel damaged? Her jaw ached a bit and her feminine crease was tender, sensitive, but the discomforts enlivened her. She wanted more. So, she suspected, did he.

I wanted to marry you one day.

Collette stared at her hands, empty of rings. Her mother had spoken of marriage on occasion, but as a woman who had ultimately felt compelled to escape her own union, she had not pressed. Fearing a similar fate, a years-later need to run, Collette had resisted attraction to the classmates Lewis brought around and the young professionals her stepfather invited for social occasions. She was saving herself for home.

By midday, she'd spent too much time without him. The coach rattled to a stop, breaking at a station for the afternoon meal and a change of horses. John stood waiting for her to dismount, his face shadowed by the brim of his hat, his hands ready at her waist to lift her down from the coach. He set her on her feet close enough to him that she smelled the sun in his clothes. Collette lingered, greedy for the heady scent, so long that John asked, "Are you unwell?"

She smiled, shook her head. "Hungry, is all. Stiff. Pleased to have a change of scene."

The last of the coach's occupants, an aging notary who had spent the duration of the ride boasting about transactions he'd officiated, jostled behind her. John braced her shoulder, steadying her, but not before her breasts softened against the hard plane of his chest. A thrill darted to her nipples. She ducked her head, bottom lip between her teeth, shy about the response. Could he feel her through their clothes?

"The driver won't break for long," he said, his voice rough. "Come eat something."

"Will we have time to walk a bit?" Time to sneak away?

His hands flexed around her upper arms. Collette closed her eyes and allowed her weight to tip into his space. Her belly aligned with his groin. He might not be able to feel her interest but his was unmistakable. Taking shelter behind the breadth of his shoulders, which blocked her from view of the coach house, she kissed the base of his throat.

John exhaled hard. His breath stirred the hair at her temple and her imagination followed a memory, recalling the sensation of him blowing between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together and parted her lips, wondering whether a small bite would elicit more than a sigh. Her teeth hardly touched him before he swore and released her arms.

“Not this stop.” He stepped away and steered her toward the station building. Her fellow passengers had already vanished inside.

Eager to take air before she had to board the coach, Collette entertained the possible definitions of his last words. An improper part of her hoped he secretly concluded the statement with such a promise as “but wait until the next one”. Her rational voice chastised the fancy. Did she really think to seduce him? Embarrassed by her impropriety, she ate quickly and wrapped a hard biscuit in her handkerchief. John’s lips quirked but he didn’t object when she declared herself finished in short order.

“When do you think we’ll stop again?” she asked outside, surveying the abbreviated town.

John shrugged and steered her along the slat boardwalk. “Might reach Denver by nightfall. Might not stop until Longmont.”

She stopped and turned to him, notions of seduction aborted by his speculation. “We have to stop in Denver. I have business.”

“Even if the coach does stop, there’ll be no time to be about in the city.” He squinted at the small watch she wore pinned to the front of her dress. “And shops will have closed by the time we pass through.”

"I suppose I could ask Ethan's wife to accompany me for shopping in a few weeks," she reluctantly conceded. Fashion had not entered her mind, however. She needed a bank and access to the funds she had wired when she'd made the decision to return home. She would feel better going home with something to her name rather than throwing herself upon Ethan's land, penniless.

"Walk," John said, urging her to resume their stroll. "It'll be the last chance you have to stretch your legs."

Frowning, she allowed him to pull her toward the end of the slat-board platform. Denver was their halfway point. Two days. Three at worst until they reached Pearl. Their proximity to Pearl put her in two directions of thought, one warming her with the prospect of home, the other worrying her about the end of her travel with John. She didn't want the end of time alone with him. She wouldn't have such freedom under her brother's watch.

"Something on your mind?" John asked, interrupting her worries.

She started to reply in the negative but boldness took her and she nodded after all, saying, "We'll only have a day or two of pretending."

John's slow pace paused, resumed. He didn't reply for long minutes. Collette began to worry that she'd been too forward. He stopped at the end of the boardwalk and didn't turn them for a return stroll. His palm tightened at her elbow, tension apparent in the strength of his forearm, and he said, "Better that it's not longer. I can untangle myself after a few days but a week might be a different matter."

Untangle himself? She looked up to find his face averted, the tension returned to his jaw. His expression was otherwise unreadable from her position. "Are you going to leave again once we've returned to Pearl?"

He grimaced and pulled at his hat, hiding his eyes in shadow. His words came low and tense. "I need to be in Trinidad by Tuesday."

The meal she'd eaten grew heavy in her stomach. "What happens after Tuesday?"

"I suppose that depends upon your brother."

Behind them, the stagecoach driver called for boarding. Collette frowned, glancing at John's face, over her shoulder at the trickle of passengers already moving between the way-station house and the coach, and back to John. "What do you mean?"

"Just that." He jerked his chin toward the coach. "Need to put you back on."

She wanted to object but knew he had the right of it. Delays could mean they were removed from the passenger list, passage paid or not. Resigned, she returned to the dusty, tight interior and looked onward to the next stop.

The coach barely paused in Denver. As John guessed, they finally stopped in the smaller northern town of Longmont. Collette's muscles ached. The biscuit she'd pilfered ran short early in the evening. During the ride, she had made steps toward solving her banking dilemma by asking the boastful notary if he would witness and certify a letter she wished to write, granting her "new husband" power over her money. He had agreed, but as payment she had to pay attention to his stories for several hours. Before the evening meal began, she hurriedly drafted a letter assigning John access to her funds.

As they sat for the meal, she presented the letter. "This will allow you to withdraw my assets from the First Bank of the Colorado Territory. I know you can travel faster than the coach on your own. When we start north tomorrow, will you double back and see to this business for me?"

He ignored the letter. "I'm not leaving you alone before we reach Pearl."

Collette frowned. "You leave me alone through the day and evening while I'm in the coach and you're riding."

"Not the same," he said firmly. "If anything happened, I'm still right there."

A middle-aged woman seated across from them asked loudly, "What is going to happen?"

Collette winced. The woman had a shrill voice and a tendency toward exaggeration and fainting. She'd needed her smelling salts no fewer than six times before their midday meal.

"Nothing's going to happen," muttered her husband, who glared at John. "Is it?"

The notary cleared his throat and addressed John. "I would be delighted to make the young missus my charge for the next leg of our journey."

"That won't be necessary," John replied tightly. "I will not be leaving my wife."

The two little words sent a thrill through her body. Collette flushed and stared at the table's scratched surface. She should not like the sound of such possessive words on his lips but she couldn't stop reproducing them for her mental ear. She wanted to hear them spoken with tenderness, with passion, even with anger.

"Well, who will protect *me*?" shrilled the fainting woman. Collette searched her memory and came up with a name. Mrs. Donohue had claimed a weak constitution and spoke of it almost as frequently as the notary began a new story.

Collette winced, and said, "I'm certain my husband is merely being overcautious."

Beside her, John shifted on his chair. She peeked sidelong to find him looking at her, a queer shuttered expression behind his eyes.

"Robbers," someone declared.

Mrs. Donohue moaned, "Indians."

Chaos erupted. Three different voices began to fight with one another for dominance and the conversation turned to stories of bloody encounters and violent battles.

"You should have approached me privately," John said beneath his breath. He stood and drew her from her chair. "Outside."

John led her out to the porch and leaned against the rickety banister that defined the porch's perimeters. He dropped a small pouch on the splintered surface of the narrow rail and smoothed the wrinkles from a rectangle of paper.

Collette frowned at him. "Are you going to smoke?"

"We are going to wait here until they calm down." Not looking at her, he pinched tobacco in a line and rolled the paper's edges to form a cylinder.

Collette worried the edges of her letter with anxious fingers, trying not to hear the ugly words said in the supper hall. A tic twitched at the corner of John's mouth but calmed after he struck a match and drew tobacco smoke into his lungs.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while.

He shrugged, watching the empty road instead of looking at her. "They'll quiet down eventually."

She mimicked his pose and leaned against the banister, staring at the tips of her shoes just visible past the hem of her skirt. A great deal of hatred and fear poured through the half-open door as their fellow travelers warmed to the topics of raids and war. John's shoulders bunched and his jaw worked, tense.

"You should go inside and eat," he said when the angry voices softened.

"Are you coming in with me?"

Shaking his head, he tucked the tobacco pouch inside his shirt and straightened from the banister. "I'll be in soon."

"I'd rather wait for you."

He scowled but turned to the house. "Inside now, then. Any longer out here and you'll miss your chance for a meal."

He was correct. The table had been picked clean of all but scraps by the time they returned. Collette assembled a plate from the scant offerings and, despite the earlier tension, fell upon her dinner with exhausted need.

When she finished, a thin, bent old man directed her and John to a cramped room in the filthy boarding house. Their bed was crowded amidst three other bunks. Maybe she should have been grateful. The night had no chance of ending the way it had previously, with their backs turned to one another, the silence uncomfortable between

them. Gratitude fell to the wayside, however. She wanted more. The texture of his skin. The strength of his hands.

John claimed a bed on the top and helped her climb the uneven ladder before following her onto the lumpy mattress and drawing the thin privacy curtain they'd been provided.

"Do you want me to loosen your dress?" he asked, watching her struggle with the folds of her skirt and the problem of her shoes.

Low conversations hummed below them. One of the other passengers had a racking cough and something in the room antagonized it. Collette covered her face, exhaled and nodded.

John reached behind her, his fingers more sure than they had been the night before. He helped her from her dress and the confines of her stays, and together they rolled the material into a makeshift pillow. Only slightly more comfortable in her shift and a petticoat, she stretched out on her back and stared at a crack running the length of the ceiling. John breathed steadily beside her, his body a long line warming her right side. His shirt buttons pressed into the soft flesh of her upper arm and the fabric was slightly scratchy.

"You should sleep," he said.

She glanced sidelong to find him on his elbow, watching her. Heat lit his eyes. Her stomach fluttered as his gaze drifted, lazy and unashamed, across her breasts. The bed was narrow and pushed them together, so close she felt his cock grow against her hip.

Someone extinguished the light. She lost track of his eyes, but his hand splayed atop her abdomen, a strong weight that quickened her breath.

"You should as well," she whispered.

Their neighbor below grunted and turned. The bunk trembled. John's lips feathered her jaw, settled at her ear. "Can you stay quiet and still?"

Uncertain, she whispered, "I don't know."

"Think on it." He licked the hollow behind her ear, lower, his tongue warm and tickling the slope of her neck.

She bit her lips against a sigh and angled her chin away, inviting him deeper, closer, lower. The whiskers from the day abraded her skin as he responded to the invitation and skimmed kisses to the jut of her collarbone, the round of her shoulder. Gooseflesh crept in focused attack, plumping her breasts, beading her nipples, raising the fine hairs along her arms.

A fit of coughing overtook the gentleman who bunked on the other side of the small room. Collette stole the opportunity and used the sound to disguise the creak of the bed as she slid her arms around John's neck.

"Sneak." He smiled against her skin.

"Clever," she countered.

He bit gentle kisses from her shoulder to her chin. His lips settled upon hers, caressing and petting as he mouthed words she couldn't hear.

"What are you saying?" she asked during the next coughing fit.

"Nonsense." He stroked her stomach in widening circles around her navel. Her shift bunched beneath his palm. He folded the material back to bare her ribs but left her breasts covered. She sighed and arched, sinuous, offering her naked belly, but John pushed her flat and sealed her lips with his. She understood why when his fingers found her nipple and plucked at the aroused point, when a moan rose in her throat. She caught the sound just in time. John's kiss eased. He found her ear again, whispered, "I want you in my mouth. Remember. Quiet."

Blood rushed to her breasts. Collette shoved her fist against her mouth and prayed she didn't cry out. John kissed her wrist. Lower. His tongue dampened her shift as he pressed open-mouth kisses between her breasts. He tugged at her nipple a second time, squeezed, teased the bit of flesh higher, tighter until his lips closed upon her. His mouth pulled. She inhaled sharply.

John squeezed her waist in warning and reminder. Collette bit her thumb so she wouldn't beg. This was torture, this unfurling of sensation and experience, pushing and jostling for an outlet she couldn't provide. John sucked slow and soft, fast and strong. He bit. He blew on wet cloth, worked the flat of his tongue across her skin. Her shift became a tool for him, an extra layer of sensation, and he alternately used it to intensify the scrape of his tongue and gentle the nip of his teeth.

Collette clutched his hair and pulled, praying for a sound in the room that would afford her enough shield to release even a small squeak. Outside, somewhere distant, a dog barked, but the sound was too far away, not long enough. A sob hiccupped from her chest.

John raised his head, hushing her with a breath. She folded her forearm across her breasts, shielding from him, and whispered, "I can't. I can't be quiet."

"Not even a little longer?" He ran his palm over her hip and gathered her petticoat in his fist, drawing it past her ankles.

She shuddered hard. The bunk frame groaned. If he touched her there with his mouth again, like he had the night before, she'd wake anybody who was sleeping and scandalize anybody who wasn't. She couldn't bring herself to stop him. Want of sensation battled with need for discretion and sensation won, drew her thighs apart as the ruffled hem of her petticoat reached her knees.

His big hand skimmed her thigh, blunt fingertips traced the crease of her sex. Collette ground her head against their makeshift pillow. Blood pounded at her temples, in her ears, drowning the sound of her breathing. He pressed relentlessly, the edges of his fingernails finding a sensitive spot that made her body jerk. She stopped caring about quiet and noise when his tongue parted her lips and swept inside her mouth.

Lifting her knee, she pushed her hips to meet his hand. John's tongue pressed deeper, imitating the long stroke of one finger as it tracked from the top of her slit to her entrance, introducing her to sensations she hadn't known possible. She was no stranger to masturbation—a school friend had passed the secret along years ago. Focused

rubbing, concentrated fantasy, biting a pillow to contain any noise—she knew those things. Climax at John’s hands though, at his mouth, were unlike any sensation she’d been able to produce through her own touch. He found every crevice and burrowed, stroked, returned over and over again to the button that made her jump. He didn’t enter her. She would have cried out for that penetration if not for the bruising pressure of his kiss.

She lost track of how many times he dragged his fingers past her entrance, how many times her body leapt to the brink of release and backed off. Sweat made her hair sticky. Arousal made her thighs slick. The blanket beneath her clutching hands was rough and abrasive. She came down to tiny things, minute sensations. The prickle of his scant beard against her chin. The rough corner of a callous catching the hood of her clitoris. To her confused senses, the bed appeared to shake, and as finally another bout of coughing assailed their roommate below, she threw her head back, bucked against his hand and whimpered into his mouth. The coughing below stretched for whole minutes, must have woken everyone in the room, but Collette didn’t care. Her abdomen cramped on a strong muscle spasm, and as it eased, John released her.

The bed shook in sporadic rhythm as if someone were laughing. She fumbled for John’s face, splayed her fingers across his mouth, whispered, “Are you laughing at me?”

He kissed her fingers and pulled her hand aside. His lips at her ear tickled, soothed, and he replied as quietly. “No laughing. Listen.”

She did as instructed. John folded her in his arms and pulled her tight to the length of his body. His erection nudged her hip but he didn’t seem to care, didn’t grind against her or draw her hand to the straining front of his pants. He smoothed damp hair from her temple and kissed her jaw. A moment later, the bed rattled hard once and the lower bunk’s occupant grunted. She almost missed the sound behind the cover of a snore. Almost.

Before she could ask, clarify, John rocked his hips slightly and whispered in her ear, "Lucky him."

In the morning, she couldn't bring herself to look any of the other passengers in the eye. The coach seemed even more crowded than it had the day before. John delayed in boarding, keeping her off until she was the only person left to board, and tucked her in with a window seat.

While everyone made themselves as comfortable as possible, he pressed a leather pouch into her hand, and said, "I'll be riding ahead. If the coach is delayed for any reason, stay with the other passengers."

Collette's brow furrowed. "You're leaving?"

"Only riding ahead. Tonight you'll stop between Fort Collins and Laramie, in a mining town named Boolah. Wait for me at the coach house if I'm not there when you arrive."

She wanted to ask more questions, but the coach driver shouted intent to begin the day's travel and John let the oilcloth curtain drop over the window. Anxiety cramped her stomach and soured her breakfast. Too many hours 'til she'd breathe fresh air again. Ignoring annoyed glances from the other passengers, she pulled the curtain aside and squeezed herself close to the window, covered her mouth and nose with a handkerchief, and watched the small town shrink.

Chapter Four

He should have stopped in Colorado Springs or Denver, but he had wanted to stay close to C.C. in case anything went wrong between Pueblo and Longmont. In case her recent traveling companions decided to come after her, or she decided to run back to them. His worry had cost time. That morning, as C.C. lingered in a wash closet, the bunch from Pueblo rode through Longmont.

Back in the Pueblo saloon, he'd handed over the deed to a parcel of Ethan's land, a small corner of the ranch that Ethan had offered as incentive for John to stay in Pearl instead of heading south. John had tried to refuse the deed, but Ethan had insisted, and so he'd gone from a man with nothing of his own to a man wealthy in soil.

According to John's rough calculations the day before, he would've had enough time to get C.C. on her way to Pearl, inform Ethan of the trouble to come and show up to send her stepbrother and his cousins on their way. He had assumed the group would travel at a more leisurely pace. Instead, they were riding hard.

No matter. The circumstances had changed, and not for the first time in the past few days. When he reached Fort Collins, he'd stop and wire a telegraph to Pearl and alert Ethan. Maybe he'd have the chance to head the group off before they got anywhere close to the Carver ranch. If nothing else, he'd have time to prepare himself for the consequences of his other actions.

Ethan responded to John's telegraph shortly after John made initial contact. The brief message indicated Ethan would be on alert and didn't ask questions. John lingered a while, watching for Lewis to ride through, but either he and his cousins had taken a different route, had beaten him to Fort Collins, or had been inconspicuous enough that he'd missed their arrival. When he'd waited long enough that he was certain he

wouldn't head them off, he checked the stagecoach office for stops and rode ahead to Boolah, the border town that straddled the Colorado-Wyoming line.

The coach pulled in late, after decent suppertime. C.C. debarked with stiff motions, her pretty face pinched and tired and browned by road dirt. She found him leaning against the coach house wall and sighed. Her shoulders drooped as tension visibly drained from her body.

"I wish you hadn't left me," she said after he retrieved her trunk from the coach's baggage store.

"I needed to do a few things." John beckoned her away from the line of passengers filing into the coach house. "Including find you a room that doesn't sleep eight and locate a mount suitable for you."

"I'm going to ride?"

"From here to Pearl. But that's still a ways." He steered her to the other side of the street where he'd rented a room in a smaller tavern that charged higher prices the coach line didn't care to pay. "We need to leave early."

She made a face. "We always need to leave early."

"They teach you to sleep 'til midday in those fancy eastern schools?" he teased.

C.C. flashed an impish smile that caught him off-guard. "Wouldn't you like to know what they taught?"

The unexpectedly playful note in her voice stirred his cock to life. John considered responding in kind, a harmless flirt, but the lady who'd helped him arrange for his rental stood in the door ahead of them. She examined C.C., probably gauging her appearance for respectability, before addressing John.

"You have a bath waiting and cold supper will be along shortly," she said. "For Mrs. Raincrow."

He glanced sidelong, gauging her reaction to the address, but C.C. evaded him, a polite and meaningless smile at her lips. She thanked the woman quietly and John nodded his appreciation as well before leading the way to their rented room.

Inside, a short wooden tub of steaming water waited. C.C.'s eyes widened. John dropped her trunk near the door and stood behind her, reaching for the fastenings of her dress before she worked up words. She practically vibrated with eager energy, and as soon as he loosened the last button, she yanked her arms free of the sleeves and went to work on her stays. Within moments she stood nude in the middle of a pile of clothes.

John leaned against the door and folded his arms across his chest, contemplating the sweet curve of her ass, the shapely length of her legs. "Want me to help you wash your hair?"

C.C. started as if she'd forgotten his presence, half turning toward him with bright pink circles coloring her cheeks. She covered her breasts, her posture mimicking his, and rubbed one small foot over the other. Self-conscious.

John tilted his head, noting the physical signs of her discomfort, and added, "Or want me to leave?"

She moistened her bottom lip. "I don't want you to leave."

The low, husky quality of her voice raised the hair on the back of his neck. He made himself stand still, made himself stand away from her, suddenly knowing that he wouldn't stop if he touched her, knowing he had to keep his hands away if he didn't want to ruin her. Knowing she'd decided she wanted more than mere touching. Knowing he couldn't give what she wanted.

Knowing didn't afford him a lick of caution. He studied the tops of her half-hidden breasts, the flare of her waist, and asked, "What do you want?"

"I don't want to tell you." She sidled toward the tub and raised first one leg then the other, climbing into the bath. A low sigh passed her lips as the hot water softened her skin, echoing the breath he exhaled as he caught glimpses of warm pink flesh peeking from her blonde thatch. She lowered herself into the water, her breasts bobbing

on the surface as the water level rose to accommodate her body. The water's temperature flushed her skin.

"Tell me anyway," he said.

"That man last night." She scooped a handful of water and spilled it between her breasts.

"What about him?"

"What he was doing..." Her words trailed off, a question at the end of them.

John uncrossed his arms. "What about it?"

She ducked her head and plucked at a clay pot of soap, rubbed the soft substance between her palms. John swallowed, his cock twitching to receive the same treatment.

"I want you to do what he was doing," she finished, so quiet he had to replay the words twice before they registered. When they did, he exhaled slowly, tempering the sudden, rapid thud of his pulse.

"Will you do the same for me?" he asked, knowing her response didn't matter. His hands had already risen on their own to pull at the fastenings of his pants. He had his cock in his hand before she nodded.

C.C. sank lower in the tub, her knees higher than her chest, and dipped her hair in the water. She held his eyes a moment and then her examination wandered south. Timing for her enjoyment, he gripped his shaft and stroked, thumb and forefinger ringing the head of his cock.

She ran her tongue around the rim of her mouth. "I liked the way you tasted."

He shuddered. "Christ. Don't talk."

C.C. smiled. Water streamed from her breasts when she straightened. John pumped his fist slower, wondering what her small hand would feel like, slippery with the soap she lathered into her sodden tangle of hair. She watched him intently as she scrubbed, and he salivated for a mouthful of her wet nipples.

Soap slid over her shoulders, between her breasts, and floated on the water. She rinsed her hair before raising one leg from the water and running her soapy fingers from ankle to knee to hip. Her hands vanished between her legs and he groaned, aware that pre-cum slicked his fingers.

"Hang your legs over the sides," he said, shouldering away from the door and moving to stand at the end of the tub. His balls climbed tight and close to his body, signaling climax.

Water sloshed against the sides, splashed over as she maneuvered to grant his request. Her feet didn't touch the floor. The position propped her thighs wide and lifted her ass from the bottom of the tub, presenting her pussy the way he'd known it would. Wet curls clung to her labia but afforded no coverage. Her lips were spread along with her legs. As he watched, she stroked her thigh and walked her fingertips along the crease of her pelvis, the slender digits so close to her clitoris that he had trouble breathing.

"I wanted your fingers inside me last night," she whispered, the shy note in her voice belying her lewd display.

He squeezed another drop of fluid from his cock and caught it with his palm, smearing the moisture down to his balls. "Put yours there now."

A sexy, soft moan whispered past her lips as she obeyed, swirling a single fingertip toward her entrance. She penetrated herself to one knuckle then added a second finger. The heel of her palm concealed her clitoris, but he didn't care. The sight of her small, pale hand exploring her pussy tilted him toward a dangerous edge. He knelt at the foot of the tub and clasped her wrist with his free hand, angling her deeper, urging her to include a third finger. Steam from the bath carried her scent, snuck it under his skin. He hung his head and fisted his cock, fast and hard. She touched his cheek, said his name, and he came, his shoulders jerking hard as his hips shoved forward into his hand and a jet of semen splashed the side of the tub.

"Help me?" she pleaded, curling her fingers in his hair.

John opened his eyes to find her watching him with heavy lashes, her bottom lip plump and pink from her teeth. She still pumped into her pussy, but the motion was erratic, shallow.

He swore and hung his head. "I don't want to ruin you."

"But you're willing to do anything else?"

He flinched at the words, the edge she placed upon them. "This is a dangerous game."

Water sloshed as she shrugged and arched her back, rolling the pad of her thumb across her clitoris. "I know the rules."

"I don't think you really do." He rose to his feet and reached into the tub, lifting her in his arms. Water streamed from her limbs, spilling across the carpet as he carried her to the bed and dropped her on the mattress. Her breasts bounced as the bed settled beneath her weight.

Instead of joining her on it, John knelt beside the bed and pulled her until her ass balanced on the edge. He pushed her knees high and spread her legs, baring her pussy and ass to his tongue.

She tensed, tried to close her thighs. "There's too much light—"

"You're beautiful," he said, cutting her off. "Pink and pretty and shining wet."

He held both her knees and buried his face between her legs, licking deep without preamble. A low groan vibrated through her body. It only sounded half-human. His cock began to harden again.

Ignoring the greedy appendage, he rubbed his fingers in her cream and lower, searching for the ring of muscle guarding her tightest passage. C.C.'s breath sharpened and she squirmed, raised her hips. The puckered circle flexed closer, blocking his invasion, but he persisted and lubricated the indent with her wetness. His tongue burned as he stretched it, searching for the spot that would rob her resistance. She told him when he found it, her moan pitching to a high keen. As muscle eased, he worked

his index finger into her ass, sliding slow and steady and deep. Her hips came off the bed, her pussy bucking his mouth, and she tore at his hair.

Determined to teach her a lesson about the rules, to show her “anything but”, he thrust and withdrew until he could fit a second finger into her anus. C.C. begged him, the words incoherent and broken. He draped her left leg over his shoulder, upsetting her balance and stealing her purchase, and shifted until he could reach along her body to fondle her breast. Her nipple stabbed at his palm, hard and so sensitive she yelped at his touch.

“More,” she breathed, clamping one of her hands over his. “Please. More. I want—ahhh. Oh. *Lord.*”

Carefully, he worked his thumb into her vagina, relishing the sounds she made in appreciation of dual penetration. Sweat made the back of his neck sticky. Need made his cock throb. Realizing he couldn’t take much more of her sweet begging, her writhing and her appreciative sighs, he licked across her clitoris and sucked while strumming her nipple. This time, unlike the first, she came for him fast. And not quiet. What sounded like a muffled shout reached his ears. He raised his head, still tonguing her flesh, to find she’d stuffed a pillow over her face to stifle her cries. Wicked inspiration struck and he rolled her clitoris back into his mouth, sucked hard, and heard the shout become a smothered scream. She reared back, her feet landing on his shoulders, shoving until her body scooted up the bed and slid off his fingers.

John let her go, sprawling onto his back and chuckling at the ceiling. He closed his eyes, idly fondled his cock, and listened to the harsh rasp of her breathing return to normal.

Soon, he felt a tickle at his ankle. He half-opened his eyes to find C.C. curled at the foot of the bed, her bare arm dangling over, fingertips exploring beneath the leg of his pants.

She caught him looking at her and a slight smile curved her lips. “Why are you all the way down there?”

John groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. "Because you're impossible when you're in arm's reach. No more. Supper should be sent along soon."

And I have to deliver you to your brother tomorrow.

Collette pillowed her cheek on her forearm and walked her fingers farther up John's leg. He still wore his boots, his pants, his shirt. Except for the parted halves of his fly, he was fully clothed. "I've no interest in food. You should undress," she declared.

He opened one eye to stare at her. "Supper."

She tugged the leg of his pants. "I want to see you."

"Supper," he said, decisively. He raised his knee, drawing his ankle out of reach, and tucked his cock into his pants.

"It's not fair that you've seen me," she cajoled.

"You always were too bold," he muttered.

"Only with you. I knew you wouldn't tell anybody that you'd kissed me."

"*You* kissed me. Under pretense of aiding that three-legged barn cat."

She smiled and rolled onto her stomach, swinging her feet up and crossing them at the ankle. "I'd forgotten all about that 'til just now. Did you forget?"

"It was a long time ago," he evaded.

"But did you *forget*?"

He grunted, stood, and rummaged through her trunk until he withdrew a dressing gown, which he tossed in her direction. Collette ignored it, letting the blue wrapper slither to the floor.

"Tell me," she pressed, suddenly invested in his answer. "Did you forget? I touched my lips against yours. You pulled on my braid and put your tongue in my mouth."

"I didn't forget," he said curtly. "You need to get dressed."

Collette retrieved her wrapper from the floor and slipped her arms through the sleeves, watching him cautiously. His playful amusement had deteriorated rapidly. Rising from the bed, she crept close and touched his arm. "What's wrong, John?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, the line of his jaw tight. "You said you weren't going to tell anybody. But Ethan came after me."

"He...what? I didn't tell."

"Someone did." He rubbed his jaw and blew a harsh breath. "You want to know what he said to me?"

"I'm not sure that I do." Biting her lip, she folded her arms beneath her breasts.

John laughed. It wasn't a sweet sound. "He told me if I ever touched you again, I'd better be prepared to marry you."

"I thought you wanted to," she whispered.

"I did."

They stared at each other, Collette trying to puzzle through subtext to find the meaning behind words he hadn't spoken. He did...but?

But he didn't anymore. She could not have expected that he would. So much time had passed, he had other plans, they did not even know one another. John didn't want Ethan to force him to stay in Pearl. The realization hurt but she pushed it aside.

"I'm not going to tell him about...this," she promised, reaching for him again. "Are you worried I will? I'm not trying to trap you."

A knock sounded at the door, ending their conversation. He waved her away and admitted a pair of boys who brought a heavy tray into the room and removed the tub. Collette had little appetite but she sat with him and nibbled, wondering at the source of his irritation with her.

After their meal, he pulled a blanket from the bed and spread it on the floor. Collette started at him. "You're not going to sleep with me."

"It's better this way," he said by way of explanation, and settled with his back to her.

"Better for whom? I'm going to miss you too much to sleep and that floor cannot be comfortable. I fail to see how either of us will be better for separation." Frustration and

fear sharpened her voice but she didn't care. He was trying to pull away and she didn't want him to go. Not yet, not knowing that he would be gone before sunset the next day.

"John. Look at me." She slipped from the bed and knelt behind him, pulling at his shoulder until he rolled to his back. His eyes glittered in the dark but she couldn't read them, couldn't determine whether he wanted her to leave him be or wanted to hear her speak.

Swallowing, she leaned over him, braced her hands on his shoulders and pinned him to the floor. His wants mattered little.

"I know you intend to deliver me and leave again. I know you believe it's best to hand me over to Ethan with virtues intact. But *I* believe my life is my own, nobody else's. I wanted to come home because I wanted my family. The people I knew. The people I loved. *Not* because I wanted somebody to shelter and govern me." She felt for his face, lingered over late whiskers roughening his jaw. John turned his head aside. Collette cupped his chin and forced him back, her fingertips pressing hard behind his ear, anger and want dulling the edges of politeness. She lowered her head until their noses touched, until he couldn't escape. "Please don't assign my well-being to anybody but me. Don't believe you're doing me a service by withholding yourself."

"This isn't for you." He clasped her wrist and forced her hand away, sitting as he pushed her back. "It isn't about you. I can't have you once and walk away. I can't lose you. Not a second time."

Collette rocked on her heels and stared at him in the dark. Emotion edged his voice, made his words ragged, sharp enough to scratch. Her chest constricted, trying to compress feeling into speech, trying to push something past her lips. Acknowledgment, understanding, promise. Anything.

When words emerged, they sounded foreign to her ears, too rough, too high. "So you are leaving Pearl. Not coming back."

"I want something of my own." He loosened his grip and folded her hand in her lap. "Forgive me."

Chapter Five

After hours on horseback, Collette wondered why she had yearned so hard for a return to the experience. Her bottom ached, her thighs burned and a headache throbbed between her temples to the rhythm of the horse's stride. And her heart, through no fault of the horse's, hurt more than any other part of her body.

They reached Pearl proper at midday. John only spoke to inquire about her health, state of hunger or need to relieve herself. He didn't stop in town. Instead, they rode straight through. She should have enjoyed her homecoming, should have appreciated the familiar dips and rises of the land, should have rehearsed a greeting for the brother she hadn't seen in more than ten years, his wife whom she had never met. She couldn't think of any of those things though, for wanting the sound of John's voice.

As they rode, something nagged her memory. The detail, a flutter of solid reason, struggled to survive beneath emotion. She worried at it so intently she didn't realize they had reached Twin Mountains, home, until John called a greeting to a youth working outside the stables. The boy, walking a young horse around the yard, waved in return.

Her stomach knotted. Collette studied the big house from beneath her hat, wondering who would appear first. Whether Ethan would recognize her.

"Had any visitors?" he asked as he dismounted. The stable hand replied to the negative.

The detail finally shook loose. Collette narrowed her eyes. When John reached to help her from the horse, she caught his sleeve before he could turn away. "In Pueblo, the sum you paid Harrington. The land. Is that what you're leaving for now?"

Color stained his cheekbones. "C.C. —"

She cut him off. "How can you be leaving if you gave the deed to Harrington? Did you give him a forgery? Is he going to come after me here?"

John clasped her wrist and held her fist against his chest. His eyebrows lowered, brow creasing in a scowl. "It was no forgery. I have the matter in hand."

"In hand?" The question sharpened, shrilled at the end. She glanced at the youth leading their mounts away then looked back to John. "They're coming here, aren't they? You led them to my family."

A slender woman with bright red hair braided over her shoulder emerged from the stable. She drew up short, still in the shadow of the structure, and shaded her eyes as she looked from John to Collette. Recognition crossed her face regardless the fact neither woman had ever met. Not looking away from Collette, addressing John, she said, "You didn't tell Ethan you were bringing her, did you?"

John grimaced. "Seemed like something better said to a man's face. Or better heard from a sister's lips."

Margaret moved closer. A breeze from the pines tugged at her skirt and pushed it against her rounded belly. The other woman didn't approach with a hug or offer a smile, but she did say, "Ethan has needed you to come home."

Collette flushed. "I'm sorry I didn't send word ahead."

Margaret was with child. Collette pulled at John's hold, anger simmering. Beneath her breath, she whispered to John, "How could you?"

John ignored the question. "C.C. had a bit of a bad run. Do you know where I can find Ethan?"

"He's riding the south ridge." Margaret raised a rust-colored eyebrow. "He seems to believe we might have company."

John grunted. "I'll ride out to meet him. Will you take C.C. inside with you?"

Margaret canted her head, her expression calculating but not unkind. "It is her home, is it not?"

The question reddened his cheeks. He pulled his hat lower, and said, "Thank you."

Collette pressed her lips together. Her brother's wife seemed to be saying words Collette didn't understand, sharp undercurrents of meaning behind neutral questions. She wasn't certain she appreciated the intimacy. She was certain she envied it. For the first time, she realized how difficult homecoming might be. Ethan, his wife, even the cowboys who rode the fences, were all strangers to her now. She didn't know about losses or happiness, anticipations or dreads. John was her only point of familiarity and she would not go so far as to call her relationship with him "comfortable".

He stepped away, making room for Margaret to walk between them. Collette pressed her fingernails into her palms and met his eyes, searching for the next step. John's face revealed nothing, his expression so carefully blank that panic rose in her throat.

Margaret touched her elbow and nudged her toward the house. Over her shoulder, to John, she said, "Ask him to come back before too late, will you?"

Collette turned back, intending to ask whether he would return with Ethan, but John had already gone. His loose-hipped stride carried him through the stable's wide door.

"The men here are too silent," Margaret remarked. "And no amount of mincing around a question will convince them to talk. If you want answers, you shall have to ask directly."

"I'm afraid I have all the answers I'm likely to receive." Collette walked stiff at Margaret's side, hanging back to ensure the other woman preceded her into the house. Home or not, the house was Margaret's domain more recently than Collette's.

Once inside, Margaret invited Collette into the kitchen for tea. Collette raised her eyebrows. "I haven't been offered tea since Philadelphia."

The remark warmed Margaret's cool demeanor. A wry smile tilted her lips. "I've learned it's a rare indulgence this far west. At first, Ethan was suspicious of anything I served outside a tin mug."

"You're not from Pearl," Collette realized. "I wondered when John told me Ethan had married. I couldn't remember any girls named Margaret."

"I'm not from Pearl," Margaret agreed. She set a kettle to heat and wiped the insides of a pair of teacups with a soft towel.

Collette sat at the table she'd grown up with and held her hands in her lap, envious of the other woman's comfort in the house.

"Ethan didn't believe you would return," Margaret said to a tin of tealeaves.

"I always wanted to. My mother...she believed the world had more to offer outside Pearl."

"Is she...well?"

"She passed in December."

"I am sorry to hear it." Margaret bowed her head. "You have both been missed here. I hope you understand that, whatever reception Ethan might demonstrate when he realizes you've returned."

Collette frowned. Had her brother changed so much? She remembered Ethan as bear hugs and relentless tickling, as mediator between Collette and their younger sibling James. Ethan had once made a clumsy attempt at sewing in order to help Collette hide a fistfight she'd started with the postmaster's daughter over a stamp. She wanted Ethan to be the person she remembered but Margaret's words raised doubts.

"He has not become a monster," Margaret said.

"A stranger, then." Collette grimaced ruefully.

The kettle whistled. Margaret lifted it from the fire and occupied herself with tea, moving easily despite her pregnancy.

"Not a stranger either," she mused. "I suspect you will still recognize one another's hearts. But he has had time to lose people. You, your mother. More recently, James. Men become harder on the outside so they can protect their tender insides."

Collette watched clouds move across the patch of sky visible through the kitchen window. Margaret spoke of Ethan, but Collette's thoughts turned to John. She missed the openness he had allowed her to see along the road to Pearl. His sudden erection of barriers the night before had hurt and confused her but suddenly made sense.

She envied Margaret's calm manner, her confidence that Ethan harbored softness despite his walls. Collette felt no such certainty that John would allow her beyond his.

"Tell me about James," she requested, reaching for a distraction.

* * * * *

John tracked Ethan to the south corner of the ranch. A few of the seasonal cowboys crouched outside a storm cabin, smoking and playing cards. More horses than men grazed at the honeysuckle growing along the fence that fronted the cabin.

After he dismounted, he plucked several of the sweet blooms and studied them on his palm. C.C. was angry with him. He couldn't help that and had no real excuse or defense. She was right. His impulsive double play to claim her without giving up anything of his own *had* put Ethan and Margaret in a bad spot. At the time, he hadn't seen any other way. Much as he would have enjoyed pounding Harrington's face when the man claimed C.C., John wouldn't have liked her caught in the middle of a brawl. Or in the middle of a gunfight.

Better she was mad at him now than hurt, then. Glowering, he stuffed the flowers in his shirt pocket and headed for the cabin.

Ethan appeared in the door. "They showed up about three hours ago. Mickey spotted them on the road."

John removed his hat and wiped his face with a kerchief. "I hoped I'd cut them off before they got here."

"From what I've heard, you were slowed down. By a woman." Ethan leaned against the doorframe, arms across his chest.

So Ethan knew. "They're talkers, I suppose."

Ethan nodded, his expression unreadable. "Where is my sister?"

His tone was clear even if his face did not reveal anything. Possessiveness punctuated the question and distrust underscored it. John grimaced. He and Ethan had rarely disagreed about anything besides C.C. Years ago, after the kiss that earned him a black eye at the end of Ethan's fist, they'd reached an agreement about the kind of relationship Ethan would tolerate. John might have pushed the boundaries given time. He didn't have the opportunity. Shortly after, C.C. was gone.

Now the boundary set him on edge. He bit back the urge to cross the line and stake his claim. C.C. couldn't be his. She wanted her family and he had already committed to a different life.

"I left her at the house. Figured it was as safe a place as any." He mounted the porch.

"If you want her, you have to be able to keep her," Ethan said.

John missed a beat but smothered his surprise. Unwilling to address his relationship with C.C., he ignored Ethan's meaning. "Margaret wanted me to ask you to head back before it gets too late. If you want to go, I'll deal with these four."

Ethan narrowed his eyes. "Mickey only found three."

John stilled. "Three men?"

"Two men and a woman."

"Damn it all. There's another man. I'm going back to the house."

Ethan assigned one of the cowboys to stand watch in the cabin. The others abandoned their card game and saddled up. John didn't wait for them. Fear for C.C.'s safety propelled him across the yard.

* * * * *

Night drew near before the sound of hoofbeats announced John and Ethan's return. Collette had been resting in the small room she'd occupied as a child but she roused to

greet her brother. Margaret intercepted her in the hall. Both women went together to the porch, Margaret hanging back, leaving Collette at center stage.

She threw an anxious glance at the other woman. "Maybe he'd rather see you first."

Margaret's brows pinched together. "True under most circumstances, but I'd be foolish if I stood between you now."

Collette drew a deep breath and blew it out, trying to calm her racing pulse. Soon, both men rode into the dirt yard that fronted the house. Ethan dropped from his horse before it came to a stop. He left the animal's leads to trail on the ground. John dismounted close behind him and loosed a piercing whistle that had someone running from the stable. Both men split in different directions, John heading for the north end of the house, Ethan for the south.

Their urgency stretched to the porch. Glancing at Margaret, Collette fisted her hands in the folds of her skirt. "I think something's wrong."

Margaret nodded. "Come inside."

Back in the house, Margaret paced in the kitchen. Collette sat on a bench in the hall and stared at her shoes. A chill stole down her back. Ethan and John had driven their horses at a racing pace and divided as if looking for something. Someone. Sudden certainty tightened her throat. She raised her head and peered at a dark window, expecting to see Harrington staring at her between the flower-printed panels of Margaret's curtains.

The window was empty. Still, she stood from the bench and joined Margaret in the kitchen. As she entered the brightly lit room, the kitchen door opened and her brother filled the space. Margaret, Collette noted, had been wrong. Ethan's eyes sought his wife immediately.

"You're all right?" he asked, scanning Margaret's form from head to rounded stomach.

Collette flushed and drew back, hovering beside a tall cupboard. The intimacy of Ethan's examination made her feel like an intruder. She averted her eyes.

Margaret reassured him with a wordless affirmative. "It's only Collette and me in the house," she added.

Silence swelled in the kitchen. Collette looked up from the study of her hem to find Ethan watching her. A confusing mix of emotions crossed his features—worry, frustration, uncertainty. Margaret had been correct. Her brother looked different in some ways, his face harder than she remembered, his posture taller, but she did recognize the heart of him. Tears stung the backs of her eyes. She swiped at them before they could emerge and stepped away from the shelter of the cupboard.

"She find her room all right?" he asked of Margaret.

"It hasn't moved from where I left it," Collette replied on Margaret's behalf.

Ethan surprised her with a short laugh. "I suppose all's the way it should be, then."

"I suppose so," she murmured.

"John," Margaret said.

Collette started, turning to find him behind her in the hall. She hadn't heard him approach. His scent overwhelmed her—leather, denim, road dust. The delicate perfume of some sweet flower. They'd only been apart a matter of hours, but the separation had left a parched void eager to soak him in. Her lashes fought to lower, to narrow her senses down to that one sharp perception. She bit the inside of her cheek, hoping to squash the urge. Ethan and Margaret were both watching them.

"You were looking for Harrington, weren't you?" she asked.

John frowned. He glanced past her to Ethan before nodding. "The other three have been secured in the south storm cabin. Harrington wasn't with them."

"Who is Harrington?" Margaret asked.

Collette reluctantly turned from John and met Ethan's eyes. Explaining Harrington's presence would lead to more complicated topics. She would have preferred time to ease into the conversation, but Harrington presented a threat that did not allow her to stall. She delivered the hardest news first. "Mama married again."

Ethan's jaw tightened. "When?"

"Nine years ago."

"It was an illegal union," he said flatly.

She bit her lip and nodded. She suspected her father was gone but couldn't bring herself to ask about details yet. Instead she said, "A barrister in New York. He had a son and daughter, Lewis and Elizabeth. I was traveling with them and their cousins when John recognized me in Pueblo.

"Harrington..." She frowned and glanced at John, wondering how much information he had already given Ethan.

John leaned against the doorframe. "It's your story."

"Harrington is Lewis' cousin," she said, holding John's gaze. "He thought he had a right to sell me to John. He wasn't happy when John met the sum he named."

"That sum being?"

She turned back to Ethan. "Large."

"I paid it with the deed to the northwest valley," John said. "The Trinidad property isn't secured yet."

"The northwest valley?" Collette stared at Ethan. That property would have been hers. Their father had divided Twin Mountains three ways. The land useful for raising livestock was to be Ethan's, the mineral-rich mines would have gone to James. The northwest valley with its steep slopes and swollen streams should have belonged to her.

"You've been gone a long time," Ethan said.

She scowled. "People keep telling me that as if I were unaware of the fact."

"We got the deed back." Frowning, Ethan held a chair for Margaret, who thanked him with a look as she sat. "But this other man. Harrington. I presume he's less interested in land and more interested in C.C."

"That would be a fair assessment," John said tightly.

His low words distracted her from confusion about the matters of land. Her body responded to the displeasure in his voice, tightening in hidden places. She shouldn't react thus to his irritation, but it translated to possessiveness and that told her he was not completely gone from her. She abruptly wished for privacy, a second chance to convince him they did not have to turn away from one another. The presence of Margaret and Ethan had her curling her hands into fists so she wouldn't reach for John.

"We didn't see signs of him near the house," Ethan said. "We'll watch by turns through the night and organize a search tomorrow if necessary. Mickey claimed first shift. He'll sound the fire bells if he sees anything."

John nodded. "I'll take second."

"Two to a watch. We'll take it together. When we find him, we'll be sure the entire bunch knows better than to linger in Pearl and send them on their way." Ethan paused then asked, "Unless there's reason we should involve the law?"

Collette bit her lip. "I'm not sure how dangerous Harrington is or what he wants."

"He wants you," John said. "And he's been duped. He's dangerous."

"But he doesn't have any claim—"

Ethan cut her off. "Claim makes no difference to some men. He's set himself on this course and he'll see it through."

Margaret stood. "I'll get James' room ready for John."

"C.C. knows where linens are kept," Ethan said. He clasped Margaret's upper arm, forestalling her. "You should rest."

Collette looked between her brother and his wife, noting for the first time that Margaret's eyes had grown tired in the last few hours. Ethan's features softened when he regarded the lovely woman. Their focus on one another created an isolated pocket and Collette turned away. She and John had been dismissed.

Chapter Six

Collette led John through the house. He stopped to secure each door and check every window. The arrangement of rooms seemed strange, unfamiliar in the dark and with the mutation of time. Ethan and Margaret slept in the spacious loft, which had been her parents' domain. Margaret was in the process of making a nursery of the room her brothers had shared. Their bunk beds still sat against one wall. The sight of them brought Collette up short just inside the door. Memory weakened her knees. She swung the lantern, angling the light away from the beds.

"I'll find blankets," she said as John stopped close behind her.

In a distant part of the house, the narrow stairs to the loft creaked. She and John were alone on the first floor.

"If I don't leave tomorrow, I'll forfeit the property in Trinidad," he said. "I don't want you out of the house until he's located."

"Why does forfeit matter? Why were you leaving if you had land here?" Collette swallowed and shook herself. "You should go at first light. Ethan will find Harrington."

He reached around her and took the lantern from her hand. After placing it on a high shelf, he clasped her arm. Collette didn't turn. She stared at the shadows on the wall and held her breath, trying not to cry.

"Look at me," he commanded.

The gravelly texture of his voice heated her abdomen. She covered her face with her hands, confused by the mixture of fear and desire pulling at her senses. How could she want his touch when the thought of watching him walk away frightened her so deeply?

"C.C. I have to go." He wrapped her hair around his hand and tugged. "Look at me. I want to see your face."

A sob hiccupped from her chest and she gulped air, mortified, desperate to hold back another cry. John cursed. He released her hair and grasped her wrists, pulled until she couldn't hide behind her hands anymore.

His eyes gleamed, shiny and black in the dim light. Holding her face sandwiched between his palms, he said, "I have to go. The Trinidad property belonged to a man who marched with me during the war. He died. His marriage has been challenged and his widow's claim has been ruled invalid. Per terms of his last will and testament, if she's unable to take it, the property comes to me. Even if I decide not to stay, I have to go. Do you understand?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't. Why push me away because of it? You could come back."

"I didn't want to come back. I wanted this chance to build something. I needed to stop waiting." He touched his forehead to hers. "I want you with me but I can't take you away again. It's not the right thing to do."

"I don't want you to do the right thing. I want you to be with me. I want *this*." Pressing forward, she aligned their bodies and stood on her toes, forcing connection at pelvis and breast. John's muscles tightened. His hands fell to her hips.

"*I love you*," she whispered fiercely. "I used to pretend you were going to come to New York and bring me home. I wrote letters for months until I figured out that Mama threw them out without posting them. You're different now, and so am I, but I want a chance to convince you to love me back. *Please*, John."

For a moment she feared he would push her away. Pain twisted his features and with a groan, he covered her mouth. His tongue invaded roughly and robbed her of breath. Collette fisted her hands in his hair, dizzy and disoriented as he lifted her against his chest. Soon, his weight pinned her to the bottom bunk. Urgent hands pushed her skirts high. She took advantage of the freedom and wrapped her legs around his waist. His hardness settled square against her sex and she moaned, rubbed her empty

body on his cock. She'd had him in her hands and in her mouth, but neither intimacy struck as deep as this connection.

John hooked his hand beneath her knee and raised her leg, pushed her thigh against the cold wall, widening her embrace. The metal edges of his belt buckle stung her skin and the butt of his revolver lodged between his hip and her inner thigh. She ignored both intrusions and arched her back until their bodies lined up from breastbone to groin.

Abruptly, John broke the kiss. His breath came fast and hot at the hollow of her throat. "This is the wrong place," he muttered.

Collette tightened her hold on his hips. "I can be quiet."

He laughed raggedly and kissed her chin. "I know you can. It's not about volume. This is your brother's home."

The reminder stilled her hands on his back. "It's my home too."

"Not if you're mine. If you're mine, I have to provide the roof." He rose on his elbows. The shift pressed him harder between her legs. His forehead creased and he met her eyes. "Do you understand? I provide the roof. Here. In Trinidad. In Mexico."

She gritted her teeth and tried to ignore his size against her sex. "Are you trying to use this against me? As some kind of leverage?"

He didn't answer. Collette frowned. "John? Tell me."

Lifting his weight from her body, he shook his head. "I'm not. I'm defining the reality. I don't have the roots your family has. I'm trying to plant them, but until I do..."

"Nothing will be sure or permanent," she finished.

He sat back on his heels, leaving her empty. Self-conscious, Collette sat and concentrated on straightening her skirt.

"I'm telling you this because Ethan will think it. He will want security for you."

She bristled. "I am beyond needing a man's permission. I have money of my own and I have passed the age of naiveté."

"I need his blessing," John said.

They stared at one another in the low light, John unmoving, Collette frustrated by his inflexibility.

Eventually, she swung her feet to the floor and stood, not looking at him. "I'll bring a blanket for you."

John rubbed his face, regretting his decision to present his terms so abruptly. C.C.'s confession of love had rattled him. Her words too closely mirrored the course his own emotions had followed. If he were smart, he would leave the matter alone until he could put some distance between them. She made him too stupid to let it go.

Rising, he found her in the hall with her hands covering her face. She inhaled when he approached and dropped her arms to her sides. "You should wait. I'll only be a moment."

He ignored her admonition and pushed the hair from her neck. Her shoulders rose protectively as he traced the line of her nape. "Do you really understand the rules?"

Her breath hitched. "What do you mean?"

Above them, a rhythmic thump commenced. C.C. stiffened. Beneath his fingers, her skin heated.

He waited, letting the telltale sounds sink into her body. Distance muffled faint feminine cries but he knew she heard them. She softened under his hand. Resisting a need to hold her, to cup her breasts and explore the extent of her response to Margaret's pleasure, he bent to whisper in her ear, "The rules. If I have you, if you accept me, there aren't any more secrets. I won't keep them. I want you in the open. I want the right to make you moan loud enough anybody in earshot can hear. Ethan will know and you won't have grounds to refuse me when your brother finds out."

She shuddered, her head tilting away from his lips. "He wouldn't force your hand."

He palmed her flushed cheek and brought her back to bite the curve of her neck. "You told me you weren't naïve."

C.C. turned, stepped away from him. The action positioned her in the entry to her bedroom. He closed on her, blocking escape by bracing his hands on either side of the frame.

"Here are the rules," he said, studying the top of her head. "I touch you and he finds out, I marry you. No matter if nobody else knows, no matter if you change your mind, no matter anything."

She tilted her head and met his eyes. The challenge in her stare hit him hard. "So by braving 'anything but', you've been protecting yourself from...what? Entrapment?"

"The goal was to protect you." He stroked her chin, down the line of her throat. Her pulse thudded fast, mimicking the pace of her shallow breaths.

"I never said I wanted you to protect me. You took that upon yourself. I only wanted you to touch me. And you can't decide whether you want to."

"I want to." He moved, crowding her backward, teasing himself with the soft swell of her breasts, the flex of her throat as she swallowed. Her body's responses spoke to his muscles, bunched them in anticipation, roused a predatory feeling he couldn't control.

Lowering his head, he bit the tender spot beneath her chin, his teeth pinching until she gasped. The sound arrowed straight to his cock. John closed his eyes, breathed the soap-sweet scent of her, and repeated, "I want to. Protect you, touch you, make you cry out so loud they hear as well upstairs as we do down here."

"John." She pushed against his shoulders and stepped out of his reach. "If you don't want an escape, and I don't want one, why are you leaving the door open?"

"For you. I was leaving it open for you." He released her and turned away, staring at the room's open door. He suspected she only half referred to the physical object and included his intention to leave her an out. But he didn't want her to have an out. And he didn't want to walk through that open door either.

Light flickered down the hall from the lantern they had left behind. He glanced over his shoulder. C.C.'s face gleamed pale in the distant lantern glow, her mouth set in an uncertain line.

"Don't move." He waited until she nodded assent then he left to retrieve the light. As he returned, Margaret's high, piercing wail carried through the walls.

C.C. met his eyes, her hands already attending the buttons that marched down the front of her dress. "I want to feel like that again."

Not speaking, he set the lantern aside. Her fingers fumbled as he removed his gun belt and placed it on the writing desk beside the door. His watch and vest followed. C.C.'s tiny buttons frustrated him but he made himself stand back to give her a chance to present herself. Every other time he had stripped her. Watching her unwrap made this different, made surrender entirely hers.

She pulled her arms through the tight sleeves and pushed the fitted waist past her hips. Her underskirts followed and she hesitated in shoes, stockings and stays.

"Everything off this time," he instructed, greedy for the sight of her.

"I want to see you as well," she said.

Shaking free of the distraction she presented, he obliged by removing his boots and setting to work on his shirt. As he shrugged it off, honeysuckle wafted from the pocket. He'd forgotten about the flowers. They were crushed, a sad handful of soft petals and thin serum, but he gathered them in his fist anyway.

C.C. bent to unroll her stockings. John forestalled her. "Show me your breasts."

Expression startled, she straightened. Her mouth parted as though she meant to protest or ask a question, but instead she inhaled deeply and nodded. While she fussed with her stays, he rubbed the flowers until their syrup made his fingertips slick.

The boning dropped to join her dress on the floor. When she raised her arms to pull her chemise over her head, the play of curve and muscle at her waist fascinated him. He caught her elbow before she could lower her arms.

"Keep them over your head," he rasped. Her nipples beaded instantly. John splayed his fingers between her breasts and pressed the bruised flowers to her skin.

Her back arched, thrusting pale curves toward him. Entranced by her sinuous form, he swept his thumb across her left nipple. Honeysuckle nectar sweetened her flesh and melted rich on his tongue. C.C. moaned, reached for his head, but he found her wrists and held them together. He smeared the remainder of the juice down her stomach and followed with his mouth, going to his knees as he licked a trail to her navel.

C.C. dropped her arms as soon as he released her wrists. He expected her hands in his hair but she loosened the ties of her underskirts and kicked free of them. Abruptly, the fragrance of her arousal rose to mix with the floral perfume. Groaning, John opened his mouth wide and sucked at her skin, licked into the hollow of her navel, lower until his tongue slid between her legs in search of stronger flavors.

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, pushed. "I don't want to finish that way. Not this time."

He raised his head and looked up the line of her body to find her eyes anxious and her mouth pinched. "This isn't finishing. It's beginning."

"But before..." She trailed off and bit her bottom lip.

"Before was different." He stroked her leg from hip to knee, relishing the gooseflesh that crept after his hand.

Overhead, Margaret cried out. C.C. jerked, her fingers tightening on his shoulders, and whispered, "Again?"

"I told you. Beginning." John pitched his weight against her knees, disrupting her balance and forcing her against the high bed.

She touched his jaw. John raised his head. Her eyebrows came together in a frown, and she said, "I've already had beginning. I want finishing. Don't you?"

John closed his eyes. The long muscles in her thighs flexed as he tightened his grip. She would have bruises in the morning. "You'll be sore."

"Stop trying to talk me out of this." C.C. stroked his hair, her touch soothing along his head, punishing when her fingernails reached his nape.

He shuddered for the small pain and forced his hands to relax. Rising, he caught her around the waist and lifted her to sit on the edge of the bed. "Spread your legs."

She did one better and leaned back until her weight rested upon her elbows. The position shoved her breasts toward him and hollowed her stomach. Chest tight, John pushed her knees apart until she bit her bottom lip.

"Too far?" he asked.

She shook her head. Lying, but he didn't call her on it. The sight of her laid open, wet flesh glistening, her bare skin gilded by lamplight, made him greedy. He plucked a torn honeysuckle petal from her pubic hair, murmured, "Should have picked more."

Her lips curved, a sly smile. "Fresh bunch of bluebells in the kitchen."

He unfastened his pants. Her eyes widened as he drew his cock into his hand. John gave himself a long stroke, pleased by the flush that darkened her cheeks. Her mouth took on a bruised hue, darkened by his shadow when his shoulders blocked the light. Needing to taste her again, he stepped between her legs. "They have to be honeysuckle."

"They do?" She clutched the scrap quilt that covered her bed.

John braced himself on one arm and leaned over her, licking at her bottom lip. "That's what your mouth tasted like."

She sighed, closed her eyes, rocked her hips to meet the head of his cock as he rubbed the sensitive bulb between her labia. He tasted the inner rim of her lips, sucked and bit until she moaned, "When?"

"The first time." Testing, pushing, he fitted himself lower, into the narrow mouth of her sex. Despite the slippery proof of her readiness, her body resisted his initial thrust.

"The first time...ohhhh. *John*. That feels —"

"The first time I kissed you," he muttered, cutting her off. If she vocalized the sensation, he would lose the careful control he had over himself. Gritting his teeth, he worked deeper. Her heat clasped tight, pushing as she drew a deep breath, pulling when her chest fell with the exhale. "You...tasted like you'd been breaking off the stems and sucking the flowers."

She didn't respond and he didn't care. The memory was more his than hers. He reveled in it, leaned to suck at the nectar-sweetened flesh between her breasts as he bought himself another inch. Her elbows slid from beneath her and she tumbled flat on the bed, reached to cover her breasts. John hissed. The sight of her nipples peeking between her fingers ate at his control. He pushed his fingers into her hair and held her waist with his free hand, pinning her to the mattress, quieting the restless twist of her hips. The flush riding her throat told him it was time.

Hooking her knee behind his hip, he climbed onto the bed and lowered his weight atop her. He adjusted their bodies to slot the head of his cock against her entrance. C.C. turned her head, the crest of a moan swallowed by a pillow. She tensed in his arms. Using his hold on her hair, he brought her head back toward him.

"Look at me," he whispered.

She slitted her eyes, a frustrated pinch to her mouth. "Stop holding back from me."

A raw laugh tore itself from his chest. Hanging his head, John focused on her eyes, drew back and followed orders. A soft, strangled cry made its way to her lips just before he licked inside her mouth. Her teeth caught his tongue hard enough to distract him from the wet muscles fluttering uncertainly around his cock. Not moving inside her, he gentled his kiss and stroked the tense line of her throat. Her pulse tripped beneath his fingertips. He lingered at that spot, caressing her pulse point in small circles until the rapid beat slowed and she returned his kiss. Soon, her shoulders relaxed. She moved beneath him, unfolding her arms from her breasts and splaying her fingers to grip his arms.

Reluctant to relinquish her mouth but needing to hear her voice, to know she wanted to continue, he lifted his head. Soft, shiny eyes met his and she slid her hands to his shoulders. He kissed the bend of her arm. "Tell me when it doesn't hurt."

"It doesn't hurt."

"Are you lying?"

"No." She closed her eyes again and shifted, angling low and curling her pelvis into his groin. Slippery heat rode along his cock, a shallow stroke, and a sigh rasped past her lips. "It's strange. Better than your mouth. Better than your fingers. I don't want anything else ever again."

She had other words for him, explicit descriptions of the sensation of fullness as his cock pressed into her, but he lost the thread of her praise. The soft, husky pitch of her voice coaxed something wild from inside him. He nipped the tender spot beneath her chin, closed his teeth around a jutting nipple, rocked back, pushed deep. Her voice lost distinction, a word becoming a gasp in the second syllable, and her fingers locked at the back of his neck.

John lost himself in her heat, in the rhythm she adopted so quickly. Her thighs rubbed along his ribs, silky and soft even as they wound around his back and squeezed. The flex and bump of her belly against his abdomen drove him farther into the wild place. He reacted to skin on skin, contracting muscles, rough hiccups of sound that told him words were no longer possible, and slid one hand beneath her ass. She rose at his touch, her back arched, and as he thrust from the new angle, a low, guttural cry rose in her throat.

In a distant part of his mind, the uncensored sound startled him, shook his view of her as a delicate thing. Deeper instincts reacted without logical processing and he reared back on his knees. The pale length of her torso arched, followed him as he straightened. He hooked his forearms beneath her thighs and folded her knees toward her breasts. The distant, sane voice warned him to stop, slow down, but her lips parted

and she clutched her breasts, pushed the pale mounds together, breathed that ragged moan as his cock butted harder, deeper.

"Give me your hand," he rasped, conscious of the tightening weight of his sac, the dull tingle rising toward the base of his skull.

C.C. blinked at him as if she didn't recognize his face, his words. He ground his hips between her legs and bore down deliberately. "I want you to touch yourself."

Her mouth rounded in an "O" of understanding. She released her breasts and insinuated one hand between them without hesitation. John closed his eyes and braced himself. Even knowing it would happen, he was ill-prepared for the abrupt contraction of muscle that answered the first press of her fingers. The tingle became a hum. Climax buzzed in his ears, underscoring the wet suck of her pussy as he withdrew completely.

"Look at me," she said, breaking through the toneless noise in his head.

John opened his eyes in time to see her lips part, her throat contract. He clenched his jaw and thrust hard, buried his full length. Her whole body jerked. Hot, wet muscle clasped around his cock and clung, gave only enough to accommodate the rush of semen she squeezed from his body.

C.C. continued to manipulate her clitoris even after he stilled. Her knees pressed into his ribs. Her thighs quivered. Breathing hard, John bent to kiss her throat. He flexed his hand, testing the softness of her ass, then worked his index finger between her cheeks until she stiffened and gasped. The second climax struck hard enough to loosen her hold on his ribs. Her knees fell away from him and her back straightened as she relaxed into the gentling pulse.

He rolled to his side and brought her with him, unwilling to relinquish their connection even though his cock had already begun to shrink inside her. She exhaled slowly and cuddled atop his chest, her fingers curled loosely below his nipple. John stroked her back, her hip, her trembling thigh. Strings of words filtered through his mind, *I shouldn't have*, followed by, *You deserve more*. He hadn't gone about it properly,

hadn't courted her the way he wanted to, long walks and increasingly warmer kisses until they had difficulty keeping their hands off one another.

Above them, the floorboards in the loft creaked. John stiffened. Resentment swelled in his chest as he realized he wouldn't even have this the way he wanted it, a warm and lazy aftermath.

Blowing resentment out in a sigh, he cupped her shoulder and kissed the crown of her hair. "I have to go," he murmured.

She rose on her elbow and met his eyes. "You love me."

Startled by the statement, he nodded.

C.C. frowned. "Then tell me."

John touched his thumb to the corner of her mouth and kissed her bottom lip. "I love you."

She sighed. "But you're still leaving."

His throat tightened. Unwilling to revisit the subject of Trinidad, he shifted her weight from his chest and sat. "Ethan and I have the second watch."

"That's not what I mean," she whispered, curling on her side atop the quilt.

John scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I know."

She didn't speak again as he dressed, and John didn't linger. Ethan's footfalls thumped on the back staircase as he slung his belt around his hips. Before he left, John glanced over his shoulder to find C.C. slipping from the bed, reaching for her chemise. Her breasts swayed as she bent. The sad fall of her mouth tempted him to stay. He left the room before he surrendered to the impulse.

Chapter Seven

Collette heard the low rumble of masculine voices as John and Ethan met down the hall. She tugged her chemise into place, knees wobbly and uncertain, and crossed the room to press her ear to the wall. They continued to talk but neither voice rose above conversational volume. She closed her eyes and sighed. What had she expected? That John would go to Ethan immediately and confess their actions? Foolish. He might not be willing to hide, but he would not deliberately create conflict. Not when he intended to leave come sunrise.

She straightened from the wall and pushed her hair behind her ears. Her body hummed, loose and alive with leftover sensation, but her chest was tight. They needed more time. Given time, she could have convinced John that land in Trinidad was unnecessary. That she would go with him if he truly believed he could not do without the opportunity.

Ownership was important to a man. A piece of land meant livelihood, security, future. Something a man could rely upon to feed a family and pass to a son.

A son.

She inhaled. Her fingers twitched toward her abdomen but she balled her hands into fists and refused to follow the thought. One problem before the next.

Seeking a distraction from her twinging sex, she gathered her dress and underskirts from the floor and hung them. As she shook the wrinkles from a fresh chemise, a corner of folded paper caught her eye.

The letter she'd written to grant John access to her funds. She retrieved the folded document and dressed quickly. The room lacked a mirror. She twisted her hair into a knot, hoping traces of John's lovemaking did not linger on her face, and left the room to find him.

The door from the kitchen remained barred, but the front entrance was unlocked. Collette ventured onto the porch and hugged herself. The night had grown chilly. Or her body was still flushed, too warm from John's touch.

A man's silhouette straightened at the northeast corner of the house, the far end of the porch. "You should sleep."

John. Tobacco smoke twined around her shoulders, drifting from the cigarette he held between his fingers. She creased the edge of her letter. "My banking errand. I wondered if you would take this with you."

He was silent so long she wondered whether he saw the transparency of her request. She bit her lip, considered taking it back. She was forcing his hand.

"You don't need me to do this for you," he finally said.

Collette looked away. "I do need you to tell me you'll come back."

"I'm going to talk with Wilson's widow and determine how best to handle her situation and mine." He extinguished the cigarette and crumbled the remains over the edge of the porch.

"I could go with you," she said quietly.

Low voices murmured from around the side of the house, gaining volume as the speakers approached. Collette glanced past John. Ethan and Mickey, who had worked the ranch as long as she could remember, both paused.

"Something wrong?" Ethan asked.

Collette shook her head but Ethan was watching John.

"Go back inside," Ethan said to her. "It's late."

John stiffened. Tension vibrated between them. Collette hugged herself tighter, pushed back her instinct to look to John for leave to protest Ethan's dismissal.

Mickey cleared his throat. "If you two are ready to take over, I'm going to get some sleep."

"We are," John answered.

Ethan grunted and broke eye contact.

Unsure whether she read the undercurrents correctly, Collette murmured a reluctant goodnight and withdrew. Only after she returned to her room did she realize she still had the bank letter and she hadn't convinced John to commit to a timely return.

* * * * *

"Where did you find her?" Ethan asked.

John scanned the dark army of pine trees that backed the house. "In Pueblo."

"Where in Pueblo?"

"At a faro table."

"She was just there and you walked up to her."

Since lack of elaboration wasn't a lie, John left Ethan's assessment at that and nodded. "I walked up to her."

"Why didn't she wire me herself?"

"Maybe you should ask her."

Ethan grunted. John rolled his shoulders, shrugging at the tension that stretched across his upper back. Patrolling in the middle of the night with Ethan was low on the list of things he wanted to be doing. His body was tired. He wanted his woman in his arms, wanted to alleviate her fears. The grounds near the house still showed no sign of trespass. Two sheep dogs curled in repose against an outbuilding, only lifting their heads when he and Ethan passed. Their lack of excitement reinforced Mickey's assessment that all was quiet.

"I don't like this," John said. "You're sure only three people are out at the storm cabin?"

"I counted them," Ethan said drily.

John rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe we're mistaken. Could be they split up along the way, before they got here."

"I'll talk to them in the morning, see what I can find out."

John nodded. As they turned and changed direction, light flickered from one of the windows at the house. A quick count added up to C.C.'s window. Her shadow passed the lit rectangle, indistinct behind the curtains. While he watched, she crossed the window a second time. Her arms lifted, elbows pointing toward the ceiling. He imagined she was unwinding her hair, readying herself for sleep, and the itch to hold her returned.

"When are you coming back?" Ethan asked.

An edge underscored his question. John looked away from the window. "After business is squared away."

"That the same answer you gave my sister?"

"You'd rather I gave her a different answer?" John stopped walking and faced Ethan. "I don't know what the situation is. It could be resolved the day I arrive. It could take months."

"Months would be acceptable," Ethan said, "if I hadn't heard the two of you together. Now that you've made that choice, you might not have months. What if she's with child?"

John's breath left him in a rush. He was unsurprised that Ethan knew of his indiscretion but the lack of confrontation unsettled him. He turned away from Ethan and regarded the pines silently. The possibility of a child had not entered his mind.

Hell. What if she did conceive?

Ethan broke the silence. "You don't need anything in Trinidad. The northwest valley —"

"Is hers, not mine."

"It's yours. Your name is on the deed now. Are you going to take her away from here to some dirt farm without the means to earn a livelihood?"

"I was thinking," John said tightly, "of assessing the situation before deciding it's worth time and effort. Instead of dismissing an opportunity due to inconvenience."

"My sister —"

"*My woman.*" John faced Ethan, interjecting the words with force, finally allowing himself to push the line of relationships and possession. "You can't have it both ways. Either she's yours or she's mine. Only one of us gets to decide how to take care of her. Push harder and I won't have any choice except to protect my authority in my household."

Ethan snarled but turned away. "If she ever has to come to mine for shelter, your claim is forfeit. You have a week to deal with your business before I start taking steps to protect *my sister's* future."

The sound of a hammer being drawn cut John off before his mouth got the better of him. He and Ethan turned at the same time. John's hand fell to his revolver. Ethan dropped into a crouch.

A man's voice came from the tree line. "Don't move. In the interest of *my* sister's future, I believe the three of us ought to have a talk."

"Show yourself," Ethan demanded.

"Show your hands."

John flexed his fists but reluctantly did as told. Glowering, he glanced at Ethan and muttered, "Did anybody get names from the three you apprehended?"

Ethan answered him with a curse. He straightened to his full height and showed his palms.

"Lewis," John said, "your sister's safe where she is."

"Safety and security are different matters." Lewis' form separated from the dark tree line. He approached slowly, the barrel of his weapon shifting back and forth, as if he couldn't decide whether to focus on Ethan or John. "You reneged on our deal. One

might even say you cheated. My cousin named a price. You paid. You can't reclaim the payment and keep the goods."

"If you want to take the matter to the law, we can discuss your trade in human flesh," Ethan said. "Which, in case you've missed events of the last decade, is *not* legal."

Lewis snorted. "Keep the land and the bitch. I don't want either. I do want the money she stole from my family. Call for her."

"She won't hear this far away," Ethan replied.

Money? John's brow creased. C.C. had been after him to withdraw funds on her behalf. Had she stolen it?

"Maybe she'll hear if I shoot one of you." Lewis swung his weapon toward Ethan. John shouted and Ethan dropped to the ground. The bullet exploded from the chamber with a thunderous crack that echoed off the nearby mountains.

Answering shouts sounded from the vicinity of the house. John lunged for Lewis, who fired a second shot. Pain tore through his side. He gritted his teeth, grabbed Lewis' forearm and twisted until something snapped and Lewis screamed. The shorter man's knees gave out. John shoved him to the ground and covered him, pinning Lewis' arm between their bodies.

Nearby, Ethan grunted. "John?"

"I have him. Get some rope."

Lewis squirmed and bucked, but John had at least a foot and fifty pounds on him. He ignored the pain that seared his side and shoved Lewis' face to the ground.

"Take his gun with you," John added.

Soon, Ethan's running footsteps receded. John shook his head to clear it. The bastard shot him. He tightened his fist in Lewis' hair and earned a muffled yelp of pain as he yanked back, lifting Lewis' face from the grass.

"We're not killers here," he growled in the other man's ear. "When he gets back, I'm tying you up and taking you to join the rest of your family. In the morning, you'll ride out of Pearl and you won't return. Am I clear?"

"Not without the money that bitch took," Lewis gasped.

"She is not a thief."

"She's not a Medford either, but she has Medford money."

John ground his teeth together. "Discussion's over."

"I'll take him," Ethan said, returning with a coil of rope. Mickey and another cowboy flanked him.

John rolled to his back. The cowboy took his place, landing upon Lewis' back knees first. They bound him quickly, jerked him to his feet and pushed him in the direction of the house and stables.

"What if he isn't lying?" John asked the dark sky.

Ethan's face appeared above him. He extended his hand. "If he isn't lying, she probably has a good reason."

"I'll ask her." John grasped Ethan's forearm and hauled himself upright, no longer able to ignore the fire burning through his blood. "Might have a bullet in my rib."

Ethan shouldered beneath his arm. John leaned heavily against him as they returned to the house.

"I love her," he said.

Ethan grunted. "I know. You waited so long I figured you should have a place to keep doing it."

"So you signed over C.C.'s land."

"It would've been yours one way or another. Either she never came back and you had it to yourself, or she did return and you shared it with her."

"She could have come back with a husband." John hated that possibility even as he uttered the words.

"Wouldn't have happened. You weren't the only one who couldn't keep feelings to yourself."

He had no reply to that.

The gunshot had roused both C.C. and Margaret. Margaret held a woven blanket around her shoulders. She shrugged free of it as soon as Ethan reached the foot of the stairs.

"Is that blood?" she asked.

Ignoring the question, John raised his head to meet C.C.'s eyes. "The money you have in that bank in Denver. Did you steal it?"

Her face paled. "I did not. My mother left it to me."

Ethan stiffened. "When?"

"Oh Lord." C.C.'s hand flew to her mouth and her gaze swung to Ethan. Horror widened her eyes. "Forgive me. I didn't mean—"

"When?" he repeated, aborting her apology.

"Last December." She sighed. "Before Christmas. I have a letter for you."

"We'll worry about that later," Margaret said. "John, did the bullet pass?"

"I don't know."

Ethan helped him up the stairs. Margaret circled behind them and prodded his back above his kidney.

"You have an exit wound," she said. "But you're bleeding heavily. Collette, you'll find old blankets upstairs beside the cradle. Bring them down."

C.C. left to do Margaret's bidding. John wanted to call her back, to touch her and soothe the shock and remorse from her face, but she moved too fast.

Collette delivered an armful of blankets to Margaret's makeshift sickroom and evacuated. The sight of John's blood made her stomach roll and compelled her

imagination down roads she did not want to follow. While Margaret bandaged him, she fled to hide in her bedroom.

Ethan followed her. "Was she happier?" he asked from the door.

Sighing, Collette scrubbed her hands over her face. "She... I don't know. She seemed content with her choice, if not happy with it. We all have letters, you, James and me. I haven't read mine yet. I'm not ready."

"James went to find you," Ethan said. "In France."

"Margaret told me he left. Perhaps we can hire a detective to find him," she suggested hopefully.

"Perhaps." Ethan shifted his weight. "I'm happy you came home."

Collette raised her head and met his eyes. "Even with such unpleasant news and upheaval."

He shrugged. "I missed you."

"And if I have to leave again?"

"You mean with John."

She nodded.

"I hope matters won't come to that." He half turned from her, staring down the hall. "If he does not do what he should by you, you will be welcome here. This is your home. He will not be welcome."

Rising, she crossed the room and wrapped her arms around his waist. Ethan stiffened, hesitated before he returned the hug.

"I like Margaret," she said against his shirt.

Ethan chuckled. "I like her too."

Reluctantly, she released him. Their embrace was not the enthusiastic, playful bear hug she recalled, but they had both left childhood behind. Ethan waited in the door until she retrieved the sealed letter addressed to him in her mother's handwriting. He frowned at it for long minutes before leaving the room.

"Everybody's so stoic around here," Collette muttered to herself.

From the front of the house, she heard Ethan's and Margaret's voices. Soon, their footsteps creaked on the stairs. If Margaret was returning to bed, she must have finished tending to John.

Feeling sheepish at her flight, Collette searched him out. She found him in the parlor, reclining on a dainty sofa. John's legs extended past the end and his chest was twisted at an odd angle so he could pillow his head on the arm.

"You look uncomfortable," she said quietly.

He opened his eyes and focused on her. "I've enjoyed softer beds."

She flushed, embarrassed that her mind immediately pictured him in her bed. "I could help you to the nursery."

"I'm fine." He straightened and swung his feet to the floor, wincing as he did. "Come sit with me."

Collette bit her lip. "You should rest. The night has been very long."

John frowned at her. "I'm not leaving in the morning. Mickey is going to ride to Trinidad and act on my behalf. You and I are going to decide what to do about the Medfords."

She narrowed her eyes on the swath of bandages wrapped around his ribs. "Lewis shot you. I'm going to shoot him."

John laughed then cut himself off with a curse. Amusement and pain crossed in his voice as he said, "I appreciate your interest in revenge on my behalf but it isn't necessary. Come here."

Sighing, she crossed the room and sat beside him. John gathered her against his uninjured side and kissed her neck. Her shiver had little to do with the chill in the room.

"I'm going to ask you," he murmured, clasping her wrist, "and I need the truth. Does Lewis have any claim on the money you have in that bank?"

Collette stiffened. She tried to pull away but John's grip tightened around her waist.

"Stop," he said. "I'm not calling you a liar. I need to know the circumstances. If he has real claim, he will return again and again until he's satisfied. Tell me so I can deal with him."

"Lewis' father died three years ago." Collette closed her eyes and sighed. "He left Mama a townhouse and a sum intended to support her lifestyle for ten years. When she passed, her properties came to me. I liquidated her assets and had them sent to Denver. I couldn't travel with so much money and I wanted to come home."

"When I told Lewis I intended to return to Colorado, he insisted upon coming with me. He said he wanted to see the West. Edward and Harrington wanted to pan for gold. But they have plenty." She opened her eyes and met John's. "Lewis' father wanted to take care of me and Mama. Their marriage may have been illegal, but they cared for one another and he wanted to continue seeing to her well-being after his death."

John's hold loosened. He released her wrist and brushed the backs of his fingers down her throat. Collette found herself softening, her chin lifting for his touch. He kissed the corner of her mouth and she turned to him, her lips parting for more.

"I want to provide for you," he said, touching his fist to her chin and urging her mouth closed. "Will you leave that money in the bank and trust me to do it?"

"You love me," she said, intent upon his eyes.

He nodded. "I do."

"Then I trust you with everything." Eager to seal her promise with a kiss, she leaned into him.

John spread his fingers between her breasts and held her off with a wry smile. "If you do that, I will take you to your bed again. I think it's only fair to warn you that Ethan heard the first time."

Heat suffused her face and she recoiled. "He *heard*? When I... Oh no."

John grinned. "You're not very good at being quiet."

Rising abruptly, she put half the room between them. "You'd better start providing for me soon or become accustomed to the sun on your rear end. I want to repeat that experience. Without an audience."

"Tomorrow," he promised in a tone that left her unsure whether he referred to provision or his willingness to brave the sun.

About the Author

Emily Ryan-Davis lives in Maryland with her loving husband and hateful guinea pig. On any given day, you can find her shopping (online or in stores), chatting/writing (the pair go hand in hand, can't have one without the other), knitting (or buying yarn) or mocking her husband's comic collection (while parenthetically wondering why comics haven't upgraded to the ebook age; imagine all the extra space she'd have). Occasionally she picks up her mandolin, but mostly she just ignores it. You won't find her paying attention to current events or the latest celebrity gossip because writing stories is her way of pretending it doesn't matter that she doesn't know how to use the television remote.

Emily's favorite to-read authors are Megan Hart, Terry Pratchett, JR Ward and Orson Scott Card. She loves sexy, magical, funny and intense stories, but especially enjoys immersing herself in the breathless intensity of a "with feeling" love scene. She can't pick a genre (decision-making issues!) so writes in whatever setting calls to her at any given time: contemporary paranormal, historical western, medieval Europe, Gothic France – if she can imagine a strong emotional attraction existing in a particular place or time, chances are she'll write the story.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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