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Ménage & More



Cindy Crane

Hannah's Gold



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HANNAH'S GOLD

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Cindy Crane

DEDICATION

For my husband, who loves a good Western.

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HANNAH'S GOLD

CINDY CRANE

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Chapter One

Luke parked his butt at an empty table by the window. Six foot two of solid muscle, he relaxed against the chair back and stretched out his long, lean legs. He welcomed the chair's solid support and the respite it gave him from the constant swaying of his horse. After weeks in his well-worn saddle, he'd begun to think they were fused together.

The window overlooked the dusty street. Wooden, one-story buildings flanked each side, with boardwalks that ran their full lengths. When the rains came, the street became a quagmire of mud, but, with no rain for a while, the heat shimmered above the hard-baked, bone-dry earth.

Dust swirled in clouds around the hooves of a horse and the wheels of a wagon that rattled past the saloon toward the general store. Luke watched with idle interest as the driver drew in the horse's reins and brought the vehicle to a stop.

He took another gulp of his beer, his third glass since walking into the saloon. The first had barely touched the sides of his throat. He'd been desperate to slake the dryness and the heat that clogged his mouth and tongue. The second had chased it down almost as quickly. But now, sitting back and relaxing, he decided to take his time with this one and really enjoy it as it tickled and refreshed every taste bud

and revived every flagging cell in his body. He'd dreamed of this moment for days, promising himself that it would be the first thing he'd do once he hit town. Then, when he'd finished, he'd join his brother upstairs with the two whores he'd already commandeered.

At the end of such a hard, long trail, all Jed had talked about, for the past two nights, was a soak in a hot tub, a bottle of whiskey, and fucking every whore in town. His wages were burning a hole in his pocket. His dick burned an even bigger one in his pants.

Well, he had his wish, Luke mused, thinking of him ensconced with the two black-haired beauties. He'd be smothering himself between their luscious tits as they scrubbed his back and soaped his balls. Months of living with a band of cowboys and a herd of cattle left a stink that clung to them like shit. Luke knew he smelt bad too but his first port of call was a beer. Then he'd join his little brother for a bit of fun.

But he wasn't rushing. Jed would be more than happy to keep the women satisfied. Luke rather liked the peace and quiet after the raucous goings-on in the big town that they'd left behind. After collecting their wages, they'd decided to travel west for another day, away from the overcrowded saloons and the well-used whores. At least here, there were enough to go around.

Lazily, Luke continued to watch the wagon. The dust had settled and a woman, dressed in men's clothing, climbed down from the seat. She tethered the reins to the hitching post. Even from this distance, he could see she was a fine-looking female with curves in all the right places. It was hard not to. After months of forced abstinence and male-only company, a tell-tale tingling stirred in his groin.

Her blonde hair hung loosely from beneath her cowboy hat. It fell over her shoulders and back in soft curls. And a pair of pert breasts strained at the brown-and-white-checkered shirt that she'd tucked into a pair of pants caught tightly at the waist. A leather belt pinched her waist nice and slim, and accentuated the womanly curve of her hips as well as her nicely rounded buttocks. They swayed evenly as she

stepped up onto the boardwalk. Luke instinctively licked his lips. There was something real sexy about a woman in pants. It covered everything yet displayed everything, too, including her long, shapely legs normally hidden beneath the folds of a skirt.

Someone must have had similar thoughts. As she pushed her way through the group of cowboys who congregated outside the general store, one spoke to her. It was obviously offensive. She raised her hand and slapped him hard across the cheek. The man's friends burst into laughter but, nevertheless, still continued to whistle and catcall after her as she strode straight-backed into the store. She turned and glared hard at them, spitting a curse.

Luke grinned. He couldn't hear what she said but, from where he sat, he could see she knew how to take care of herself. She looked a sassy one, all right. Just how he liked them. There was nothing finer than a good catfight as a prelude to a good, sweaty fuck. Warmth tingled into his groin. His dick, now thoroughly aware of its forced celibacy, quivered in expectation. Those two whores would get one hell of a seeing to once he joined his brother upstairs. But it wouldn't be just yet. He wanted to see what happened when the woman came out of the store.

It wasn't long, about twenty minutes. The men hadn't moved. In fact, another had joined them. In his long, black dress-coat, white shirt, and thin tie, he looked like no ordinary cowboy but someone of much more importance and most likely their boss. He chewed on a cheroot, and thin clouds of smoke curled alongside one cheek and up toward his black, wide-brimmed hat. Periodically, he stroked a thumb across his pencil-thin moustache to groom his already immaculate appearance. Unlike the other cowboys, his black leather boots virtually shone. After his short journey from the bank at the other side of the street, only a thin film of dust covered the toes and heels.

As the woman stepped from the store, she held a box of rations in her arms. The man in black stepped in front of her and blocked her

way. For a female, she stood tall but he towered over her by a good six inches, and as he spoke, he reached down a hand and cupped her brazenly between her legs. With her hands otherwise engaged, this time she couldn't dole out a slap. Instead, she twisted sharply to one side and shrugged him away. As she pushed past him, she nudged him hard with her shoulder. Her lips compressed into a grim line.

The cowboys laughed but the man in black turned and barked out an order to them that brought their mirth to an abrupt end. One of the men stepped out in front of her and blocked her way yet again. The woman glared. Her cheeks now burned fiery red. Luke could almost feel the heat from where he sat. But this time, the cowboy tipped his hat at her and took the box of rations from her arms. He turned and took them to the wagon. It looked like they offered her a bit of respect, after all.

But no, the man in black stepped closer to her, although this time from behind. He caught the woman's arms in a pair of firm hands and pulled her back against his strong, sturdy body. Pinning her tightly to him, he moved one hand to the junction between her thighs and the other to cup one of her delightful breasts. Finally, lowering his face toward her neck, he buried his mouth into her soft flesh. The way the woman struggled, she wasn't at all happy with his attention.

Luke frowned and not for the first time since watching the scenario play out before him. Why wasn't anyone going to her aid? Townsfolk had suddenly melted away, leaving the street deserted.

The man's cronies roared with laughter as they made obscene gestures and lewd remarks at their boss' antics with the woman. Luke didn't like what he saw. Rough as he was, even he had standards, and certainly a lot more respect for women. He'd never treat one the way that bastard behaved with this one.

His chair scraped loudly against the wooden floor and, as he leaped to his feet, it fell backward with a crash. It seemed that if no one else would help her, it was up to him to do something about it.

Chapter Two

Hannah cringed. Her flesh crawled with shame and anger. Hot, tobacco-laced breath fanned across her face as she struggled to free herself from the pair of hands that gripped her far too tightly, and far too intimately, for all to see.

“Now, now, Hannah,” her captor purred lasciviously against her skin. “I’m just sampling my juicy, little gold mine. After all, another few days and I’ll be taking all the interest I need out of it.” He twirled a finger against the nub of her sex.

Thank goodness a thick seam of denim covered her cunny. Anything that deadened the sensation of his touch was a bonus. Nevertheless, she still felt the pressure and it made her feel sick to think that he would soon be parting her naked thighs and taking his precious prize.

He squeezed his other hand hard around her breast and fingered the tip protruding through the cotton fabric. Her nipple contracted into a visible point at his rough handling.

Dammit. She hated the way Ethan McCabe foisted his unwanted attentions upon her. He was an evil bastard. No way would she ever react willingly to his disgusting pawing.

“Now that feels promising,” he whispered lewdly in her ear, as he tweaked it a little more. “I can see we’re going to have lots of fun together.”

She tried pushing him away again.

“Sampling wasn’t part of the deal,” she said evenly, between clenched teeth. Despite the storm of hatred and fear ravaging her

insides, she prided herself on her determination to keep her frazzled nerves under strict control. “You’re forgetting there are four more days before the deal becomes a reality. That’s four more days for Jacob to get back and pay you the money you cheated out of his father.”

But her clear-cut words sounded more confident than she felt speaking them. Gone for nearly twelve months, each day that now approached the one year McCabe had given Jacob to repay the debt, crept agonizingly closer. She’d managed to keep him at arm’s length until now, but the past few weeks had brought more frequent jibes and taunts about her impending future with him and of all the disgusting things he would do with her once she became his possession. It made her skin crawl.

McCabe’s lips still hovered too close to her ear. He laughed softly, sending shivers of dread down her spine.

“That spineless *fiancé* of yours isn’t coming back,” he mocked and spoke the word slowly and derisively. He enunciated every syllable, *fee-on-say*. It indicated his contempt of the man. “Admit it, Hannah. He’s abandoned you to your fate. He knows I’m going to have his land and his woman. He isn’t even man enough to fight me for you.”

Angered by McCabe’s disrespect for Jacob, Hannah struggled afresh as she tried to wriggle from his grasp. Jacob would never abandon her. He’d promised faithfully he’d be back. They might not yet be officially betrothed, but when he did return, they would be.

But Hannah’s lithe, struggling form only made McCabe squeeze her all the more tightly to him, pressing her bottom against the hard ridge at the junction of his pants. She could feel the lust on him. It made her blood run cold.

“Bastard,” she snarled at him. “Get off me.”

“Now, now, Hannah,” he repeated. “Calm that temper of yours. I like my women to do as they’re told. That way they don’t get hurt.”

Hannah knew her feisty ways aroused him but she couldn't help herself or her temper. She hated the man.

His hand traced a path from her breast to the V of her shirt. Poking his fingers inside the fabric, he stroked the soft, bare flesh, and sampled the delights of her silky smooth skin until he reached a dimpled peak. He rolled her unprotected nipple between a finger and thumb.

"Now, what have we here?" he leered. His mouth felt hot against her ear and cheek. "I'm really looking forward to getting to know these little playthings a lot better. What say we have a little peek, eh boys?" He raised his eyes to meet the eager ones of his men. They nodded, laughing and jeering in eager anticipation. "After all, once I've taken my dues out of your pretty little cunt, I'll be selling it to *anyone* with a dollar to spare." He squeezed her sex hard again. "Oh yes, Hannah, I'm going to really enjoy shafting *your* little gold mine." He laughed crudely at his sick joke.

Anger and disgust boiled like a cauldron deep in the pit of Hannah's stomach. It overrode any shame and humiliation caused by the imminent exposure of her breasts for all McCabe's men, and the rest of the lily-livered townsfolk, to see. She relaxed, just for a moment, while McCabe loosened his hold on her in readiness to tear open the front of her shirt. Then, raising her knee, she brought up her foot and stamped her heel hard onto the top of his boot. She ground it viciously into the tiny bones of his upper foot.

His strong leather boots offered some protection but the shock and suddenness of her action made him release his grip on her altogether. It gave her enough time to twist out of his arms, turn, and kick him hard in the groin. Thank goodness she'd decided to wear pants. She could never have moved so swiftly in her skirt.

With a strangled *Oof* of pain, McCabe doubled over, and, tightly clenching her fist, Hannah landed a strong right hook to his mouth and jaw. Pain seared through the bones of her hand but the sight of

McCabe staggering backward, clutching both his groin and his mouth, made it worthwhile.

His men sniggered all the more at this fresh entertainment. She was a spirited little mare.

But McCabe wasn't amused.

"You bitch," he snarled as he licked the trickle of blood oozing from his smarting mouth. "Don't think I'll forget that." He paused for a second. "In fact, you can come back with me now and I'll show you what pain really is. Get her, boys."

Rough hands grabbed each of her upper arms.

Hannah cursed the townsfolk for hiding behind their curtains and letting McCabe run roughshod over them all. If they'd all stood up to him in the first place, he wouldn't be here ruining everyone's lives. She was only too aware that no one would fight in her corner but she wasn't going to go down their route and succumb so easily. She kicked out. Her boots caught the shins of the two cowboys holding on to her.

She kicked again, hard.

"Shit!"

"Bitch!"

Spitting profanities, they released her, hopping around for a moment but, just before she reached her wagon, they caught her roughly once more. However, she wasn't going to give up that easily. She spat and struggled like a mountain cat caught in a trap.

"Leave the lady alone!" A deep voice rumbled over the noise of the mayhem going on in the street.

The hands hovering over Hannah's arms froze. Taking advantage, she struggled free and hopped up onto the seat of her wagon. She shot a quick glance in the direction of her unexpected rescuer, wondering in surprise who had actually found the guts to come to her aid.

Her tormentors too, stopped to appraise the cowboy standing boldly before them. A newcomer, covered in trail dust, he stunk to high heaven.

He was taller than average, and dirt streaked his fair hair, while several days' beard growth covered his face. He stood arrogantly, legs apart, with one hand resting on his gun belt. He presented a daunting figure as he squinted in the bright sunshine. His blue eyes narrowed into mere slits in his weather-beaten face, causing tiny creases to form at the corners.

"And what business is it of yours?" McCabe asked. Finally recovered from Hannah's well-placed kick in the balls, he could now stand tall once more and was able to look the stranger straight in the eye.

"The lady doesn't like the attention, so I'm making it my business," the man drawled softly. His quiet authority showed that he meant business, even though he was outnumbered five to one. A frisson of hope traveled up Hannah's spine.

A smile slithered across McCabe's mouth but it never reached his eyes. He too spoke with quiet intimidation.

"We don't take too kindly to strangers meddling in our affairs 'round here. I suggest you saddle up and ride out of here."

"Or what?" the cowboy goaded. He still spoke with a cool, even tone, while his unwavering eyes held McCabe's, matching his threat.

McCabe's men watched the stand-off. Hannah could sense their eagerness as they shuffled their feet in the dirt. She knew what was coming. She'd seen it often enough before with others. Their boss relinquished his gaze first and gave his head a slight nod. However, before she had chance to call out a warning, McCabe's men fell upon the stranger with their fists and feet.

Chapter Three

Jed lay spread-eagled on the bed. He puffed out his cheeks and let his breath go in one long, slow blow. Well and truly fucked, his body felt like a puddle of jelly. The two whores had serviced him well.

He'd buried himself deep into their warm, wet cunnies, feasted on their ample bosoms, and suckled on their delightful nipples. He'd made them squeal and *ooh* and *aah* in rapturous orgasm. Such was his arrogance, he knew they'd be fighting for his services next time he was in town. They might be whores but they were still women. It was part of his pleasure to make them come too.

His cock lay limp and spent. It flopped to one side, nestling in the bush of dark, curly hair. It was the only hair on his body not bleached by the sun. One dark-haired, Irish hussy, with soft brown eyes and a melodious, sweet lilt to her voice, still played with it. Her tongue flicked its end, licking off a drop of cum and smearing it across her ruby red lips. She held his gaze. Her eyes overflowed with clear, wanton debauchery, but he needed a few minutes more before he would be ready again. He decided he might come in their mouths next time and, if willing, in their asses later. He liked it like that. It felt so tight, like taking a full-blown virgin. At least, that's what he imagined. He'd not found many willing virgins on his travels. Virgins needed time and wooing, and living life on the trail didn't allow time for relationships such as that.

He wondered what kept his brother. If he didn't hurry his ass up here soon, the poor cows would be worn out. After so many months without hot, rampant sex, his libido had gone into overdrive. His cock, already twitching into life again, sensed fresh stirrings of arousal knocking at its door.

The other whore made little mewling noises as he fingered her slick, wet cunny and played with the little pink button that winked at him from beneath her thick, dark bush. A few more seconds and he'd be rolling her under him and ramming his hard cock inside her once more.

Suddenly, a noise from the street seared the haze that clouded his brain. His eyes shot open and he listened. Always on the brink of trouble himself, he recognized the sound. Someone was having themselves a scrap. He brushed the girls aside and jumped from the bed. He stuck his head through the open window.

Yep. He was right. Down the street, right in front of the general store, a fight was going on. The odds didn't look too good either. One against five.

Fuck! He suddenly recognized the one. Luke.

"Shit, bro," he spat. "What the fuck are you playing at?"

He grabbed his pants and boots and hopped around from one foot to the other as he pulled them on. Finally decent, he leapt through the window onto the upper veranda. He poked his head back through the window just long enough to wink and say, "Won't be long, ladies. Keep those nice, juicy cunts hot and ready." After that, he gate-vaulted over the rail and landed in an untidy heap in the back of a wagon tethered to a horse just below.

The horse whinnied and harrumphed at the unexpected disturbance. It pranced from side to side in distress as Jed jumped out of its wagon and onto the street. He paused for a second to calm and pat it.

"Steady there, boy," he puffed. His chest heaved with the sudden, unexpected exercise following his near-comatose, post-fuck haze. Then, still fastening his belt, he scooted up the street toward the action.

Luke wasn't doing so badly. He'd already floored two of his attackers and now fended off the other three. Jed leapt into the fray,

grabbing one by the scruff of his neck. He turned him and planted his fist smack in the middle of his face. Blood squirted from the cowboy's nose. He hopped around squealing, livid with the unexpected pain.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! You've broken it!" he screamed.

But Jed ignored his pathetic squeals and followed up his punch with a hefty kick to his backside and sent the man sprawling. Spinning on his heel, he turned back to view Luke. He still held his own.

Next, as the other two cowboys clambered back onto their feet, they threw punches in Jed's direction as well. He jarred up an elbow and cracked the front teeth of the cowboy behind. Without stopping to think, he spun round again and dealt him a swift kick in the bollocks. The cowboy doubled over and sank to the ground, whining as he clasped his bruised balls. At least that one no longer seemed in the mood to continue fighting.

Jed felt a dirty, sweaty paw clamp down on his bare shoulder. Before he had chance to react, the cowboy turned Jed's face into his closed fist. Jed staggered backward with arms outstretched to help him retain his balance. He saw stars. With a huge roar, he straightened and charged forward, grasping his attacker round the waist. They fell to the ground, where Jed proceeded to pummel the slimy bastard's face with his fists. Grunts and groans, accompanied by dull thuds and cracks of knuckles against bones, filled the air.

A single gunshot echoed around the deserted street. The sound bounced from one building to another. Everyone stopped and looked in the direction of the perpetrator of the sound.

Chapter Four

Hannah stood in the wagon. Her rifle pointed skyward.

“That’s enough,” she shouted. Two fiery circles stained her cheeks but her voice remained steady and commanding. She turned to face McCabe’s men.

“Get the hell out of here.”

Quickly, she rounded on McCabe himself and pointed the rifle directly at his face. Having watched the whole sorry scene that his men had just enacted with the two strangers, he didn’t look best pleased.

“As for you,” she snarled. “Come near me again and I’ll be using this on you.”

She lowered the barrel until it pointed directly at his chest. Her eyes narrowed in stark warning. She wouldn’t be messed with until the time came for her to pay her debt. She knew she’d caused him nothing but trouble ever since she’d come into town. She’d make sure it stayed that way. She’d continue to remain tantalizingly out of reach until Jacob returned. It was the only way her plan would work.

McCabe’s lips curled in a mocking sneer. His thoughts were clearly written on his face. Yes, he’d really enjoy showing this little missy a thing or two. He took a long, lazy drag on his cheroot and matched her steely stare. He tossed the butt into the dusty street as he turned to his men once more.

“Come on, you sorry bunch of fuckers. Outnumbered by two strangers and a woman, you should be ashamed of yourselves.” His smirk morphed into an evil leer. “As for you, Hannah.”

The cold threat in his unfinished sentence sent an icy chill coursing through Hannah's veins but she remained resolute. She might be quaking inside but she didn't lower her rifle until they'd all gone. She inhaled slowly and laid the weapon beneath the seat of her wagon.

She sat down heavily. She needed to still her trembling. Her legs threatened to give way. She took another deep breath and forced a smile in the direction of the two strangers who'd come to her aid. She wished she felt as calm as her exterior portrayed. Her insides churned in a jangle of nerves, and her heart thudded like a drum against her ribcage.

"Thanks," she finally said. "I'm grateful for your assistance."

One of the cowboys stretched out a friendly hand. "You're welcome, ma'am. I'm Luke Daniels and this here's my little brother, Jeremiah."

"Hannah," Hannah replied, as she reached out and lost her small hand in his huge, callused paw. It felt so tiny in his, and after being strong for so long, it made her suddenly feel very vulnerable. Her heart gave a little flutter and she was glad that she'd sat down. Her legs had gone all wobbly again. He had a kindly smile and she'd not seen too many of those in a while. She tore her eyes away from his and turned her attention instead to his raw, bleeding knuckles.

"You're hurt," she said in alarm.

"Aw, it's nothing," he shrugged. "A bit of water will soon put it right."

Jed pushed Luke aside and took her hand next. "Ma'am," he said by way of introduction.

"Jeremiah," she smiled, "thank you, too, for your kindness."

"Jed," he corrected. His wide, beaming smile matched that of his brother's.

Hannah was immediately struck by the similarity between the two men, even though there were a few differences in height and coloring. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, Luke was a little shorter than his brother,

who stood another good two inches over him. Jed was also a little darker haired. Nevertheless, both struck her as fine figures of men. As he squeezed her hand, her eyes, drawn inexplicably to Jed's strapping physique, roamed helplessly for a moment over his damp torso. Quickly, she lowered them again. Suddenly, she felt a little shy. She wasn't used to half-naked men touching her, even though he only shook her hand. Letting her eyes stray over a firm, broad chest and hard, muscular shoulders, invited a hunger she wasn't comfortable with.

She withdrew her fingers, sliding them slowly from his firm, yet gentle grip. However, the tingle that followed crept sensuously up her arm and across her skin. Such a long time since she'd experienced the gentle touch of a man, the contact startled her. She sucked in a huge gulp of air to steady herself.

"Have you just gotten into town?" she asked politely. She needed to distract her thoughts, away from strong hands and fine-looking bodies.

"A few hours ago," Luke explained. "We finished a cattle drive a couple of days back. But the town we arrived in was too busy. We decided to come down here for the peace and quiet." He chuckled. "Don't look like we found much of that."

"I'm sorry," Hannah apologized. "The townsfolk here are good people. It's McCabe and his men who are the trouble." She gave a little smile. "Look, you must let me cook you supper as way of thanks for seeing them off." The men looked as though they might appreciate a good home-cooked meal.

Luke tipped his hat. He'd retrieved it from where it lay in the dust while Jed introduced himself. He smiled kindly at her.

"That's mighty neighborly of you, ma'am."

Jed folded his arms across his bare chest. He drew himself up to his full height and winked at her, as he turned to his brother and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“I suggest you get yourself a shave, a bath, and a change of clothes first, bro,” he said. “We don’t want the lady passing out from your stink.”

Hannah silently agreed. Luke’s scent was more than a little ripe. He’d obviously not had the benefit of a bath as Jed had appeared to have done. They both laughed as he made a deliberate show of sniffing his armpits.

“He’s right there, ma’am. I’m sorry if the smell is offensive. The call of a beer was too much to resist before all that soap and palaver.”

Hannah nodded in understanding but asked impulsively, “Why not take a bath at my place? There’s hot water and I can easily find a change of clothes and a razor for you. I’ll even wash those clothes of yours. It’s the least I can do after your kindness.”

Luke tipped his hat again.

“Why, thank you, ma’am. I might just take you up on that.”

“Good. That’s settled then.” She smiled. “And please, call me Hannah.” She paused for a moment. She had an idea. She didn’t want McCabe and his men following her. That time would come soon enough. “I’m heading home now. Would you like to come back with me now?”

She glanced quickly from one to the other. Relief flooded her bones as Luke nodded in agreement. However, Jed declined to join her immediately. Instead, he looked down at the thin film of dust that now covered his sweaty torso. He ran his palm over his bearded chin and said, “I had to jump from my bath to come give you a helping hand. My shave’s still waiting. I’ll go and finish off. No point in wasting all that nice hot water.” He gave a quick, backward toss of his head in the direction of the saloon. At the same time, he slipped Hannah an easy smile.

The mischievous twinkle in his eyes also told her it was more than just his toilette he was eager to get back to. Knowing exactly what went on in the upper rooms of the building, her heart gave a little flutter. Maybe it was a good thing he had declined her offer. Having

lived among cowboys for a while, she knew some men liked nothing more than a good fight to get their juices flowing. Suddenly Jed looked extremely horny. A tingle snaked its way along her spine. She'd not been with a man in a while, so, maybe it was better this way. At least Luke's stink was enough to divert her sudden, and unwanted, wayward thoughts.

Chapter Five

Hannah poured the last of the water into the tin bath. Long tendrils of steam curled and meandered their way toward the ceiling. Luke had carried the bath into her bedroom.

She'd felt a little shy at first, letting him into her private abode, but she'd insisted he would have more privacy there. But it wasn't just his privacy she now worried about. He'd ridden by her side all the way back to the ranch, and she'd been a little too conscious of his strong thighs straining at the fabric of his pants as he sat astride his horse. He'd controlled its movement, here and there, with only a slight nudge of his knees and spurs.

When she'd lived back East, Hannah had done lots of riding. It was her passion. As she'd gotten older, she began to notice how sensual the activity could be, especially watching manly legs control the beasts. She'd always hated the ridiculous side-saddle her mother had insisted she ride and, when out on her own, she too would sit astride the animal's back, like a man, and feel the power of the creature between her legs.

Consequently, by the time she got back to the ranch, more than the afternoon heat coursed through her veins.

Hannah had always been a sensual creature. With Jacob gone so long, she missed the touch of his hands on her body and the squirming pleasure he could give her. The way the cowboy tilted his hat and spoke kindly to her reminded her of what she'd lost. He held his reins so easily while his hips swayed with the natural rhythm of the horse. It combined to stir up feelings from which she'd long distanced herself.

She now started to think that maybe it was a bad idea, after all, to have invited him back here. The last thing she wanted to do was watch him bathe in the kitchen, the place where Jacob usually put his bath. Scrubbing the stench of cows and sweat from his lean, rangy body, might be more than she could stand, but it wasn't the smell that made her uneasy. She'd be busy preparing supper and she didn't want any distractions. In her mind she'd promised herself to Jacob. After all, they had been lovers, if only for a brief time before he left. It was the only way she'd got through these past months, even though everyone else thought he would not be coming back.

She found Jacob's razor and shaving brush as well as a clean shirt and fresh pants. She'd washed Jacob's clothes often enough while acting as housekeeper for him and his father. Luke was about his size. She'd put his clothes out with tomorrow's laundry. She also gave him her small vanity mirror to help with his shaving. It was the least she could do. No one else had come to her aid. These days, even the town sheriff kept well away. Ethan McCabe now upheld the law, if it could be called that, along with everything else he set his sights on.

She busied herself with supper. She pulled up a few vegetables from her little garden and chopped them into the stew. It bubbled away nicely over the fire. It smelt good and she expected the two men hadn't eaten tasty, home-cooked food for a while. After her earlier misgivings, it started to feel good cooking for someone other than just herself again. The two cowboys looked as though they had lusty appetites.

She could hear Luke humming some little ditty while he bathed. As Hannah passed by the door, it was slightly ajar. She couldn't resist sneaking a little peek. He had the mirror wedged between his knees. To cram his tall frame into the bath, they bent at an acute angle. She smiled as she saw him scrape a thick layer of soap and hard bristles from his chin and upper lip. It seemed an age since she last watched a man perform such an intimate act of his toilette.

Her heart ached afresh. How she missed Jacob with his warm touch and soft timbre to his voice. The man sitting in her bath reminded her so much of him. Even during the fight, he'd remained cool and calm, totally unfazed by McCabe's threats.

She almost sighed as Luke removed the last vestiges of his beard and splashed water over his freshly shaven cheeks. Rubbing his fingers around his chin and mouth, he did away with all final traces of soap. His face, now smooth and shiny, struck Hannah as being most handsome, despite the weather-beaten tan and fine lines crinkling the corners of his eyes. She idly wondered if the rest of his body looked as fine. Warmth trickled into her groin and her heart gave an unexpected lurch. It startled her back to reality, shocked by her wicked thoughts.

Hot moisture began to leak from the cleft between her legs and a needy ache gnawed at her insides. Unexpectedly, she felt hot and reckless. The way she used to when Jacob's hands and tongue traced delightful pathways of bliss over her delicate skin. Her lips suddenly went dry. She flicked her tongue across them to wet them. She felt as though she might be running a fever.

As Luke reached across for the towel to wipe his face, he spluttered a curse. Hannah jumped and scuttled back to the kitchen table, putting as much distance as she could between her and the door. Had he seen her? She hoped not.

"Hannah," Luke called.

She stood stock-still for a moment. Her heart thudded way too fast and she found it hard to speak immediately. She felt a little light-headed. She sucked in a smidgeon of air.

"Yes?" she called back, hoping he couldn't hear the tremor in her voice.

"Sorry to bother you but have you another towel? I've just dropped this one in the bath. It's soaked."

Thank God. Her body relaxed in relief. He hadn't spotted her. But her heart still flipped and pounded fiercely against her chest wall.

She'd have to go back in there and this time with Luke sitting in the bath, as naked as the day he was born—except, of course, he'd not been born looking like *that*. A deep flush crept from her chest all the way up to her cheeks.

A naked man, about whom she just had lewd, unladylike thoughts. She could barely breathe.

"Just a moment. I'll bring one," she said, clutching the edge of the table to steady her shaky legs. She needed a moment or two to gather her wits. The last thing she wanted was for Luke to step out of the water and come looking for one himself, *still naked*.

Squaring her shoulders, she nudged the door open a little and stepped inside her bedroom. Luke had submerged his head under the water as he rinsed soap from his hair. His knees still bent sharply and his genitals floated just beneath the water level. The layer of soapy scum that lay on top of the water barely covered them. Hannah tried not to stare but stare she did. Rosy pink, their size wasn't lost on her. Semi-erect, his cock hung in the water, like a snake hiding in a dark bush of wet curls, ready for action. Involuntarily, her tongue flicked across her hot, dry lips. He looked all male.

The ache, now gnawing in the depths of her belly, doubled. Blood surged hotly through her veins, and her upper thighs crawled with tiny prickles of heat and yearning. She needed to distract herself quickly. Her breasts now tingled and swelled in desperate need. She craved a pair of strong, callused hands to fondle and cradle them, while a warm, wet mouth suckled and teased the sensitive tips already contracting into hard points. Shameful, she tore her eyes away. She shouldn't be thinking such things. Quickly, she dropped the towel on the wooden rocker by the bath.

It creaked and moved gently on its rockers. It reminded her, almost mocked her, that Jacob's mother had sat in that rocker when she'd nursed him as a baby. They'd brought it with them, when she and his father had travelled from back East to settle here and seek a

better life. One day, Jacob once told her, he hoped his wife would suckle their babies there, too, and a primitive urge tugged at her womanhood. It fanned upward and outward from her core until a throbbing need enveloped her whole body. Her nerve endings prickled with longing, and her face burned as Luke's manly tackle drew her eyes once more, knowing what the results of coupling with such a man might bring.

Luke's head surged up from the water. He wiped the soap from his eyes. Hastily, Hannah stooped to retrieve his dirty laundry. She needed to divert her wayward thoughts, as well as her face, before he had chance to see the blush staining her cheeks.

"I'll take these outside and put them to soak," she mumbled breathlessly.

Unable to meet his eyes, she was afraid he might see the lust written clearly in hers. He might even offer to do something about it. Since Jacob left, she'd had enough of those sorts of offers from McCabe and his men. But never, until now, did she think she might want to take anyone up on them. Try as she might, she still wanted to believe that Jacob would be coming back.

She scurried from the room and dropped his clothes into a tub of cold water out back. Returning to the kitchen, she gave the stew a vigorous stir. Puffing out her cheeks, she let out a long, slow breath. Hot and sweaty, and very mindful it wasn't just the weather causing her physical state, her head was all over the place.

She unfastened another button on her blouse and wiped away the thin sheen of perspiration covering her neck and corsage with her fingers and palm. Thank goodness she'd changed out of her pants into a skirt when she got back. She lifted the front and wafted it vigorously in a futile attempt to cool herself down. Try as she might, she still couldn't ignore the sound of splashing water in her bedroom. Unable to control herself, she went back to the open door.

Her heart pumped mercilessly against her ribcage. Her breath shortened. Sucking in tight, ragged gasps, her body throbbed as the

blood fizzed hotly through her veins. Instinctively, her hand slid to the V of her blouse. She unfastened yet another button.

Slipping her left hand inside the garment, she could feel the heat emanating from her skin as her flesh tingled and burned. Gently, she began to stroke the soft flesh of her right breast. She needed to do *something* to alleviate the ever-increasing tension threatening to swamp her.

Lightly, her fingers found the hard peak of her tightly contracted nipple. Teasing and circling it gently, tiny sparks of electricity shot through her body. They massed in a cacophony of nerve endings deep inside the core of her womanhood. Their intensity stirred a jumble of emotions and needs. She gasped and gave a little moan. Everything faded around her, receding swiftly to the outer reaches of the room until nothing was left in it but her pulsating body, eager for release from the sweet agony that now swept through her like a huge tidal wave. Desperate for release, she closed her eyes.

She caught the hem of her skirt. Barely conscious of her short, panting intakes of air, she scrunched the material slowly between the fingers of her right hand and lifted it. She'd not bothered with bloomers. She often went bare-assed when the weather became warm, saving them just for Sundays, when she went to church, or when she rode into town. She was glad now that she hadn't.

She licked her lips and opened her eyes. Peeking through the doorway, she could now see Luke's well-formed masculine body reclining against the back of the bath. His big frame looked cramped in that tiny bath with his eyes shut and his knees still bent and spread apart. However, Hannah was now more interested in admiring his rugged looks and taut, lean body. Sure and strong, with a wide, broad chest and flat, washboard stomach, it bore testament to the hard, physical life he led. His thighs, clear of the water, were firm and powerful. She lingered, for a moment, imagining how delicious it would feel to have them pry hers apart. Her sex swelled and she laid

her head against the wall once more. Tilting her head back and closing her eyes, she tweaked a tingling, sensitive nipple.

A wonderful spasm coursed down to her womb, and the hand that held her skirt, now slid to her hot, wet center. Gently, her fingers started to rub its slick folds and twirl the golden curls at the junction of her thighs. She squirmed against the wall, as she rotated the tip of her finger around the swollen nub of her quivering clit. She began to tremble.

Oh, God! It had been far too long since she'd felt a hard cock inside her, and drowned in that wonderful, shameless feeling as if it would split her body in two. How she craved to feel a man's rough flesh lying against her flesh again, rocking together and bringing each other to the brink of sweet oblivion. She wanted to fall over the edge into that wonderful abyss, where nothing mattered, except pure physical gratification while he spurted hot juices deep inside her

Oh, God—where she nearly was now.

She panted. Her breath came raw, short, and fast at the back of her throat. She was barely aware of the warmth that suddenly tickled the length of her exposed neck as she arched against the wall, ready to give her whole being over to that glorious wave of pure bliss. Shivers of excruciating delight slithered tantalizingly across her shoulders and down her spine until they reached the crevice between her buttocks. For a moment, they teased and circled around her butt hole before finally creeping into her now dripping cunny. She moaned softly, welcoming the hot, pouring tide rolling in over the sexual heat that she'd put on one side for so long.

Just as the dam was about to burst, a low, seductive, gravelly voice purred against her ear. It cleaved its way through the fog clouding her brain.

"Do you need any help with that?"

Chapter Six

Hannah's eyes shot open. Wide-eyed, she stared at Jed's grinning face. Her jaw dropped and her knees went weak. A little cry caught in her throat. She quickly dropped her skirt. A cool breeze fanned across her legs as it fell to the floor.

Jed caught her now empty hand in his. He lifted it slowly to his nostrils and inhaled deeply. His eyes darkened, and, lightly, he rested his freshly-shaven cheek against hers. At the same time, he guided her face toward the crack in the door once more. He invited her to sneak another peek at his brother who continued his bath, unaware of the storm he had just created.

"*Hmm...*He's a good-looking guy, my brother," Jed whispered softly against the burning apple of her cheek. "I guess if I was in your position, I'd be fucking myself, too, and fantasizing about him making me come. Although, you only needed to ask. I'm sure he'd have obliged. He's too much of a gentleman not to help out a lady in distress."

He steered her hand, still in his, back to her skirt. Slowly, with his fingertips, he crumpled it up once more. Her thighs exposed yet again, he pressed her fingers against her wet slit.

"I'm sorry, I've put you off your stroke," he apologized.

Powerless to move, the mischievous twinkle in Jed's eyes mesmerized her. Yet, despite the shock of finding herself with an unexpected voyeur, the ache hadn't lessened. In fact, it had gotten a whole lot worse. Jed's huge frame, towering over hers, caused her bones to melt into a puddle of jelly. She thought Luke was all man but

his brother matched him bone for bone. Nevertheless, she couldn't bring herself to perform such an intimate act under such a watchful gaze. She felt a little shy.

Yet, as he shushed her softly and backed her away from the bedroom and Luke's ablutions, into the kitchen, she let him. He turned her to face him and slowly unfastened the rest of her buttons. She gave a little whimper, and her breath shortened as he pushed her shirt from her shoulders. Then, as he caught his thumbs in the straps of her camisole, he slid them over her upper arms and down to her waist. It allowed her breasts to spill free. They rose and fell rapidly with each short breath. At the same time, their tips contracted into dimpled peaks. She heard Jed catch his breath too. She raised her eyes to his and she parted her lips, inviting his kisses. However, instead, he captured her tiny hands in his and guided them to her breasts, encouraging her to cup them herself.

"Don't be shy," he said softly. "You were doing okay before I arrived. Run your thumbs over the tips."

Entranced by his smile, she obeyed. She gave a short gasp at the speed with which the needy thread of desire shot to her womb. Her nipples hardened further into proud, protruding points of ecstasy.

"That's it," he praised, as teacher to pupil. "Now, keep doing that, and I'll do the rest."

He spanned her waist in a gentle grasp and turned her around until she faced away from him. Snaking his hands up either side of her body, she felt his fingers entwine through her hair. Stroking the curls from out of her neck, he lowered his lips to her nape. He barely touched her, catching only the tops of the fine hairs. They quivered to attention, like a platoon of soldiers on sentry duty, and her skin shivered with goose bumps. A little moan caught in her throat. She couldn't stop herself, or him. She loved every touch and stroke Jed made as his lips trailed a path of tiny kisses down her naked back, following the curve of her spine. His hands, resting on her hips, slowly scrunched up her skirt, exposing her smooth, long legs to the

warm air, and baring her delicious, round bottom to his admiring gaze.

Involuntarily, her pelvis rotated, her buttocks momentarily clenched as she squeezed her groin in a desperate bid to control the hopeless betrayal of her body. Utterly exposed, and much to her consternation, she adored every depraved moment of it.

Jed bent her over the table. The front of her skirt now trailed the floor while the back crumpled across the back of her waist. A gush of hot liquid streamed from her steamy slit as he nudged her legs wider apart. Her pussy throbbed. Her body vanished in a tangle of passion and yearning as her hormones surged out of control. She trembled.

“A-are you going to fuck me?” she stuttered, unable to control the tremor in her voice. The way he touched her was wildly exciting, yet extremely disturbing. Given over to a lust so dangerous and so powerful, all consequence of any coupling became lost in a haze of basic, primitive need for fulfillment. First his brother, now him, her body felt as though it no longer belonged to her.

Jed leaned over her and laid his cheek gently against hers once more.

“Shh,” he soothed. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about that. This is about you, not me. I’m only helping you to get some satisfaction. You don’t need me to fuck you. You just need a helping hand, that’s all. You look like you need it.”

Hannah’s stomach squelched. A host of butterflies jumped around her insides, and a feathery pulse fluttered in her throat. She was in sweet agony and close to seeing stars. Her whole body, engulfed in greedy yearning, abandoned itself to the sheer wanton pleasure Jed offered her. Her hands, trapped between her soft breasts and the hard wood of the table, tingled as the weight of his body pressed against hers.

The hard ridge in his denim pants pried open the valley between her buttocks, and her cunny throbbed and quivered. Snaking his hands

from her waist to the flesh of her butt cheeks, he gently cupped each one, squeezing and kneading. Once more, Hannah's breath shortened into quick, ragged bursts as it rasped in her throat and chest. Her sex, swollen and so hot, opened up to him like a flower.

Oh, God! She wanted him to touch her there so badly. What did a woman do in this sort of situation? Did she ask? Did she tell him? Did he know?

Of course he did. He now knelt on the floor behind her. His hot breath gently caressed her secret place. The movement, wholly erotic and painfully delightful, made her squirm uncontrollably against the wood. Jed's warm, wet tongue flicked at the junction where her buttocks met.

Nerve endings exploded and a tiny cry caught in her throat. Fresh tentacles of molten fire fanned along the pathways of her flesh. Lightning flashed in her brain. A multitude of colors sparked behind her closed eyelids.

Then, as Jed pried her cheeks apart with his thumbs, he pressed his lips into the crack and circled her butt hole with the tip of his tongue, alternating between a hardened point that probed and searched, and a wide, flat tongue that gently lapped.

Short, sharp shocks of static sparked through her veins and her tiny cry became soft mewling that quivered at the base of her throat. As intense, pounding need poured through every cell of her body, it ignited every erogenous zone she possessed. He then lapped at her cunny. His tongue, first stretched wide, next contracted into an invasive point, he drank the honey, and circled and jabbed deep inside her soft, warm womanhood.

The short, sharp bursts and slow, meandering searches of her flesh drove her crazy. Every time she teetered on the edge of completion, he stopped and altered the rhythm, leaving her dangling, helpless, and desperate.

It seemed he knew exactly what to do.

She didn't.

She didn't know what to do at all. All she knew was that she wanted to suck every cock within a ten-foot radius into her swollen, aching cunt and release the torment that swamped her.

Beneath her, Jed flicked his tongue across her clit, which now quivered in needy expectation. Her breath quickened again as rapid pants raked her throat. She teetered on the edge of blissful oblivion. Finally, as he caught the little nub between his teeth and sucked and nibbled, Hannah gave a little tremor, and spasms of rolling pleasure gripped her body. Nothing more than a tangled mass of frenzied flesh, she became a slave to her most basic needs, as well as Jed's dominance and skill.

Her vagina contracted hard and she bucked and thrust against Jed's lips. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut with the intensity of her orgasm, a high-pitched cry of splendid release broke through the constriction that had bound her chest and throat. She was ravenous for everything he gave her.

Jed hung on like a leech as more wonderful tremors rocked her sex-starved body. It served to remind her of what she'd missed these long, lonely months. Finally, as she collapsed, prone and exhausted, across the table top, a metallic click echoed in the sudden, ensuing silence.

A gun cocked.

Seconds later, a deep, authoritative voice followed it.

"Just hold it there. Nobody move."

Chapter Seven

Lying in the warm, relaxing water, with hot, erotic thoughts filling his head, had invited Luke to perform a hand job to ease the ache. Unlike his brother, after all those celibate weeks on the trail, he hadn't had chance to relieve his pent-up frustrations. What made it worse, the lovely Hannah had deepened his carnal needs. Sweet and comely in appearance, and feisty in character, he could almost understand McCabe's need to possess her.

However, that was where his understanding stopped. Luke had too much respect for women, and he never fucked them without their express permission. He would never force his attentions where they weren't welcome, albeit, a little gentle teasing and good-humored persuasion usually never failed. He had a knack for being able to detect a willing partner, and, despite Hannah's rebuff of McCabe, he'd sensed a mutual attraction between himself and the lovely lady as they rode over here.

Furthermore, he wasn't about to pounce where his advances may not be totally welcome. After all, he wasn't quite sure who this Jacob was, of whom she spoke so affectionately, or where he fit into her life. Maybe he was her brother. He doubted he was her husband. She didn't wear a ring. Nevertheless, it puzzled him that any man should have abandoned a woman alone to the kind of jibes and taunts McCabe handed out to her. So, for the time being, he decided to make do with a few sexual fantasies. Clamping his hand around his hard cock, he stroked up and down with ever-increasing rhythm.

Just as he reached the longed-for pinnacle, Hannah's scream pierced the delightful fog clouding his mind. It was a cry of feral

proportion, as if pain, suddenly and inexplicably, was being ripped from her body. His head jerked up from where it lay against the back of the bath and his hand abandoned his aching cock. Instinctively, he reached for his gun. Some bastard was hurting the lovely lady and it was his job, as a man, to protect her.

As he leapt from the bath and flung open the door, water dripped from his body and pooled at his feet. He stood in the doorway, as naked as the day he was born.

The sight that met him filled him with rage. Hannah lay face down on the table, her face turned to one side. Her eyes closed, she wasn't moving.

Fuck! Some bastard had killed her.

His eyes scoured the room, his brain absorbing the lay-out in an instant. He saw no one else, but the back of his scalp prickled. He'd lived with danger too long not to know he wasn't alone in the room with the dead woman. However, satisfied the intruder wasn't lurking in any of the shadows, he lowered his eyes to the floor and the space just beyond the table legs. He could just make out the toe of a dusty boot. Whoever had just done this despicable deed crouched behind her, using her lifeless body as a shield.

Slowly bending at the knees, Luke lowered his body into a crouch too, ready to shoot the bastard beneath the table. But before he had a chance to take aim, a pair of hands rose slowly from behind the prostrate Hannah. Never one to shoot a man about to surrender, Luke stood tall again but his gun hand remained unwavering. He was still ready to kill once he'd looked the bastard in the eye.

However, the top of the head, that finally emerged, had a very familiar look to it, while the pair of eyes, meeting his, held a plethora of mischief. They were eminently well-known to him.

Jed lifted his grinning face to meet his brother's.

"Whoa there, bro, don't shoot. It's just your little brother helping out a lady in distress. I caught her a-masturbating over your naked

body and discovered she needed a helping hand.” He grinned and wiggled his tongue suggestively in Luke’s direction. “Or, rather, a tongue,” he corrected. “And mighty tasty, I might say, too.”

Luke set the safety catch and lay his gun to one side.

“You bastard,” he scolded. “You nearly got yourself shot. I thought someone had killed her.”

He took a step nearer and looked down at her. The sight of her naked back and delightful bare butt confirmed Jed’s explanation of events. Even though she still wasn’t moving, he could now see her breathing hard against the table top. “Is she okay?”

“More than okay, I’d say after all that coming,” Jed replied. “Though I suspect it’s still a big, juicy cock that she really wants inside her. You know what these widow-women are like when they haven’t had a man to satisfy them for a while.”

Beneath them, Hannah shifted slightly. Her movement caught their attention and they stopped their chit-chat. She raised her head slightly and looked up at them through the tousled curtain of hair that had fallen over her eyes and across her face.

“Will you please stop talking about me as if I’m not here,” she complained. “And I’m not a widow. I’m not even married.”

The two brothers exchanged a quick glance. With an expressive contortion of his face, Jed silently conveyed his thoughts that, for a woman with no man, she was a powerfully sexy lady. It made Luke wonder if this Jacob, whom she’d spoken of, had something to do with it. It certainly looked like she held fort here for him. The house showed a few womanly touches but signs of male domination were in clear evidence. Also, he was still curious as to what might be going on between McCabe and the woman. The man’s treatment of her cut right across the grain with him. He felt a pang of compassion for her as he watched her brush her hair from out of her eyes.

However, his pity quickly evaporated. While supporting herself on her upper arms, with her luscious locks tumbling around her lovely face, Hannah’s breasts now hung like two ripe melons. Their rosy tips

brushed the hard wood of the table top. She looked totally disheveled and wholly promiscuous. The long line of her back and the curve of her hips were breathtaking. Luke was stirred by her beauty, and his cock, temporarily wilted by the unexpected disruption to his carnal tendering, now sprang soldier-straight once more.

Chapter Eight

The power of Hannah's orgasm had left her breathless but now that she'd regained control of her senses, she stared blatantly at Luke's delectable organ and muscular torso. His fair body hair, plastered over his tanned skin, formed a trail from his wide chest to his groin, and his cock stood stiff and proud as it strained at its satin sheath. Gnarled veins, blue and throbbing, ran its length.

Her warm, wet pussy, temporarily satiated, triggered into life once more. She might not be a widow but she was a full, hot-blooded woman. Jed was right. What she did want was a hard, thick cock inside her, and a fresh bolt of lightning seared through the tangled pathways of her body. The one waving at her from the mass of bushy, wet hair at the junction of Luke's thighs would do just fine.

White-hot passion raged through her veins. Her enforced abstinence had gone on for too long. She was a woman of base, primitive, physical needs. Long ago, Jacob had coached and awakened them but he'd abandoned her so abruptly. Now, her body was so hungry. Jed had given her a taste of the delights she'd been missing. Luke, she knew, could supply the full meal.

She stood upright and tossed her hair from out of her face. If she did this, she wasn't going to act all coy. Nevertheless, she still caught the corner of her bottom lip in her teeth and glanced shyly up at him through her long lashes. She couldn't help it. After all, she didn't usually behave with such depravity with total strangers.

She didn't usually behave with *any* depravity with total strangers.

She closed her eyes, and, with her back still to Jed, she shrugged off her shirt altogether. She let it slide to the floor. She heard Luke

catch his breath. Naked from the waist up, her breasts swung free, while their tips contracted into two hard points that ached for Luke's touch. She wanted him to caress, fondle, and stroke them. She needed him to make love to her, and to feel the heat of his yearning as he spilled his seed into her. Jacob might have been her first and only lover, but, despite the happiness he'd brought her, it now paled into insignificance for the overwhelming desire this man stirred within her.

Suddenly, she needed to fill herself with him before life took the turn she'd dreaded these past twelve months. She knew it wouldn't be long before she was at the mercy of McCabe who was only content on humiliating her, and having his evil way, just so he could satisfy his own base gratifications.

She opened her eyes. He held her gently but he'd made no movement. As he looked into her eyes, she could see in him a conflict of emotions, too. He seemed to be struggling with his feelings.

"I don't know what's going on between you and that gunslinger," he said softly, "but I don't want you to think I'm some sort of evil bastard, too. You don't need to do this if you don't want to. You can still reconsider. After all, it's the woman who lives with the consequences of coupling if a man's seed gets planted. I'm not sure I'll have the strength of will to control myself once I get inside you."

Her eyes fell to the tip of his cock which now glistened with pre-cum. She ached with gnawing intensity and, in silent reply, Hannah fiddled with the waistband of her skirt. The tenderness of his offer engulfed her for a moment, but deep-seated yearning chewed at her insides. It now drove her to distraction, and, as if possessed, her body cried out for a cure from the overwhelming passion that, now, swept through her.

She'd expected Jacob back weeks ago. Close to despair, she wondered if she'd ever see him again. If she had to submit to McCabe's disgusting pawing, at least she might grant herself a few

sweet bodily pleasures with this fine specimen of a man first, before McCabe ravaged her totally.

Boldly, her thoughts continued to tempt her.

In fact, both men were rather handsome and certainly appeared experienced in ways of pleasuring women.

With a shimmy of her hips, she let the garment slide down her long legs until it crumpled into a heap around her ankles. As naked as Luke, she stepped out from the bundle of fabric, and presented her willing body to him.

A thin film of dew covered her skin, and her flesh turned pink as an unexpected flush crept over it. She couldn't help it. After all, she wasn't used to whoring herself. She just needed a little tenderness, and sweetness, from all the torment and hard work Jacob had left behind.

As Luke's eyes scoured her curves and hot flesh, he scorched a pathway down her body to the thick bush, lying in a V between her legs. She trembled in expectation and a little whimper caught in her throat. Luke, too, gave a low groan as he stepped forward and molded one hand around her buttock, and nudged her thighs apart with his knee. Parting the folds of her tender flesh, he thrust a finger deep into her warm, wet cave. Hannah gasped as her head reeled. The movement pushed her back against Luke's brother. For a moment, lost in debauched thoughts of Luke's shaft thrusting inside her, she'd forgotten all about Jed. He'd been so quiet, watching from behind as her skirt slithered down her legs, caressing her outer thighs on its way to the floor.

As she fell back against him, he supported their weight, and curled his hands up around her until he captured her aching breasts into his huge rough hands. He gently squeezed and kneaded as if measuring the size and shape while lightly running his thumbs across their hardened peaks. Hannah cried out in pure rapture.

She felt so tiny and so delicate, trapped between the two powerful men, as their hands touched her most intimate parts. They circled and

stroked, thrust and probed. In sheer ecstasy, she writhed against Jed's firm body. The rough cloth of his clothes scratched her bare skin and she could feel the hard ridge of his erection lying against her back. At the same time, Luke continued to trace wonderful, teasing paths along her inner thighs.

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!

Her mind screamed out for release but all she could muster was a hoarse whisper.

"Fuck me, please," she begged, as her nails raked his upper arms.

However, instead of succumbing to her request, Luke withdrew his finger for a moment and thrust three inside her, widening her slick, wet passage. He rubbed her flowing juices over her sensitive little button with his thumb. Hard and engorged, it cried out for ultimate satisfaction from his cock which lay hot and throbbing against the junction of her thigh.

At the same time, Jed buried his mouth into her creamy shoulder. Hot, steamy breath trampled over every hair root, forcing them to attention. Hannah writhed, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, as Jed gently rocked his hips against hers.

Barely a hair's breadth separated their three bodies. Jed gently caressed Hannah's breasts, squeezing and kneading them, while Luke lowered his lips to hers and tenderly teased them apart. Now, desperate for release, she loved every delightful, erotic touch. Finally, Luke's tongue gained access to her warm mouth. It invaded the soft cavity and searched for her tongue, until they danced a slow minuet together. A little moan caught in Hannah's throat. She raised her hips toward him. Cupping her backside in his big hands, he lifted her off her feet, impaling her onto his hard shaft.

Hannah caught her breath. Her body seemed to split in two. Supported only by Luke's strong hands, she felt the length of his hard cock slide all the way up to the hilt. Short, sharp bursts of electricity telegraphed their way to her needy womb as Jed continued to play

with her aching breasts. His fingertips rolled her tender nipples between fingers and thumbs and teased them into hard, little buttons.

Then, finally, Luke began to rock.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Hannah took up the rhythm, squeezing her behind and rocking her pelvis. She ground her engorged clit against the hard ridge of Luke's pubic bone. Her feet dangled in the air, her body totally abandoned to a wonderful wave of salacious pleasure. It carried her along a turbulent tide of passion.

Supporting her from behind, Jed joined the rhythm. The rough fabric of his pants burned and scoured the tender flesh of her ass where Luke's fingers pried her butt cheeks apart. The hard ridge behind Jed's fly rubbed up and down the tight, little valley.

Hannah's mind whirled. Her body was no longer her own but a vessel for every lustful pleasure the two cowboys had just re-awakened in her. Like Pandora's Box, every nerve ending swelled and strained, frantic to break out. Her breath, short and ragged, rasped deep in her throat. The blood filling her sex engorged every nook and cranny until, tumbling into the void, she screamed out in blissful orgasm.

Her vagina contracted strongly around Luke's bone-hard shaft, and he too groaned as he spurted hot cum against the door of her womb. With short, sharp grunts and spasming hips, he buried himself deep within her.

Growling softly against her ear, Jed pinched the engorged peaks of her breasts between fingers and thumbs. He pulled her forcefully back against him until her body molded against his, trapping her securely between his body and Luke's.

Chapter Nine

Hannah's head reeled. She lay panting, sandwiched between the two men. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. It threatened to burst its way through her ribcage. Her warm, slick cunny still throbbed deliciously. Luke's cock was still trapped inside her.

Spent, she now felt him withdrawing, accompanied by a trickle of semen that spilled over her groin and onto her upper thighs. Steeped in a glorious post-coital haze, she'd forgotten how wonderful it was to couple like this, abandoning her body to base pleasures of the flesh.

Jacob had schooled her well in the few weeks they'd spent together, both to give as well as to receive. From out of nowhere, these two brothers had suddenly re-ignited her diminished, passionate nature. As she'd thought more and more about what life was soon to become with Ethan McCabe, she'd been lost in hopeless despair.

Jed had selflessly pleased her and was a rock against which she and Luke had braced themselves. Now, the incriminating bulge pressing against her bottom informed her most clearly that he had needs, too. She wondered whether Jed's expertise with his cock, and not just his mouth, matched that of his brother's. Would it be so terrible if she let him fuck her too?

However, as Luke gently lowered her to the floor, her mind was drawn back to him. She flicked her tongue across her bruised lips, making them shiny and wet. Her heart gave a little lurch as she watched Luke's eyes feast upon them. Wantonly, she slowly drew her tongue back inside her mouth and inexplicably pouted, gazing up at him like a wanton whore. But not a whore who did this for monetary

gain but a whore who succumbed to her own bodily cravings that only these two men could, and would, satisfy. Yet, despite her bold thoughts, she suddenly blushed under Luke's close scrutiny. Afraid he might read her mind, she lowered her eyes. He tucked her under the chin.

"Don't go all shy on me now, Hannah," he teased gently. "That was beautiful. And special. Don't be embarrassed. A woman has needs, too." He pressed his lips against her forehead for a moment before raising his eyes over her head to meet those of his brother, who'd already slipped his hands lightly to her waist.

Jed's delicate touch sent fresh shivers of pleasure down her spine. He slowly turned her to face him. Remembering her thoughts only moments earlier, Hannah was afraid she might burn him with the enormity of lust still coiled tightly within her. She lowered her eyes again. This time, however, a finger and thumb caught her chin to raise her face to look at his. Jed bent his head to hers and brushed his lips against her lips. They felt unexpectedly soft against her tender ones, and she could taste faint remnants of the strong liquor he'd imbibed earlier.

He pried her lips apart and worked his tongue slowly against hers. She closed her eyes, surrendering to his strength and power. Tired of always being the strong one, all she wanted now was to abandon herself to this tender manipulation of her body and hormones. Maybe, as she enjoyed being swept along an ecstatic tide of passion, she could forget about repaying the debt, which still hung over her like an evil bird of prey.

She clung to Jed while Luke's hands snaked around her hips until his fingers threaded through her bush. His forefinger played and rubbed gently across her still-sensitive clit. It was still slick and wet from her juices and his cum. Lightning bolts shot through her body, finding new pathways, and old ones, to tease and stimulate. Her hormones weren't done yet. She still craved more.

Was this what it was like to be a harlot, the whore her mother said she would become once she'd made her impetuous decision to travel, alone, out West to find her wayward brother? That she'd fall prey to the needs of men, and her own wicked desires, and would bring yet more shame on their family.

Her body ached in outrageous, physical torment with every gentle stroke and invasive touch. She gave a little cry and arched back against Luke. The pulse inside her deepened and quickened, and she pressed the cheeks of her bottom against his spent cock. It was still damp from the warm gush of fluid that had given both of them so much pleasure.

She didn't care. She loved her wicked desires. Jacob had tutored her well.

Luke buried his mouth against her ear. Tiny prickles of yearning burrowed deep into her flesh. She inhaled deeply. He smelled so good, fresh soap mingled with damp skin and musky sex. And his hands knew exactly how to caress all the right parts. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to disappear in a cacophony of debauchery and shamelessness, where she could stop thinking about Ethan McCabe and could simply drown in a surfeit of bliss.

She gave a start. Luke spoke softly to her. His breath tickled her ear.

"I'm sorry. You've used me all up for the time being. If you want fucking again, now, you'll have to open your legs for Jed."

Resting his bare butt against the table top, he pulled her back onto his upper thighs and slid his hands onto the insides of hers. He gently widened her legs, levering them apart while Jed unfastened his pants. Her eyes fixed on his, it was clear his earlier carryings-on with the saloon girls hadn't dampened his sexual ardor any. Hannah marveled at his obvious stamina, and her sheer good fortune to have these two men pleasuring her in this outrageous way. His rampant cock sprung from its lair and rammed inside her. Thrusting roughly while gripping

her outer thighs, their combined weight, now, fell against Luke's hard frame.

Hannah's slick, sweaty skin slid erotically against Luke's. He too gave a little groan as he kneaded and stroked her bare breasts in the same way, and with the same verve, Jed had pleased them only minutes earlier. They grunted and rocked in unison.

The gentleness of Hannah's earlier coupling with Luke faded into a frantic, primeval tempo of intense fervor, now dominated by his younger brother. The raw sexuality of his thrusts brought her to the trembling brink once more. Sharp, stabbing waves of ecstasy made her gasp and cry out yet again as her cunt contracted and squeezed around his thick cock. At last, with a low groan and a succession of satisfied grunts, Jed too released his seed into her bucking body to join that of his brother's still lubricating her quivering passage.

Hannah wrapped her legs around his waist, curling the toes of one foot around the ankle of the other. She wasn't going to let him go—not yet. She needed to keep him inside her for as long as possible. She still cared about Jacob but he'd not stuck around long enough to treat her to enough of this. How could he have been so cruel as to awaken such basic needs, only to abandon her so quickly? Deep down, she knew he'd had no choice, that she herself had urged him on his quest, but it did little to relieve her pain at his long absence. With so little time left, she knew she clutched at straws to think he would be coming back.

As Jed fell against her, he trapped Luke's hands against her naked breasts. Exhaustion overwhelmed her and she lay unmoving between the two men, overcome by the intensity of such unashamed immorality. The sweat sat shiny on her skin. It made her slip sensuously against Luke's naked flesh while, at the same time, adhered the front of Jed's shirt to her. Tendrils of hair stuck to her face and she had to spit tiny strands from her mouth. She felt so small, so helpless between the two men, yet at the same time so powerful. It was a shame it wouldn't last.

She shuddered.

Only a few more days, then McCabe would call in his debt, and he would be the one doing these things to her.

But he wouldn't be treating her the same way.

She knew that for sure.

And, once he'd had his fun with her, he'd throw her to his dogs, and they certainly wouldn't care how they treated her.

Chapter Ten

Hannah hid in a corner of her bedroom. She crouched over a bowl of water that she'd placed on the floor. She looked like an Indian squaw, crouched by a fire.

She'd scooped the water from the rain barrel outside, and her hands and fingers busily doused and washed away the creamy issues of the two strangers who'd just pleased her in such an outrageous way.

However, pleasure had morphed into dismay as full realization of what she'd just done hit her hard. She could hear her mother's parting words as she'd stepped aboard the train, alone, to travel here and meet up with her brother.

"Mind my words, girl," she'd said grimly. "Never let a man get his hands beneath your skirt unless you want a baby. We've had enough shame brought upon this family without you causing us any more disgrace."

"When I have a baby, it will be with a husband to help me," Hannah had replied coolly, although the thought of husbands and babies were the furthest thoughts from her mind. After all, that was one of the reasons she decided to make her escape.

"A husband? To help?" her mother scoffed. "When you have a husband and the babies start to come, that's when you'll wish you'd stayed with your mother and sisters. All your husband will do is take his pleasure and give you a child every year. You'll find it hard and lonely doing all the work on your own."

Her mother's face was dour, set in stone. It conveyed her disappointment that her head-strong daughter had refused to marry

Matthew Holden, the son of a well-off property owner. His entry into the family would certainly have eased their current financial burden and helped to ease the pain and humiliation of what had recently befallen them all. But she hadn't. She'd decided, instead, to chase after her equally head-strong brother who'd headed out West in search of freedom and adventure, abandoning the Turner women to live with the scandal following their father's untimely and unexpected death.

A bank owner, Cornelius Turner had lost everyone's money in a series of bad investments, and, rather than face the shame of prosecution in the law courts, he'd chosen to put a gun to his head, thinking he'd take the gentleman's way out. Except, of course, he'd been no gentleman. He'd abandoned his wife and family to face the uproar that followed, alone.

Left penniless, Hannah's mother had to resort to taking in boarders, while Hannah and her four younger sisters sought work as seamstresses. Their only brother, William, had headed out West to escape the scandal and to start over, perhaps make his fortune looking for gold out in California. He promised that, when he succeeded, he would return home, and his mother and sisters would no longer have to work. They would all return to their rightful place in society, and he would take care of them all. But in the meantime, the women were left with no man to support them.

William took off several months before Hannah left. In the beginning, they received some letters, telling his family of his travels. Hannah, ever the imaginative one, dreamed of joining him and travelling the rest of the way out West with him. Sewing with a group of whining sisters didn't appeal to her tomboyish nature. She felt sure she could help her brother pan for gold. Paddling barefoot in flowing waters, her skirt tucked above her knees, created a tempting venture in her mind. She didn't even think about what it would be like when the

rains came, or that there might be days spent finding nothing at all. All she could see was a fairytale ending to her family's plight.

Even better, it would get her away from Matthew's perpetual fawning and her mother's insistent coaxing to marry him. When William's letters dried up, she decided she would go to find him.

She came here first. It was the last place from which he'd written. But by the time she arrived, he'd already moved on. However, Jacob and his father were waiting for her. William had worked for them for a while, and, before he left, he'd told them that if his little sister showed up, they should keep her with them until he returned. They kept their word and, in return for food and lodging, Hannah became their housekeeper, concentrating on the household chores.

She cooked, washed, and grew vegetables while the men tended the cattle and horses. However, having ridden back home, Hannah had a way with the horses, too, always preferring more physical activities than her sisters, who liked to play the piano and flirt with young men. So, more and more, she found herself helping out in the corral with Jacob and the ranch hands.

It wasn't that she hadn't done her share of flirting. Hannah had always had her share of admirers. But with her strong-minded, impetuous ways, she was always too quick with a put-down.

"Not lady-like at all," her mother had once complained as more and more young men fell by the wayside.

In the end, only Matthew persevered with her. Even after the scandal that rocked both their families, he remained a constant visitor, much to the consternation of *his* mother. Rumors ran rife that they would soon marry. However, Hannah didn't love him and she wasn't prepared to produce a brood of children for a man she didn't care enough about, even if it would have meant financial security for her mother and sisters, as well as herself.

So, having finally made her escape, she found she loved the life here more.

Certainly, life was hard, but the men soon appreciated her quick tongue and practical skills. She proved very quickly that she wasn't a wet-behind-the-ears greenhorn from back East, afraid of hard work and getting her hands dirty. For that, they admired her.

However, before she left to catch the train, her mother, finally resigned to her daughter's departure, at least, tried to give her the benefit of *her* womanly experience. She told her of ways that women could *try* to reduce the number of babies they had, if they couldn't persuade their husbands to "treat them with respect."

Hannah hadn't really been sure what she'd meant by that until Jacob made love to her. Determined not to put a child in her belly, he withdrew from her just before he came. He'd fallen upon her, panting and crying out her name in pain and anguish, as he spurted his warm seed over her belly. For a moment, Hannah was frightened that he'd hurt himself in some way. After a few minutes, he'd smiled tenderly at her innocence and told her that was what men did when they respected women. There would be time enough for babies when the ranch became his once again.

Well, the two cowboys hadn't done what Jacob had done, so now, following her mother's instructions, she cleaned high into her vagina, washing out any semen the two men had left behind. She knew that it might not work but she would try her best.

Her cheeks still burned fiercely but not through shame. She knew she ought to feel shame but she'd loved every moment of the intimacy she shared with the two men. Her heart still pounded. Its rapid beat hammered against her ribcage while her head filled with stars, spinning in the aftermath of the intense emotion to which she'd succumbed. Until Jacob, she'd never realized she was a woman of such passion, driven by a powerful, burning hunger. For twelve long months, she'd kept it in check but she'd been swept along by an incredible desire, drawn to the power and inner strength that the two

brothers had shown her by championing her against the evil Ethan McCabe.

Both men had serviced her well, but it was Luke who still filled her thoughts as she douched. Pictures of his delicious, naked body performing his toilette in the bath, made her skin tingle afresh at the memory of his bare flesh touching hers. Much as she'd enjoyed Jed's final, rough love-making, Luke's gentle handling of her body really gave her goose bumps. He made her feel so good.

He might be a total stranger, soon to disappear as quickly as he'd appeared, but, at least she'd been given the opportunity to feel the joy of gentle handling, and to be cared for again, if only for a short while.

As the deadline drew closer, she'd wanted to run away so many times. Because of her hot-headed promises and dogged resolve to show everyone in town that someone could, and would, stand up to Ethan McCabe, she'd made a vow. However, because of that vow, in less than four days time, she'd have to surrender herself to him. Then, he'd put her to work in his whorehouse, to become a harlot for anyone to procure.

Chapter Eleven

Luke watched as Hannah ladled stew into the dishes. Steam curled and danced toward the ceiling. It brought with it a delicious, mouth-watering aroma. Both brothers had drooled each time she stirred the pot. It was months since either had eaten decent, home-cooked food, and women usually made a good job of cooking, especially when they had someone to cook for. The cook, on the journey across the prairies, had spent most of his days gazing at the bottom of a whiskey bottle instead of serving up proper grub. For most of the ride, the victuals were tough and hard.

However, since emerging from her bedroom, Hannah had remained quiet. Luke had only returned there briefly to retrieve the clothes she'd laid out for him. Quickly covering herself after their coupling, she'd disappeared outside for a moment. She'd returned carrying a bowl of water. He knew exactly what it was for. He cursed himself for not being more refrained. He wasn't in the habit of spilling his seed into women who didn't want it—even if his brother might be. He'd learned a long time ago there were ways of making sure he didn't leave an unwanted child in their bellies.

When she'd shut herself in the bedroom, it bothered him all the more. They didn't usually take advantage of lonely, isolated women, but suddenly it felt as though that was exactly what they'd done. He'd shot a swift, concerned glance at Jed, who returned his gaze with a recalcitrant one of his own.

“What?” Jed demanded. He seemed totally unfazed by all that had happened.

Luke knew he was too principled for his own good. Sometimes he wished he was more like his little brother and not given over to guilt the way he was.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have,” he began.

“Don’t,” Jed warned. “You didn’t see what I saw when I stepped through the door. She was so busy pleasuring herself over your stark naked body, she never even heard me come in. We gave her what she wanted, that’s all. You heard the pretty mewling she made.” He rolled his eyes skyward and imitated her tiny cries of rapture. He gave a wicked, lopsided grin as he met his brother’s gaze. “And don’t try to tell me she didn’t enjoy it, too. You worry too much.”

Luke was glad Hannah was out of ear shot. He inhaled deeply, puffing out his cheeks and letting out a long, slow, thoughtful breath. Jed was right. That was his trouble. He did worry, not like his little brother, whose womanizing ways had got him into trouble on more than one occasion. After all, that was part of why they were now here instead of helping their father rebuild his business after the dreadful financial crash that had all but ruined them. He gave his head a little shake and shot Jed a look of disdain at his disrespectful mimicry. At least it made him hold up his hands in defeat.

“Okay, okay,” he relented. “I won’t touch her again,” then added with a grin, “unless she wants me to.” Pausing for a moment, he shot his brother a knowing look. “Or maybe, you’re thinking that you want to keep her all to yourself.”

“Don’t talk ridiculous. She may already be spoken for.”

“To a man evident by his absence,” Jed replied scathingly. “What kind of bastard abandons a woman and allows an evil fuck to grope and treat her like that in public? Even I’ve got better standards than that. I’d never take an unwilling woman into my bed. They deserve more respect than that”.

The same thought still nagged Luke. What was it that he'd overheard Hannah saying? Something about a deal? What deal? And where did she fit into it? He wrestled with these thoughts until he finally decided it was none of his business. Consequently, when Hannah returned from her ablutions and dished up supper, he focused on the meal instead.

"This tastes mighty good," he praised, blowing short bursts of breath onto the hot food to help cool it. The first forkful had burned his tongue. Both Jed and Hannah had chuckled at his predicament.

As Hannah smiled her thanks at his kind words, her clear blue eyes sparkled. They made Luke's heart give a little lurch. He thought about how lovely she looked, with her cheeks, sitting like two rosy apples atop the upturned corners of her pretty, ruby-red lips. Especially, as earlier, when she'd emerged fully clothed from the bedroom, all his previous misgivings had come rushing back.

With her mouth set in a grim line, she'd buttoned her blouse all the way up to her neck and fastened it with a brooch. It was as if to ward off any further ideas to touch her, especially in all those places she'd enjoyed being touched just a short time before. Luke now feared she regretted her impromptu actions.

But instead of warding off his gaze, the brooch only succeeded in drawing his eyes to the base of her creamy throat and long slender neck that was now emphasized all the more by the way she'd tied her hair back into a heavy ponytail. It swung enticingly from side to side every time she moved her head and revealed a neck that invited his kisses. He wanted to nibble and lick all the way up to her ears and hairline, before changing direction and trailing a path down to her slender shoulders and luscious breasts. A jolt kicked him low in his belly. She also kept sneaking crafty looks in his direction when she didn't think he was looking, and he thought they were the most beautiful eyes upon which he'd ever had the good fortune to gaze.

When he'd started masturbating in the bath, he believed just her pretty face and delightful curves were the object of his fantasies, as well as the lack of female company for the past few months. Now, he wasn't so sure.

They'd conversed so easily on the ride back. He'd homed in on all her little mannerisms, noticing the way she tossed her hair and the agreeable way she had of laughing at his stories of the cattle drive through such inhospitable country. Even before he dismounted from his horse he knew he was smitten. Each time she smiled, a cute little dimple played at the corner of her mouth.

She intrigued him, this woman alone, with the strength to stand up to a man like McCabe, and capable of running a ranch when all hands had obviously abandoned her to her inevitable fate. For the umpteenth time, he wondered about the deal she had made with him.

And what kind of man had let her make it?

He had to ask.

"So, what kind of man leaves a woman to fend for herself in a God-forsaken place like this with a devil like McCabe thinking he runs the town?" Hannah's smile faded and Luke knew he'd asked the wrong thing.

"He doesn't think. He does," she corrected grimly. Her tone of voice told Luke he had to tread warily. She obviously didn't take kindly to any criticism aimed at Jacob. "Ethan McCabe owns the town and every property and business in it. Except for this place."

Luke and Jed exchanged glances but it was Jed who spoke first as he juggled a piece of hot dumpling in his mouth.

"That why your man ran out on you?"

Now Jed received Hannah's icy stare.

"Jacob had no choice. He had to go, or lose everything."

Remembering Hannah's earlier meeting with McCabe, Luke said, "Seems like he's done that anyway."

"No, he hasn't," she hit back quickly. "He's still got another four, no, three days before he calls in the debt." Despite the stubbornness in

her tone, a tremor vibrated at the back of her throat. Luke sensed her fear that she was another day closer to her impending fate.

“And how long has he been gone?” He, now, watched her swallow hard, trying her best to be brave. Again, fear seemed to emanate from every pore.

“Nearly a year,” she said quietly. Her earlier defiance seemed to be dissipating fast.

“Hmm! Cutting things a bit fine then?” Jed said ironically, as he joined in the conversation.

Luke watched Hannah’s reaction. He, now, saw despair lurking behind her tough facade. Clearly, the woman was in big trouble, and, he quickly decided, he wasn’t going to skirt around the subject any longer. He sensed her panic that Jacob wasn’t going to make it back, after all. It was time for an answer.

“So, what’s this deal you’ve made with McCabe?” he asked gently.

On the journey back to the ranch, their conversation had veered in the general direction of his work on the cattle drive and the more mundane task of organizing his bath and fresh clothes. She’d deliberately steered clear of any reference to the incident with McCabe once she’d thanked him for his help. Now, he wanted to know. How else would he be able to help her? It seemed it was long overdue for someone to take the wind out of McCabe’s sails.

“My deal has nothing to do with either of you,” she stated coolly. She dropped her fork onto her plate. “You’re just passing through. You’ll be gone in the morning and Jacob will be back before McCabe has a chance to call it in.”

“From what I saw earlier, it seems he’s anticipating calling it in early,” Luke replied, gently. If he couldn’t browbeat an answer out of her, then he’d try it in a calm, persuasive voice. She’d tried to sound convincing but she didn’t fool Luke. Her voice was full of dread and apprehension. “It also seems that no one in town is prepared to stand

up to him, including this Jacob of yours, judging by the length of time he's been away."

Luke watched her work her jaw and then clamp her teeth tightly together. As she drew in a long, noisy breath, her nostrils flared. Screwing her fingers into tight fists, her knuckles went white against the dark tabletop. "I've just told you. It's none of your damned business." She spoke her words clipped and short. They were full of venom.

She sprang to her feet. Her chair clattered noisily backward onto the floor. She stood for a moment glaring down at the pair of them. Then, with six purposeful strides, she made her exit through the outside door and stomped noisily down the wooden steps from the veranda onto the baked earth below.

The two brothers exchanged looks of concern. Jed nodded silently for Luke to follow after her. Luke knew Jed was right. After getting her all fired up like that, it was up to him to sort things out and get a straight answer. It certainly puzzled him. There was obviously no love lost between Hannah and this McCabe, so why should she be willing to go to the slaughter for something another man was responsible for?

He shook his head as he set off in pursuit.

Women.

Why were they always so damn difficult to fathom?

Chapter Twelve

The light faded fast. Night chased the remainder of day across the sky and pinned it against the horizon. Just a thin strip of blue and pink lingered.

Luke made out Hannah's silhouette by the corral. Her shoulders were hunched and her hands covered her face. A horse harrumphed and snuffled over her. She was crying. But it wasn't full-wail crying, the sort that Rose had done when he'd exposed her plans to trap Jed into a sham of a marriage. No, this was silent crying. Not a sound escaped her lips, but tears coursed down her cheeks. They trickled into the corners of her mouth and dripped from her chin.

He turned her and gently folded her into his arms. She felt so tiny and frail against his hard body, and, as she laid her head against him, her hot, wet cheek burned its imprint through his shirt and onto his chest. He hated it when women cried. Usually, he could never tell whether it was genuine or on purpose. But this time he did know, and it made him feel so helpless that he couldn't help her.

She melted into his arms and, for a few seconds, her body relaxed a little against him. He hugged her gently, wishing he could shut out her problems. But the reality was, he couldn't. No amount of comfort he offered was enough to make her forget her impending fate. He needed her to tell him what was wrong, and, as she drew in a shuddery breath and stepped out of the comfort zone he offered her, he wasn't going to be shrugged off again. As she roughly rubbed the offending tears away with her bare hands, he pursued his interrogation.

“I’m sorry if it seems like I’m prying but this afternoon it seemed like you needed a friend.” He caught her chin tenderly between fingers and thumb, raising her face to look at him. “Something tells me you still do.”

Fresh tears welled up at his friendly gesture. They pooled in the corners of her eyes and sat along her lower lids. They glistened like diamonds in the silvery moonlight and he had to fight the urge to kiss them away. The battle raging within her was plain for anyone to see.

“I’m also sorry for earlier,” he said, and meant it. “Jed and I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you. It may be hard to believe, but we’re not all like McCabe. We do respect women.”

“Don’t be sorry.” A wan smile broke the unhappy curve of her mouth. “It was entirely my fault. I do have needs and I’m glad it was you and Jed who—” She stopped mid-sentence, as if suddenly a little embarrassed by her frank admission.

Luke’s heart gave a little squeeze and he returned her smile with a reassuring one of his own.

“In fact, it was good,” she continued. She still looked a little awkward but she finally managed a bigger smile. “And, although I’m sure Jacob will be back in time, if McCabe does end up calling in his debt, at least it will be something good to remember you both by.”

Looking down at her brave face, Luke wasn’t sure he only wanted to be a pleasant memory. With only three days left, no way would this man be coming back home. She was deluding herself. He grasped her shoulders more tightly.

“So, let me help you. Tell me what it’s all about and I’ll get McCabe to release you from your bargain.”

Chapter Thirteen

Hope, which had been Hannah's companion for so long, now deserted her. She'd been strong for so long, and Luke's kind words finally tipped her over the edge. Feeling McCabe's hands pawing her had stirred up every dark thought and awful dread of what would become of her. He wouldn't be as considerate of her feelings as the cowboy standing before her. McCabe had told her on numerous occasions what he would do to her body and that, when he'd finished with her, he'd give her to his men. That vile bunch of cowboys he called his employees.

Hannah clenched her teeth to steady the muscles in her jaw. She raised her eyes to meet Luke's as her back stiffened a little. Oh, how his words tempted her. But what could he do? She'd made a promise.

Swallowing hard, she took a deep breath to help stem a fresh flow of tears. This didn't help her at all. Luke looked far too concerned for someone she'd only just met, and to whom she'd given her body so freely, and so wantonly, only a short while earlier. Why was he bothering? In fact, why were he and his brother still here? According to her mother, after taking their pleasure, shouldn't they have left and not stuck around wanting to know her business? She inhaled deeply again, hoping he wouldn't hear the slight tremor that trembled in her throat once more. She needed to stand on her own two feet. It was her battle not his, but as Luke placed a hand on each of her shoulders, he looked her straight in the eye and all resolve began to crumble. She inhaled deeply to steady her nerves.

“Then I shall be indebted to you and I have no wish to be indebted to anyone again.”

First her father’s creditors and then Jacob’s. Why hadn’t she listened to her heart and followed her brother to California instead of playing the docile, little woman and obeying his instructions to wait here until he returned?

Except, she *had* listened to her heart. At least, she’d thought that back then. Jacob had needed to add little pressure or persuasion to keep her here. One look at his dark, chocolate brown eyes, framed with beautiful long lashes, and any strong will and perseverance she had totally melted away.

At first, she tried telling herself that it was his gentle manner that had drawn her to him. After weeks of traveling over such inhospitable country, she was tired and needed a rest from her journey. But it wasn’t true. The excitement of life here fizzed hotly through her veins. Finally, she could be herself, uncluttered and free while the raw sexuality of the man awoke a sleeping dragon in her. Jacob sparked her sexuality into life with just a mere touch. A brush of their fingertips or a stolen glance lit the fire and sent sparks flying. She thought she loved him. That was the reason she’d stayed and not followed her brother.

At first, Jacob had resisted her advances. He respected her brother and didn’t want to dishonor his little sister. However, Hannah had other ideas. Her body ached for the nearness of this man and, in the end, he’d needed little persuasion, although he always made certain he never gave her a baby.

Hannah marveled at his will power. She recalled how he would hold himself inside her, telling her not to move, or even twitch. Afterward, he would slide quickly from her and spurt his juices over her naked flesh. Only once had she resorted to the douching her mother had told her about. He’d been so ashamed that he’d not had the strength of will to protect her himself. But Hannah wasn’t. She was glad. She’d wanted him to feel the same overwhelming pleasure

that she did when she orgasmed so spectacularly around his hard cock as it stroked up and down inside her slick passage.

Because of that, he also taught her other ways that men and women could pleasure each other—with their mouths. She'd been a little shy at first but, when her body erupted and convulsed against his soft lips and warm lapping tongue, she was glad she'd listened to his gentle, supportive tutoring. Addicted to these carnal pleasures, Hannah loved nothing more than to spend time alone with him. He'd alternately nibble at the tiny little bud at the junction of her thighs and lap at her aching cunny. Her body would tingle and ripple all the way down from the hairs on her head to her toes.

The first time she took him fully in her mouth, she was afraid she wouldn't know what to do. But she followed his instructions and swirled her tongue around the swollen head as she flicked the ridge beneath with its tip. Receiving the gush of creamy liquid into her throat, while he'd spasmed against her, was so completely erotic, she knew she'd be performing such an act over and over again, not only because it prevented the threat of pregnancy but because she loved the sheer, base, wanton act. She couldn't get enough of it. Jacob would bring her to the peak of satisfaction and, afterward, she'd finish pleasuring him while tasting her own juices on his thick cock.

Her mother would have cringed and died of shame if she'd known. She'd have called her a whore for the way she behaved but she no longer cared. When she was with Jacob, her body became a vessel for every lustful thought and desire that assembled in her being. She was a woman of strong, sensual needs, although she knew it would never be like that with *any* man. With some, she only experienced friendship while men, like Ethan McCabe and his side-kicks, turned her blood to ice.

Confusion still clouded her mind. Why should this happen to her now? Why did these two strangers fire her blood in the same way? How could she ache so much for physical contact with the man

standing before her, as well as his big, rough brother, sitting inside her home, stuffing his face with her cooking?

Suddenly, the thought of food, and Luke and Jed, chased the dark ones away. If only for a while, she could let herself forget what she would soon become: a harlot pleasuring men for the rest of her life.

She cast Luke a wan smile.

“Let’s go back inside and finish our meal before your brother eats it all. He’s got a big frame to fill.”

Again, the memory of the big man’s hands on her body while he’d thrust roughly inside her, sent a fresh shiver of pleasure coursing through her, as did the gentle hand guiding her into the house once more. She may not be happy about her fate but she’d enjoy every moment she had left to her before she fell into McCabe’s evil hands.

Chapter Fourteen

Jed glanced from one to another. Hannah's eyes were still wet but Luke looked as though he'd diffused the situation.

"At least you've given the food chance to cool," he said gruffly as they sat at the table once more. It sounded banal but he didn't want the conversation to die altogether. He gave a throaty chuckle. "I'll be biting down on blisters for the rest of the night. It's so tasty. I couldn't help shoveling it into my mouth. Hope you don't mind but I've already helped myself to seconds. I'd forgotten how good a woman's cooking can be."

As Hannah too gave a short laugh, he noticed her quick exchange of looks with Luke who also grinned.

"What?" Jed asked, aware he wasn't in on the joke.

"I said we needed to get back inside before you ate it all up," Hannah teased. "I see you have a big appetite that needs filling. And call me Hannah, not ma'am. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Now that I'm not sure of," Jed replied. "If we were friends, you'd be telling us your problems. What it is that McCabe wants and why you've been left here to fend for yourself all on your lonesome. He means to make you his whore. That's what this deal's all about, ain't it?"

Nothing much got past Jed. Listening to Luke's description of the way McCabe treated Hannah, groping her in full view of the townsfolk, who'd just melted away into the safety of their homes and not lifted a finger to help, angered him. Jed enjoyed the company of women and the pleasure he got from them, but what McCabe had

done was downright disgraceful. Once he'd learned the full story, he was only sorry he'd not put his fist into his smirking face, too, or better still, his boot in his balls.

The two whores had also filled him in on all McCabe's carryings-on as they fussed around him, tending his cuts and bruises, and helping him into the tub again. They told him Jacob hadn't been home in nearly a year and that, because of McCabe's obsession with Hannah, the man would probably never do so again. Jed felt sorry for the woman.

He watched her move the meat and vegetables around silently on her plate and stab a piece of beef with her fork. For a moment, she looked at it thoughtfully before popping it into her mouth. As she closed her succulent lips around the juicy morsel, Jed regarded her mouth with close interest, wondering how they'd feel wrapped around his manhood, sucking and plundering its sensitive tip with that pink little tongue that was doing such a good job of rolling the food around inside her mouth. She was a damn fine woman and he found it wholly erotic when a woman wanted a man for her own delight, just as she had earlier, and not just to please or entrap him.

Nevertheless, his previous thoughts held sway. She might have much to offer a man, but no man should ever use a woman against her will.

She lifted her face to meet his gaze and Luke's. She tilted her chin almost defiantly. Nonetheless, her voice remained soft and calm as she spoke. "I made a deal with him. It was the only way to keep McCabe at bay until Jacob gets back. If I hadn't suggested it, he would have taken the land, the house, the lot. Jacob has a year to get the money, including interest, to pay McCabe what he owes. If Jacob doesn't make it back, well, McCabe wins anyway. He still gets everything, including interest. Except that I'm the interest."

Jed's eyes darkened. Something raked across his heart, drawing anger that Hannah should find herself in such a position.

“What sort of man makes a deal like that with a no-good whoremonger?” he raged. “Letting a woman settle his debt. He should be ashamed.”

“He didn’t make the deal,” Hannah defended him. “I did. That’s how much faith I have in him. I know he won’t leave me to McCabe’s clutches. And the debts aren’t his. They’re his father’s.”

Jed frowned. The woman must be mad but he wasn’t about to say anything yet. He caught Luke’s eye and they both turned to Hannah and watched her closely, intent on hearing the full story. After a short pause, she obliged and began.

* * * *

She told how, when she first arrived, looking for her brother, William had already moved on. But, knowing her the way he did, he’d asked Jacob and his father to look out for her and keep her here with them. Where he was going, to pan for gold out in California, was no place for a decent woman. They had to try to persuade her to return home, to their mother and sisters, to await his return. If they couldn’t, they were to make her stay until he got back.

However, in all the time she’d been here, William had sent only one letter. He told her life was rough and hard but that he was doing well. He moved around a lot, trying to find the best spots, so it wasn’t an invitation to join him. He told her that women were there for one reason only and that was to fill the brothels and pleasure the glut of men out there, trying to make their fortunes. After that, no more arrived and she could only wonder as to his fate and hope he was well.

Hannah found it hard to begin with, staying on with Jacob and his father. However, it didn’t take her long to realize, that after the soft life of a city-dweller she’d led back home, this was where she belonged. The only blot on the landscape was Jacob’s father’s

drinking and gambling. He'd always had a weakness for both, especially since his wife's death. Now he began to spend more and more time in town and in the saloon.

McCabe and his gang of gunslingers had ridden into town about two years earlier and it wasn't long before he'd cheated one poor farmer out of his home and land. Others quickly followed, along with their herds and horses. Anyone who tried to stand up to the man found themselves staring down the barrel of a gun, or worse, six feet under. He even had the law in his pocket, and, before long, he'd taken over the bank with all its mortgages and debts. He strutted round town like a peacock until, in the end, no one dared to challenge him. Everything that came in and out of town went through McCabe.

So far, Jacob and his father had avoided him and his cheating ways, but they knew he had his sights set on them. Jacob warned his father that he should never get into a serious card game with the man but, of course, he did. Little by little, he gambled his, and Jacob's, livelihood completely away. When McCabe came with his gang to call in the debt, it was the first Jacob knew of it.

Devious and clever, McCabe had let him win some and lose some, enticing him just enough to whet his appetite and to feed his addiction. Then, he hit him with the big one. His father's IOU had increased so much that McCabe suggested he put his land into the pot. Depressed, defeated, and very drunk, he agreed. Totally humiliated by his actions, he'd been unable to bring himself to tell his son until it was too late. The rest of the townsfolk kept their heads down low. They knew Jacob and his father were just the latest victims in McCabe's plans to take over the whole region.

When McCabe and his gang rode onto their land, Jacob picked up his rifle. He wasn't going to let it go without a fight. Hannah stood five steps behind him, clutching her rifle, too. His father, unshaven and disheveled, stumbled from the house. All he could cry was, "I'm sorry, son. I'm sorry."

The memory was as clear in Hannah's head as the day it happened. Each word would be forever stamped in her mind.

"Get back inside, Pa," Jacob replied coldly. But while he spoke, his eyes never left the figure of the man sitting arrogantly astride his huge gelding. "Leave this to me now."

McCabe never batted an eyelid. The smile that crept to his lips had all the venom of a snake ready to strike. He flicked the remains of his cheroot onto the ground.

"I admire your nerve," he said. "But you haven't a leg to stand on. The land and everything your father owns is now mine. Your father signed it all over to me. You've been a little lax in letting him keep full ownership for so long. You should have got him to hand it over to you before now. So, I suggest you put your gun down and just accept the fact that this place is now mine."

His horse trotted a few steps closer. Towering above Jacob, it looked like he hoped to intimidate the man further. Jacob merely cocked his rifle and aimed it directly at McCabe's chest.

"You cheated my father out of his property just like you did all the others. You're not going to get away with it this time. Get off my land."

The man never flinched. As Jacob spoke, McCabe's sidekicks all drew their guns as one, and Jacob found himself staring down the barrels of all six weapons.

"I reckon my boys will fell you before you even get chance to pull the trigger," he sneered. "Put it down. I'll give you twenty four hours to get out. I have people ready to move in and work for me."

Jacob didn't move but his hesitation distracted everyone enough to allow Hannah to level her rifle at him, too. Her knees trembled beneath her skirts but, if Jacob was prepared to try to stop this evil man, she would help him do so. It was about time someone stood up to him.

“No.” Her voice rang out clearly and calmly, despite the anger and fear raging within her. “You heard Jacob. Get off his land.”

Again, McCabe showed no fear. Arrogantly, he tipped his hat at her while his gaze raked her body and undressed her in that dirty, slimy way he always did every time he set eyes on her. That should have been enough for her to squeeze the trigger but, as three of his men now turned their guns on her, she didn’t.

“Well, Miss Hannah. What have we here then? A spirited mountain cat? Now, it would be a shame to shoot *you*.” He licked his lips and wiggled his tongue suggestively at her. “Why don’t you put the gun down and come and work for me? If you’re so damned set on defending this fool, maybe I’ll even let you work off some off his father’s debt.” An evil leer twisted his mouth. “But I warn you, with what’s outstanding, it may take a *very* long time.”

Jacob took an angry stride forward.

“You filthy bastard, don’t speak to her like that.”

A nearby cowboy kicked his foot out and caught Jacob full in the face. It sent him sprawling into the dirt. The rifle flew from his hands.

McCabe turned his full attention on Jacob once again.

“Now, why should you worry yourself about her? Don’t tell me she’s as pure as driven snow. Since she’s living out here alone with two men, and she’s not your wife, she must be your whore.”

Hannah saw red. She’d always managed to control her temper and kept cool and aloof when she’d met him in town, treating him instead to the contempt he deserved. However, this was too much. Jacob had too much respect for her. They might not be married but she certainly wasn’t his whore. Furthermore, if McCabe had the audacity to think she’d become one of his whores, he had another thing coming. So, while he was preoccupied with Jacob, she pulled the trigger.

Fortunately for McCabe, as he busily mocked Jacob, his horse sidestepped a fraction. The bullet merely grazed his arm. Nevertheless, he winced loudly. He clutched the wound with one hand as he drew in the reins with the other, attempting to calm his

now fretful horse, startled by the sudden short, sharp blast of gunfire. Blood oozed between his gloved fingers. Bright-red, the fluid slowly darkened his jacket.

Jacob turned his face in horror toward Hannah. Still lying prone in the dust, he was powerless to help her. McCabe's men surrounded her. All they needed was McCabe's order to shoot. Their horses snorted and harrumphed as their bridles bit into their sensitive mouths and their legs danced mere inches from her slight frame.

One man kicked the rifle out of her hands. It landed on the ground with a dull thud. McCabe's horse, now under control, trotted into the circle. McCabe leaned forward and lashed out at her with the back of his hand. It sent her sprawling to the ground. Her cheek flamed red, marked by the stinging blow and stained with blood from McCabe's leather glove.

"*Bitch*," he snarled angrily. "Believe me, for that alone, I *will* make you my whore. And whatever lover-boy here tries to do to stop me, it will never be enough. You *will* be mine."

"No, she won't."

They all turned to see Jacob's father. While they'd all been distracted, he'd retrieved Jacob's rifle. He aimed it at McCabe, but, as he was about to pull the trigger, McCabe's men filled him with lead.

He stood for a moment. His eyes grew wide with shock and surprise. Then, boneless, he crumpled onto the ground.

"No!" Hannah screamed. She rushed to his side.

At the same time, Jacob scrambled onto his feet to tend his father's wounds but his father was dead before he even touched the ground. Two, round, glassy eyes stared skyward, as if remembering the good times when it had once been the only roof he'd had over his head, and when he'd made the long journey out West with his wife and baby son. His life had been snuffed out in the blink of an eye.

McCabe looked down at the sorry trio. He spat on the ground.

“Bury your father,” he ordered. “I have the deeds to your land. I’ll be back. Then, it,” he paused for a moment to look Hannah hard in the eyes, “and you, missy, for all the torment you’ve caused me, will be mine.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hannah paused as the two brothers eyed her silently. They still looked puzzled. She took a slow breath to calm her. Her cheeks felt on fire as she burned with hate for the man who had ruined so many lives.

“But McCabe hasn’t taken Jacob’s land,” Luke said. It was more question than statement. “What caused his change of heart?”

“Not yet, he hasn’t,” Hannah explained. “After we buried Jacob’s pa, McCabe and his men came back and took the cattle and some of the horses. While overseeing it all, eager to rub Jacob’s nose in it, Jacob told him he would raise the money to buy back the deeds. He laughed in his face.”

“Pay him back? What with?” he asked.

“Jacob told him he would go out to California and get gold. Men can make it rich out there. He would too.”

As she continued her tale, she told them that McCabe warned Jacob that leaving his land unattended was tantamount to McCabe taking it anyway. Jacob said he wouldn’t be leaving it unattended because Hannah would stay to oversee the few remaining horses and crops.

He and Hannah had spent the previous evening discussing their ideas. Jacob would leave as soon as he could for California, and, while he was there, he’d look out for her brother, too. Once he’d collected enough gold, he’d come back, pay off his father’s debt and buy a new herd. He’d start over again. Best of all, though, they’d show the others in town that McCabe could be beaten.

At first, Hannah wanted to go with him but Jacob only reiterated her brother's words. It would be too dangerous for a woman.

"Any more dangerous than here?" she asked. But she knew he was right. Jacob needed her to stay to tend the land. No one else would. He also suggested that if they told McCabe that they were betrothed, it might make him think twice about threatening her. So, after they'd buried his father, they plotted their tactics.

When they explained their plans to McCabe, though, he only raised a disinterested eyebrow. "And she's going to stop me?" he sneered, as if he found the thought of a mere woman defending Jacob's land amusing.

Again, Hannah's memories flooded back, hard and fast.

Meeting his hard gaze with one of her own, Hannah stepped up to him and said, with an equally mocking sneer, "I did last time. Maybe next time my aim will be better."

Their eyes locked in unwavering conflict. Hannah stood proudly before him, her chin tilted upward in staunch defiance. She knew the fire would be surging through McCabe's veins and into his disgusting groin, just as it always did when she confronted him. He'd told her so many times before on her trips into town.

He'd sneak up behind her and whisper his vile threats in her ear, informing her that one day he'd strip her bare. Then, as her claws and barbed words scratched and raked his skin, he'd roll her around in his bed. He'd keep her barefoot and naked for as long as it took, until he'd finished with her. Her body would be his for the taking, whether it was for a week, a month, or even a year. He'd gaze upon her luscious breasts, and squeeze and knead them, whenever he wished.

He'd make her sit astride him and slide her wet cunt up and down his hard cock until he shot his cum into her. She would be his plaything and he would play out every sexual fantasy he could think of, and more besides. He'd wipe the "holier than thou" look off her face and make her beg him to stop.

Afterward, when she was broken, he'd pass her on to his men so they could fuck themselves stupid inside every hole she possessed. And after *they'd* done with her, he'd put her to work in one of his whorehouses.

He'd make her pay for being the only woman ever to dare to look at him as if he were nothing more than a piece of shit stuck on the bottom of her shoe. Betrothed or not, his plans for her were no less diminished. He'd pay her back in full for her sassy mouth and the open contempt she gave him, as well as the scar he now carried on his upper arm.

Hannah inwardly shuddered. Yes, she knew exactly what he thought. She'd slapped his face and kicked his ankles on more than one occasion when his hands strayed to her pert behind or casually brushed the swell at the side of her breasts. Townsfolk were amazed he'd not already captured her and whisked her away to his ranch, because the more she resisted, the more aroused it made him. It made her feel even more sick when he told her his pleasure would be all the greater when she finally came crawling to him of her own volition.

Hannah knew it was only she who stopped McCabe from killing Jacob outright now. Under normal circumstances, he'd have already acquired Jacob's home and land. She also knew that this scheme they'd concocted would appeal to the games and lengths he would be prepared to play in order to get her into his bed.

Like a Mexican stand-off, neither Hannah nor McCabe gave an inch. They glared icily at one another.

Jacob spoke first to diffuse the situation.

"I'd like to propose you give me a year," he said calmly. Hannah was proud of him. He was always in full control of his emotions, even when angry. "When I come back, I'll pay you back every penny my father owed you plus interest."

McCabe made a show of pondering the idea. Then, with a smile that contained no humor, said slowly, "Now why would I do that? It

seems like I'd be the one losing out if you come back with nothing. No debt re-paid, no interest, no revenue from land I could have been using for twelve months."

"I won't fail," Jacob persisted.

McCabe shook his head slowly. Hannah knew he liked nothing more than to watch people squirm. That neither she nor Jacob did that clearly irritated him. It was a dangerous game they played.

"I can't take that risk," he said. "Perhaps you should just pack up and go. And don't bother coming back."

"If he does, I'm going with him, too," Hannah chipped in. She ignored the look that told her that it would never happen. McCabe would put a bullet through Jacob's heart first. She was thinking on her feet. What could possibly tempt the evil bastard to leave them alone for a while?

Suddenly she knew.

Knowing it was *she* whom McCabe was really interested in, and not Jacob's deal, she continued. "But, if you agree to this deal, I'll be staying here to tend the land and horses."

Again, McCabe deliberately considered the thought.

"So you've already told me. How is that going to help pay the debt?" he asked casually.

"The land and house won't fall into disrepair," she explained, equally calmly. "I'll even employ one or two men to keep the place running."

"And?" He still made it sound like a no-deal.

"If Jacob doesn't come back with the money, you still get the land. It'll just be a year late, that's all. But I'll be able to pay you any profits you might have made on the land from those I'll make." Hannah had a good working head on her shoulders. She knew she could do it. She trembled inside. She was so scared but she spoke so clearly and so steadily, no one would have guessed it, except maybe Jacob.

He'd told her so many times he was impressed by her valor and that his heart swelled with the respect he had for her. Well, she would remain that way. She'd striven against adversity back home and now, she would do so here by standing up to a man who'd crushed others. She would continue to be strong, steadfast and loyal, just as Jacob would be with her. He'd already told her it would break his heart if he failed her.

However, McCabe still looked unmoved. "And how would I recuperate my lost interest? Every day you stay here, the debt will only increase."

Hannah knew he'd never refuse what she offered next. She let a little smile slide to the corner of her mouth. No emotion accompanied it. The enticement was all she needed.

"I'll be the guarantor," she said. "If Jacob fails, I'll be the interest. You can take every bit of it out of me." She spoke so evenly and so coolly, she could have been bartering supplies not her body.

"No!" Jacob protested vehemently. He took a step toward Hannah but she raised a hand, showing him her palm, to stop him.

At the same time, a gun clicked. One of McCabe's men leveled his weapon at Jacob's temple.

Hannah's heart raced. It hammered against her ribcage. She needed to get this right, otherwise Jacob would die before her very eyes.

"Be still, Jacob," she said gently. "I have faith in you. I know you'll come back richer. You'll not let me down."

McCabe turned to Jacob. The lustful glint gleamed wickedly in his dark eyes.

"Well, I'm glad Miss Hannah has faith in your preposterous idea," he laughed. "It's more than I do. I hear more men leave California poorer than when they arrived. And deadier."

McCabe licked his lips. Hannah could see he was considering the deal, if only for the sheer hell of it. Her heart pounded and began to

race, wondering what he might say next. After all, he wouldn't be prepared to let her call all the shots. When he finally spoke, it was slow and deliberate.

"What happens if I need an interim payment of interest?"

Hannah gave a silent sigh of relief. It was easier than she thought.

"There will be no interim payments, only a final one," she answered. The steely glare she gave him warned against reneging on any agreement they might come to. She also clutched her rifle in a tight grip. It warned him of how she would repay such an action.

"Anyway," she went on, as that sly smile played at the corner of her mouth, "surely it's better to have a willing payee than an unwilling one?" Once again, she didn't need to spell out how she'd be making her payments. Her eyes said it all. "And after a year, I'm sure there'll be a lot of accumulated interest."

McCabe licked his lips again.

"You sure have balls. I'll give you that," he said, contemplating her offer in a business-like tone of voice. "But I can't have folk thinking I've gone all soft now. Can I?"

"I'm sure they'd never think that," she sneered. "So, do we have a deal? If that's the case, I want it done legally and drawn up by a lawyer, although my word should be good enough. I've never gone back on a promise."

The corner of McCabe's mouth twisted cruelly. Hannah shuddered. She drove a hard bargain but she knew McCabe well enough, by now, to know he'd think it worth waiting for. Especially as he'd be imagining there'd be no end to the fun he could have with her on the run-in to taking his prize.

"Okay, we have a deal." He removed a glove and held out his hand.

The thought of touching his skin made Hannah's stomach turn, but, nevertheless, she reached up and shook it, cementing their agreement. A shiver crawled along her spine as he held on to her fingers a little too long. He stroked his fingertips deliberately across

her palm as he finally withdrew it, and stared her straight in the eyes. It only served to remind her of the evils she would have to endure if Jacob failed.

“My boys here are our witnesses, but I’ll have it drawn up all legal-like if that’s what you want. I look forward to doing *business* with you.” The innuendo clear, his laughter rang out as he whirled his horse around and galloped off.

Jacob hugged her tightly to him after they’d gone. He told her she’d gone mad and that he’d changed his mind about everything. They’d leave tonight, and together. He’d abandon his land to McCabe after all. He, they, would start over again somewhere else. It wasn’t worth risking her honor for.

Hannah squeezed him to her for a moment before shrugging him away. Forceful and adamant as she spoke, she told him someone had to make a stand against McCabe. She doubted any document he produced could ever be deemed watertight, but when Jacob returned, at least everyone would see that they’d had the strength to take him on. Maybe then, the townsfolk and other ranchers might take it as a sign that they could fight him, too. Her honor would never become an issue.

It also gave them a year’s breathing space.

McCabe might be a villain and couldn’t be trusted as far as one could throw him, but he’d enjoy taunting her more during the coming months than actually making her have sex with him. If only for a short while, she’d kept herself safe.

* * * *

“So there’s a document somewhere stating that you’ll become McCabe’s whore if Jacob doesn’t make it back with the gold?” Luke sounded totally flabbergasted, barely able to say the words.

“Signed and sealed,” Hannah answered.

“And Jacob actually agreed to it? I can’t believe a man would stand by and allow his woman to be the collateral on such a madcap scheme.”

“No. I did it on my own. He disagreed with it every step of the way, but I couldn’t let that evil man take everything Jacob’s ma and pa had worked for. Jacob was their only son. They’d come here to make a new life for themselves. It was as much for them as for Jacob. It was also important that we show everyone that McCabe could be beaten”

“So, you’re prepared to put your honor on the line, even though it was his father who lost it all in a card game?” Jed drawled dryly. “You must be mad.”

“You don’t understand. It was more than that. He was cheated out of it. Like I said, someone has to stand up to McCabe. He’s driven too many good folk out of their homes and taken too much of their money. If we stood up to him, maybe it might make others do the same.”

Luke shook his head in disbelief, his mouth set in a grim line.

“It’s still disgraceful. A man should protect a woman, not the other way around. And there’s still no guarantee he’ll give back the deeds even if Jacob does make it back in time,” he said. “Men like McCabe don’t have a decent bone in their bodies. He’s still likely to end up killing him, take the land, and you, after all. You should have gone with Jacob when he told you to. You could have started over again.”

“What with? Jacob has nothing. Neither have I. This way, we still have a chance.”

Jed shook his head.

“Sorry, I can only see one winner here,” he said slowly. “There may be tales of those making their fortunes with gold but I’ve yet to meet one. There are too many whores, card games, and hard liquor out there for men to spend their gold on. Life’s hard so men play hard too.”

“Not Jacob,” Hannah protested vehemently. “He’d never do anything like that. He promised every grain, every nugget he found would be marked ‘Hannah’s Gold.’ That every bit of it would go to pay off his father’s debt and release me from mine.”

Chapter Sixteen

Hannah couldn't contain the restlessness she felt. Her heart thumped loudly and strongly in her chest. Its erratic beat leaped to her throat every time she recalled her conversation with the two brothers. They'd not been at all positive about any possibility of Jacob's success or return. It only fuelled her own fears that she'd experienced more and more over the past few days. The deadline drew near and there'd been no word from Jacob in months.

During the past year, she'd lain awake many a night wondering how Jacob fared, whether he'd found her brother, and whether he'd found a rich vein of the precious metal that would be their salvation. In all that time, just as from her brother, she'd only received one letter but, in it, he had told her so much.

He spoke of the rains that had come unexpectedly, the mud, and the ramshackle, ungodly towns that made their little town look wholly civilized, despite McCabe's cruel grip. He'd also written that he'd sought out a good spot and spent hours each day panning for the shiny nuggets and grains that would pay off their debt.

Despite the grim life that Jacob portrayed, he'd sounded optimistic and positive that it wouldn't take him long to get the money they needed to pay off McCabe. He'd also asked around about her brother, and one or two prospectors said they thought they'd seen him. They said he'd struck it lucky a little way upriver. But, as yet, he hadn't found him.

She read his letter over and over again.

He told her that, each day, he weighed in his finds, and that he'd found a bank, newly opened, into which to entrust his money. He only

kept back enough to pay for food and lodgings. Unlike other prospectors, who spent it in the whorehouses, saloons, and in poker games, he was determined not to waste one jot of it. This gold was for Hannah, to repay the faith she had in him. He had never succumbed to the evils of gambling as his father had done. He wouldn't start now.

He reiterated his dreams, telling her he'd build up the ranch once more to pass it on to his children. He'd waited for so long for the right woman to share his life. Now that she was here, he was determined he wasn't going to lose her to McCabe's evil clutches.

Hannah loved the things he wrote and she spent many a long night remembering the sweet things he said to her just before he left.

She knew he'd never been short of female admirers but, with a shortage of women in their wilderness town, other young men soon snatched them up. Eager for their soft flesh to warm their beds at night, they hoped to produce the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

She also knew about Becky, a sweet girl who wore her love for him on her sleeve. He'd been stepping out with her before Hannah arrived. Hannah also knew she would have married him and borne him a houseful of children if only he'd asked. But he hadn't. Instead, he seemed to forget all about her when Hannah stepped from the wagon, looking for her brother, William.

From William's last letter to her, Hannah knew he'd bedded down in Jacob's stable for a few weeks before moving on to California. Jacob told her that, during the brief time William spent with him and his father, he'd told them all about his headstrong younger sister whom he'd left behind to support his scandal-ridden family. Jacob also told her that William's description of her sassy ways had been enough to make him fall in love with her before he even clapped eyes on her.

Hannah's thoughts churned through her brain. Her head whirled with them. As she tossed and turned in her bed, even the memories of

when William left her and her family came tumbling back. How, at the time, William had told them he was sorry but, with everyone calling for their heads, he felt he had little choice. As the eldest and only son, he felt it was his duty to try to make his fortune elsewhere, and out of reach of those who'd once deemed them friends but now treated them with hate and contempt. It wasn't his family's fault their father had made some bad financial calls but that wasn't how others saw it.

At first, Hannah had been angry with William. Her mother and sisters had wept and wailed. However, eventually, she saw he'd had little choice. Before leaving, though, he made sure his mother and sisters had a roof over their heads and that they had some sort of income, however small. After that, Hannah took it upon herself to rally round and organize them all. Once she'd accepted his imminent departure, she'd taken everything in her stride. She faced the demons head on. Their father's suicide had driven their mother to hell and back and she'd needed immense support to help her through it. Hannah became her rock.

By the time she arrived here, in town, Jacob knew almost everything about her. William had told him the lot.

Initially, Jacob placed himself in the role of her protector. It was his promise to William. However, later, when Hannah showed him her tenacity in learning how to milk a cow and how to grow vegetables, he told her she absolutely bowled him over. In addition, she amazed him with her expertise with horses.

Having ridden in the parks back home, she'd often stayed behind in the stables to groom and tend the creatures. Yet, when Jacob showed her how to really handle them, she proved a natural. She loved to feel the wind in her hair and the sun on her face. As she rode the wide, open spaces, Hannah quickly knew this was the life for her. It also wasn't long before they became really close. That was when Jacob confessed to her that he'd fallen for her, even before he clapped eyes on her.

For a tough cowboy, Jacob certainly had a way with words, and Hannah loved to hear them. He'd run his fingers through her hair, calling them his dazzling, golden curls, and he'd say, so charmingly, that her beauty mesmerized him. That her sapphire blue eyes were like two clear, bright limpet pools that sparkled with the adrenalin of adventure. Her bones would melt as she smiled back at him, and gaze into his warm brown ones.

He told her that her mouth was like a luscious rosebud, and that her lips rendered sensuality so wonderfully reckless, no wonder they attracted men to her like bees around a honey pot. She was a delight to behold.

He whispered such wonderful, sexy things to her, she was totally besotted by him. He'd tease her and tell her she oozed sexiness by the way her hips swung when she walked, and that he loved the way she tilted her head so sassily when the men tormented her. Moreover, he'd murmur in her ear that he loved her quick tongue which gave back as good as she got. His words sent tingles down her spine.

After the stifling, constricted existence she'd lived for the past twenty years, Hannah now felt truly alive. Suddenly, she and Jacob shared their thoughts and ideas as though they'd known each other all their lives. The attraction between them became too much to endure and before long, unable to stem their growing lust for each other, they made love.

Hannah sighed with frustration. With all these thoughts trampling roughshod through her brain, there was no way she was going to sleep. She swung her legs from the bed and ran her fingers through her hair. Her head pounded and, her body ached. She missed the way Jacob's hands touched her skin, and traced pathways around her body, caressing her swollen breasts until she moaned and sighed with tortured need. She also missed the way he pried her apart with his expert fingers, releasing her fluids, until her passage became slick and

wet, ready to welcome his hard shaft as he thrust into her. She sighed again. That hot, needy ache resurfaced, ravaging her flesh and soul.

A sudden twinge of guilt raked through her heart that maybe she'd betrayed Jacob with the two strangers, but she'd been unable to help herself. After all, he'd been the one to release the sleeping dragon within her. The two cowboys had only stirred up feelings she'd successfully put away this past year. She'd been so touched by their kindness, unlike that from everyone else around her.

Neighbors and townsfolk had been wary of her ever since she arrived. She was a newcomer who, not only had taken the most eligible man around, but who'd also caught the eye of the most dangerous man in town. They treated her with respect but they knew she was strictly off limits in any shape, way, or form. They suspected she'd be heading for McCabe's bed once he'd disposed of Jacob and his preposterous scheme. She'd even overheard some saying that it served her right. She'd broken poor Becky's heart, snatching Jacob away from her like she had. Yes, Hannah had heard all the whispering, as well as the not-so-quiet comments, said behind her back.

At the same time, though, some said they secretly admired her courage. Yet, they also condemned her stupidity. They muttered scathingly that was Jacob's downfall, too. He should have stuck with Becky instead of having had his head turned by this woman. That way, he wouldn't be in all this trouble either.

She knew even McCabe had expected her to have given up before now but she hadn't. In fact, she knew her stubbornness impressed him all the more. After Jacob left, it wasn't long before his last few remaining ranch hands fell by the wayside, helped along by a few well-placed threats. Within six weeks, she was totally alone but still she continued to trade where able, just as Jacob had shown her. She lived her life frugally, but with no men to help her, the ranch had begun to fall into disrepair, and it was no good hoping anyone in town would be brave enough to come to her aid. McCabe just bided his

time, smiling sweetly at her and telling her how hard she was trying, and that it would make his prize all the sweeter when the time came.

After supper, the two brothers had offered to stay a few days to help her out with a few jobs. She wasn't naive enough to think it was just to mend fences or nail a few boards on the stable walls. After all, they didn't think Jacob would come back either, so what would be the point? However, they did express an interest in her deal with McCabe and his eagerness to bring it to an early conclusion. They told her she needed a pair of strong hands in more ways than one. Maybe they could even help her to find a way out of the bargain she'd made. Despite her earlier bravado, Hannah didn't feel as confident about Jacob's return any longer, nor was she in any rush to finalize the deal.

The thought of sex with McCabe made her blood run cold, especially the things he had in mind. He'd told her often enough, and they were not at all like the delightful, pleasurable things the two cowboys had done to her earlier.

"A gentleman always makes sure the lady comes first," Jed had said with a mischievous grin slapped across his face. "And my brother and I are true gentlemen." Although the last thing Hannah had felt like was a lady as she'd shared her body with them. Nevertheless, she couldn't help smiling to herself in the darkness at Jed's roguish charm and Luke's gentler nature. A frisson of excitement shivered down her spine.

She stepped from her bedroom and recalled how she'd begun to pleasure herself while secretly watching him in the bath. His broad shoulders and strong chest had drawn her eyes to him first but when they'd slipped to his flat, washboard belly...

She gave a start. Suddenly, the memory of his manhood protruding stiff and proud from the dark curls nestling between his legs and rising toward his navel, made her hot. Blood began to pound through her veins and heat pooled in liquid jelly at the confluence of her thighs. She ran her hand round the back of her neck and lifted her

hair from out of the sweat now sitting in little droplets on her skin. Her nightgown stuck to her back and breasts. She needed some air.

What the hell was wrong with her? Twelve months without a man's touch and a stranger's kindness and handsome body already turned her into a whore.

She stepped outside onto the front porch and sucked in the cold night air. She let it waft over her skin to cool her burning flesh and evaporate the dampness that sat, wet and slick, on the surface of her skin. She raised her eyes to the black, velvet sky.

Studded with stars that sparkled and winked down at her, the constellations looked clear and beautiful. It all looked so peaceful up there. She wished she felt as tranquil.

She gave another start as the wooden boards creaked behind her.

"I take it you can't sleep either," a voice said softly in her ear.

Chapter Seventeen

Luke had lain awake, listening to Jed's snoring. The smell of horses and straw filled his nostrils. The stable was more comfortable than the hard ground he'd lain on these past few months but he did miss opening his eyes and looking up at the night sky.

He'd also have preferred to have shared Hannah's bed but, after her willing participation earlier, she had appeared a little reluctant to mention it again after supper. Instead, she'd suggested that they might like to bed down in the stable rather than make the journey back into town. Furthermore, she'd suddenly looked a little shy and nervous, concealing the hot blood and sexual frustration that had overwhelmed her with such passion earlier. Luke respected her need for some solitude and went with Jed to the stable.

They'd readily accepted her invitation to stay but with more in mind than just a night's stopover. They decided they'd keep an eye on her. She was worth more than just ending up as McCabe's sexual toy.

Alone in the stable, Jed had reiterated his doubt that Jacob would be returning, even taking into consideration that he might still be alive. Too many men out there wanted to make their fortunes. With poker games rife and stealing the norm, if a man did strike it lucky, there were always other ways to get gold from him. A stray bullet never came amiss.

Also, as for her brother, apart from that one letter, Hannah hadn't heard from him either.

What use was he?

He was as bad as this Jacob for abandoning Hannah and the rest of his family after their father killed himself.

They'd remained silent throughout her tale, especially when she went on to tell them about her father and family back East. Only a brief glance, between Jed and himself, acknowledged that this was the source of their father's ruin, too. Although, back then, they'd laughed cruelly at Cornelius Turner's demise. They'd heard all the stories of how his brains had been splattered all over his parlor wall. At the time, they decreed he deserved everything he got. They were only sorry he'd taken the coward's way out and hadn't stuck around to face his creditors who'd thought their money safe in his bank. Luke and Jed had never given his family a thought about the suffering they must have endured too.

Now, however, they realized, he'd done more than let down his customers. He'd let down his family, as well. At least their father had the good fortune to find a good investor who had faith in his business. It also gave his sons chance to get away for a while until the furor surrounding Rose and Jed died down. Yet poor Hannah had been let down by so many men: her father, her brother, and now this man.

So, what made Luke think he could do any better? After Jed got himself mixed up with the Chandler girl and supposedly made her pregnant, he'd gone out of his way to prove the child couldn't possibly be Jed's, causing a dreadful scandal himself. As far as he was concerned, the girl had deserved everything she got. She was a scheming and manipulative little harpy, who carried a child as the result of an affair she'd had with a married property developer. The man had dropped her like a ton of bricks the minute she told him about it.

He and Jed had worked for him, through their father, and her flirtatious dalliances with the man hadn't gone unnoticed. When he stated categorically that he didn't want her around him anymore, they assumed he'd merely tired of her attentions or that his wife had found

out. Rose had bawled and wailed, but her tears soon stopped flowing once Jed offered her a few kind words.

Of course, they hadn't known about the baby then.

Jed had had a fancying for her for a while. Unlike other women, however, Rose had always kept him at arm's length. Any other man would have taken the hint long before. Not Jed. He saw her as a challenge.

Usually, women melted like putty in his hands, although, with his quick smile and little-boy charm, there was nothing little boy about Jed. His strong masculine physique and flirtatious compliments had the girls buzzing round him like bees round a honey pot. But not Rose. Rose thought herself too good for him.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, Rose changed from cold, aloof ice maiden, into a hot little madam. She welcomed his brother into her bed before he had chance to draw breath. After months of rejection and being snubbed, she was his for the taking. Every spare minute he had, he spent with her. Her charm and sexual prowess had him captivated. Jed even began to think himself in love.

Their father hinted that a union between their two families could be good for business, especially as Rose Chandler came from a good family.

A marriage looked imminent, particularly when she told him only a couple of weeks later that she carried his child.

However, Luke had his doubts. He'd noticed Rose's change of dress-style for a while. He even expressed his concerns that she might be hiding a secret. Had Jed actually seen her totally naked, he asked him? Or did they confine their romping to the dark or under the covers? Hadn't he noticed how her breasts had swollen and suddenly become more lush? Was she hiding something beneath her clothing that she didn't want him to see?

As usual, Jed couldn't see further than his cock.

It was only when Rose lost the baby that Luke later discovered that the baby was too well-grown to have fit the dates Rose had given. Rose had well and truly hoodwinked his brother. She'd never been interested in him at all, except as a man who could provide her child with a name. Moreover, once she and Jed had married, there would have been nothing he could have done about it.

When Luke confronted her about it, she'd wept and wailed, accusing him of maligning her good name, but she never actually denied it. She said that his brother had taken his pleasure out of her, so it was only fair that he should do the right thing by her. Rumors already ran rife that she'd lost a child. She had a reputation to uphold. Jed had taken advantage of a poor defenseless girl. He should pay the consequences.

Luke disagreed. He'd been prepared to keep it all quiet if she'd just let Jed down gently but she'd kicked up such a fuss. He quickly decided Jed wouldn't be the one to come out of it all dishonorably. Even though his brother should have kept his dick in his pants as far as the little shrew was concerned.

However, as it happened, he didn't need to worry about leaking the news. Servants had a good way of spreading the dirt too when they wanted to, and Rose had never endeared herself to any of hers. The argument between them was clearly heard by all and, before long, everyone knew about Rose Chandler's indiscretions.

Then the bank crisis occurred. It forced their father to look elsewhere for finance. When he found it, there was no immediate room for his sons as well so Luke took the opportunity to whisk Jed away before Rose really got her vengeful claws into him. He'd already got his revenge by leaving her to face the scandal alone. The long, hard ride they found on a cattle drive was just what the two men needed to put everything behind them.

It now struck him as funny how paths in life crossed. It had all coincided with the bank collapse, and here he was, worrying about the daughter of the very man who had almost ruined his father. So, with

his head, full of reflection, he sat in the darkness on Hannah's front porch until he heard the soft sound of footfalls. She'd risen from her bed and stepped out into the moonlight.

For a few minutes, he sat quietly in the shadows, watching her. He couldn't drag his eyes away from her slender figure. Her nightgown buttoned high to her neck, with long sleeves that reached her wrists. In fact, the whole garment hung shapelessly over her slight frame but, where it draped, it touched the delightful curves he'd had the pleasure of handling and stroking only a few short hours before. They were a feast for sore eyes. In the moonlight, as his eyes devoured her, Luke saw two tight little buds protrude against the loose cotton as it brushed against her nipples.

He'd told his brother earlier that they wouldn't touch her again. It wasn't right to take advantage of a defenseless woman. Jed had just laughed at him when he used that phrase. He told him there was nothing defenseless about Hannah. If he'd seen how she'd been panting, all hot and bothered, while she'd peeked through the crack in the door, watching him scrub his armpits and wash his balls, he wouldn't be bedding down in the straw, with the smell of horses filling his nostrils. He'd be treading a pathway to her bed and supping on the sweet honey that had run smooth and creamy from her tight little cunny.

Jed was right. That's exactly what he should have done. Unable to sleep, Luke couldn't stop thinking about her. He'd had to grab his cock and squeeze hard to stop the blood rush and ease the ache in his balls. However, it didn't stop the thoughts rolling round his brain that it might just be to his advantage if this Jacob didn't make it back. Over supper, she'd said that she loved him. But then, she would, wouldn't she? Barricading her emotions behind a huge wall, by telling them she loved this man, it also told them she was off-limits, despite everything that had happened earlier. Nevertheless, as the evening wore on, it didn't stop him noticing that she found it harder to meet

his eyes than Jed's, and when she did, Luke saw the same thing nagging at her as at him. That a mighty big battle of lust was going on between them.

Maybe it was because neither of them had been intimate with the opposite sex for a while, he thought logically, if it was possible to think logically with an excess of hormones rampaging through his body. They were both pretty much sex-starved. All the same, whatever it was, it also gave Luke a mighty strong urge to help her out of her present predicament. No decent woman should have to put up with the likes of McCabe. That was why he said that he and Jed would stay awhile. He'd make sure that he and Jed would devise a plan.

"Ha!" Jed mocked yet again as they'd bedded down for the night, talking for a while as they always did. "And what do you reckon we do? Go in all guns blazing and shoot the fuckers up? I think if we do that, the only ones to end up six feet under will be us."

"We didn't do so bad earlier," Luke replied, a little naively, but at the time, he'd not had the benefit of Jed's earlier conversation with the two whores.

Jed filled him in on all the details. He told him that the women were very proud of what they'd done to help Miss Hannah but that they would now need to watch their backs. McCabe owned the town and everyone in it. He had his sights set well and truly on her, so it might be best if they left as fast as they came.

Jed also told Luke he'd laughed at their concern, and said that he had no intention of leaving—at least, not until he'd fucked them both again. The women had giggled and teased him mercilessly, and had been more than happy to let him do so. They told him they could at least say they'd been screwed by one man hard enough to stand up to McCabe. His blatant bragging had brought the first smile to Luke's lips in a while. Nevertheless, Jed's revelations made Luke's head spin. He'd always been the one with the ideas but, this time, none would come.

What was more, he couldn't get past wondering why he really wanted to help her. What would be in it for him? A spirited little filly, she certainly fired him up in a way no other woman ever had. Was he thinking of persuading her to go away with him?

And then what?

Settle down?

Marry her?

It scared him to think of such things. He'd only known the woman a few hours, yet she'd gotten right under his skin. Jed always said he was a sucker for lost causes and vulnerable creatures. Maybe he was right. Left here alone, she was very vulnerable, and her plight appeared a definite lost cause.

Eventually, worn out with all his thinking, he decided he'd do what he could to help her before moving on. Maybe if he screwed her a few more times, her novelty and freshness might wear off, but still unable to sleep, he walked back to the house and sat on the porch for a while, until she walked out.

Hannah gave a start when he spoke. She smiled a little unconvincingly at him.

"The night's too hot and I've got too many things going on in my head," she said.

Despite the brave face she put on for the rest of the world, Luke sensed her unease.

Damn everyone for having left her alone, and so friendless, in this godforsaken town. He wanted to fold her into his arms and comfort her as he had earlier. But he didn't. After earlier, he needed to administer some self-control. A rush of blood already coursed through his veins. Her nearness and soft, musky scent played havoc with his senses. Using her body to satisfy his lustful needs would make him as bad as McCabe.

The air crackled between them and the silence that surrounded them pounded in their ears. Their eyes locked and, for ten heartbeats,

neither spoke. Eventually, Hannah gave a little cough to clear her throat.

“About earlier,” she said quietly. Her big, round eyes still captivated Luke’s. “I don’t usually, I mean, I never, I haven’t—”

“Done anything like that before?” he finished for her.

She swallowed. Her pretty throat quivered as it rose, and fell with the awkwardness of her admission. She shook her head.

“Then I’m honored that you chose me and my brother,” he smiled, gently reassuring her.

“I don’t know what came over me. I-I think I should be feeling terribly guilty about it but, but I don’t think I do. Is that so awful?”

Luke reached out to her and brushed a stray lock of hair from her eyes. Its softness flashed a tingle of static from his fingertips down into his groin. It paused momentarily on its journey to flip his heart. He caught his breath as he watched her eyes darken, almost black with yearning. Whatever was happening to him, he knew she felt it too.

She raised her hand and caught his huge hand in her tiny one. Hard work had roughened it but, to Luke, her delicate fingers felt as soft as driven snow. A fresh shiver snaked through his body. He drew her close, letting his free hand find the small of her back. The loose cotton of her nightgown compressed between his palm and her flesh. It molded against her soft curves as he pressed her to him. He felt every delightful undulation of her body against his as if nothing lay between them.

In his arms, Hannah moaned. The breath caught and rasped in her throat. Her lips parted. Their soft fullness beckoned. She flicked her tongue across them, making them wet and shiny. Luke could scarcely breathe. Hot blood pulsated through his body. Desire crawled across his skin and invaded every erogenous zone he possessed. It sparked lightning bolts along every nerve in his body, charging it with electricity as he gazed at a woman he knew had the power to

manipulate him to blissful peaks of satisfaction. His longing sharpened as lust cavorted wildly within him.

In one swift, fluid movement, his lips met hers, working them in frenzied passion. Hannah opened her mouth in submission and to receive his probing, searching tongue. He slipped it inside the warm, soft cavity. As she met it with hers, their tongues danced and curled with a deep, powerful urgency.

As Hannah's body molded against Luke's strong one, his cock, now a hard ridge, straining at the front of his pants, pressed hard against her belly. She raised her hips toward him. He gave a low moan, craving the breathtaking sensations that he knew this woman could provide. He felt her breathing become short, while ragged bursts trembled in her throat. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly against his chest. When they parted, she grasped his hand more tightly in her own and dragged him inside the house and toward her bed.

And despite his earlier resolve, Luke let her.

Chapter Eighteen

Jed tethered his horse at the hitching post in front of the saloon. On the trail back into town, the sky had been clear, and the silvery light of the full moon had illuminated his way.

The town was in darkness. Only a few flickering lanterns still lit up the saloon bar, with all quiet inside. It wasn't like the rowdy singing and cavorting that would still be going on in the town they'd left yesterday morning. There, drinking and fornication would be going on until daybreak.

Jed had woken when Luke crept from the stable. His brother had tried not to disturb him, but weeks of light sleeping out on the trail, when always on the alert for danger, was a hard habit to break.

He'd lain for a while, listening to the mumbling voices up near the house. When it all went quiet, he'd dozed for a short time. He'd woken a little while later but his brother hadn't returned. Jed wasn't about to hand out prizes for guessing where he would be. However, they'd spent too long watching each other's backs, so he rolled out of his bed and pulled on his shirt and boots.

He made his way up to the house and slowly pushed open the door. He stopped for a moment and listened. He grinned at the sounds that met his ears. Grunting and groaning, and ooh-ing and aah-ing, along with heavy breathing and creaking bed springs, told Jed exactly what his brother was up to with the lovely Hannah. It amused him that only a few hours earlier, Luke had categorically stated they should keep their hands off her.

For a moment, he felt tempted to join them. Memories of their earlier threesome threaded a pleasurable pathway into both his brain

and his cock but, reluctantly, he decided he wouldn't disturb his brother's time with her. After all, he'd done enough fucking for the both of them with the two whores he'd left back in town. Luke needed a bit of catch-up time. Jed just hoped Luke wouldn't get his fingers burned. One way or another, the woman had trouble written all over her.

He sat on the rocker on the front porch for a while. Now wide-awake, he was in no mood for sleep so he saddled up his horse and followed the trail back into town. Maybe the two strumpets were still around. If not, he'd find some other soft, warm flesh to keep him company for the night.

He pushed open the swinging doors. The place looked near deserted. A couple of cowboys, who had abandoned their game of poker, sat in a corner. They'd turned their interests on to three saloon girls who now paid them close attention.

Another girl sat alone in the shadows. A large black, crocheted shawl partially covered her turquoise, satin dress. She pulled it tightly around her shoulders. The feather adornment that she wore in her long, dark, wavy hair had fallen askew. It wobbled to one side. She looked a little worse for wear as she slugged back whiskey from the glass sitting on the table in front of her.

He recognized her as the Irish girl he'd fucked earlier. She obviously remembered him too. Her brief glance darted quickly across the room in his direction but she made no move toward him. She just poured herself another glass of whiskey and swigged it down in one go.

Jed's boots clip-clopped noisily on the wooden floor. His spurs jangled rhythmically with each steady footfall. The two cowboys and their girls paused to observe the newcomer for a moment. Just as quickly, they returned to their canoodling. The bar tender who'd been sitting on his stool, his head nodding in impending sleep, stood up sharply. He looked slightly bemused. Jed was sorry to have entered

his saloon at such an ungodly hour. He imagined the man had been hoping to close up once the girls had taken the two cowboys to their rooms.

“Evening, cowboy,” he greeted sleepily. “What can I get you?”

Jed ordered another two whiskeys and tossed some coins onto the counter. He told him to keep the change. He carried the glasses across to the Irish girl.

He expected a little more enthusiasm, especially after the good time he’d shown her and her friend earlier but she only drew her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. She idly stuck out a foot and pushed the chair beside her out from beneath the table so that he could sit down.

“Thanks,” he smiled as he sat and set one of the glasses before her.

As she turned to face him, he caught the full view of her face in the lamplight. The sight smacked him hard in the gut. It looked far from pretty. Her left eye was bruised, and a nasty cut to her upper lip had already scabbed over. The swelling surrounding it appeared extremely tender. Another bruise to her lower jaw looked sore.

“Shit,” Jed exclaimed in concern. Stretching out his fingers, he gently touched the offending marks. “Who the hell did this to you?”

The girl didn’t reply immediately. Instead, her eyes welled up and tears sat, like raindrops, glistening on her lower lids.

“It comes with the territory,” she said. “Some men are rougher than others. It isn’t unusual to find an overzealous and violent punter from time to time.”

“Bastard,” Jed replied angrily. “Tell me who did it and he won’t do it again. No woman deserves to be treated like that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied with a little shake of her head. “You won’t get away with it a second time.”

Jed’s brow pulled together in a frown. His gray-blue eyes darkened at her words.

“Second time? You mean one of McCabe’s men did it?”

She hesitated for a moment and then shook her head again.

"No, it was Mr. McCabe himself."

"Bastard," he spat again. He reached out and gently touched her face once more. He tenderly stroked her swollen lip with his thumb but she winced and pulled away.

"Sorry," he apologized. He hadn't intended to hurt her. "Tell me where he is and we'll see if he's as tough using his fists on a man."

"Are you crazy?" she exclaimed, giving him a hard stare of disbelief. "His men would kill you before you got anywhere near him. He already has you and your brother in his sights after what you did earlier. That's why he took me and Lydia up to his ranch. He knew we'd been entertaining you and he wanted to know all about you both. It irritated him that we didn't actually know a thing." She paused briefly. For the first time, a little smile slipped to her pretty mouth, curling it almost grotesquely as it battled with the swelling. "Except that you were a damn good fuck." But her smile faded almost as quickly. Jed watched her blink back the tears and fix her jaw, grinding her teeth as she attempted to take control of her emotions. "So, instead, he decided to amuse himself with us while we were there. And Mr. McCabe likes giving pain. Lots of it."

A muscle twitched in Jed's jaw as he worked it hard, fighting the growing anger clawing at his chest and belly.

"And where's Lydia now?" His concern now stretched to the other girl with whom he'd spent such a pleasant afternoon. But speaking the girl's name also filled him with guilt that he'd never taken the time to ask their names earlier. He'd given them ridiculous nicknames like "Irish" and "Beauty." He'd been too concerned with his own bodily needs to respect them fully. "I'm sorry. I don't know *your* name."

"Maggie," she half-smiled. "And she's still there." Her smile quickly faded again. "But she isn't the first and won't be the last."

“Fuck,” Jed spat. He kept his voice deliberately low. “And it’s my fault.”

“No,” she reassured him. “He’s taken all of us up there from time to time. There’s nothing he likes better than to degrade and humiliate women.”

“So he’s done this to you before?”

“And to others.”

“But he chose you this time because me and Luke saw off his men?”

Maggie didn’t reply immediately. She just sort of shrugged. Her big round eyes gave him all the answer he needed. He ran a hand over his face.

Dammit. He wanted to go and give the bastard a taste of his own medicine. But the girl was right. If he rode over there now, his men would probably put a bullet through his head before he even got face to face with the fucker. Nevertheless, he had to do something. It only reiterated what Hannah had told them about the evil bastard. He needed dealing with permanently before Hannah was subjected to this kind of treatment, too.

“You’re staying with Miss Hannah, aren’t you? That’s where your brother went. And where you went after you left us, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he answered. It felt as though she’d just read his thoughts.

Maggie put her tiny hand on his forearm. “You’ve got to help her,” she implored. “It’s all a big game to him. She’s a decent woman. She shouldn’t have to put up with his violent, pervert ways.”

“Neither should you,” he said softly. He folded her hand gently into his big one and covered it with his other. “Did he force you into all of this too? Being a whore and all? After all, that’s what McCabe’s planned for Hannah, once he’s done with her, isn’t it?”

Maggie gave a short laugh.

“No,” she said. She appeared amused by his concern. “I’ve always been a whore. It was the only way to earn a living back home in Ireland. I did entertain an idea at one time, when I made the journey

to America, that I might take up a trade or even get myself a hard-working husband. But there still wasn't enough work, even over here. With the docks full of brothels, I found it easier to lie on my back and open my legs than work my fingers to the bone, scrubbing floors and being at the beck and call of some snobby woman who thinks me and my kind no better than the dirt on the bottom of her shoes. I put a bit of money to one side and I keep myself clean so maybe one day I might find a kind man, who doesn't care what I once did for a living."

Her voice trailed away. The sound of futility in it told Jed that, for now, it was just a distant dream. She paused for a second but, then, continued hurriedly, "Miss Hannah, though, she's a lady. Although she doesn't look down on us like other women do. She treats everyone with respect and she shouldn't be forced into our kind of life against her will. That's what he's going to do to her, mind, once he's broken her spirit. And believe me, she's going to have one hell of a baptism up there on that ranch of his where no one will ever hear her cries for help."

Jed watched Maggie's eyes dim, clouded by the wretchedness of her own painful memories. "I'm sorry," he whispered guiltily.

"What for?"

"Well, that men like me only contribute to your misery."

She laughed. It tinkled girlishly in her throat. It made her sound younger than she looked. "Don't be silly. It's not your fault some men are bastards. Some women get themselves hitched to men like that and there's not a damn thing they can do about it. At least we don't have *that* problem. We can try to turn them down." The teasing look, he remembered from earlier, twinkled in her eyes and she gave him a little push. "Anyway, we also have our favorite customers who can satisfy our needs too. And sometimes we're even lucky enough to find a really good man who can make us forget, if only for a while, what we are and why we do it."

She withdrew her hand still nestling in his protective grip and grasped both of his with hers.

“Come upstairs with me now,” she urged. “I won’t charge.”

But Jed would pay, and more. It was the least he could do. She seemed suddenly anxious as if she needed to put memories of McCabe out of her mind. He’d take her in his arms and nurse her aching limbs, while he tenderly worked his magic on her tired body. He stood and followed her to the staircase.

The other cowboys had gone, taking two of the girls with them. The last remaining one sashayed over.

“Mind if I join you?” she brazenly asked. “I seem to recall you and your brother stood up to a certain Mr. McCabe and his men earlier. I wouldn’t mind a taste of you, too, after what Maggie and Lydia told me.”

Maggie hesitated. Jed slipped his arm round her shoulders and drew her close to him. He tenderly kissed the top of her head. Although he knew that a night with him wouldn’t end all her woes, he wanted her to himself for a while. She obviously agreed as she said, “Jed and I have some business first. Give us an hour and then you can join us.”

However, an hour later, Jed rode the trail again. Only this time he headed straight out of town.

He left Maggie with strict instructions.

She was to tell his brother, and no one else, exactly what she had told him next. But Luke wasn’t to come after him. He had to stay behind and protect Hannah until he got back.

He also had to do whatever it took to stop McCabe.

Chapter Nineteen

Luke strode across to the mail office. His boots kicked up clouds of dust as each footstep hit the ground. Fear and anger gripped his heart in fingers of cold steel. How dare his brother ride off and put himself in such danger without a word to him? He'd always looked out for his little brother, getting him out of scrapes when it would have been easier to leave him to it. The man must be mad.

Even worse, the news that Maggie had just given him wasn't at all what he wanted to hear. She'd just told him Jacob was still alive and kicking and would be back in a couple of days, along with Hannah's errant brother.

When he'd woken that morning, curled around Hannah's soft, naked flesh, his erection had grown increasingly harder under the warm blankets as it pressed against her curvaceous bottom and thighs. He even let himself dream for a while of how wonderful it would be to wake like this every morning. They'd made love twice during the night before they finally drifted off to sleep. And although, the first time, he'd withdrawn from her delicious, wet cunny before he came, she'd wrapped her legs around his waist the second time and squeezed him into her. She'd sucked every last fraction of his bone-hard cock into her slick passage. She'd bucked and moaned beneath him and wouldn't let him go. Her legs were like a vise from which he couldn't escape. Nor did he want to.

He'd stopped his thrusting and held his breath. He tried to distract his thoughts and focus his mind on other things until she released him. He begged her to let him go. But she wouldn't. As she slid back from

the dizzy heights of her own euphoria, she smiled wantonly at him and told him she wanted to feel him come inside her, just like before. He wasn't to worry about any consequences. She didn't care about any consequences. She just wanted to feel him spasm and spurt his juices high into her body.

She whispered so prettily, yet so crudely, in his ear. Her warm breath filtered along the sensitive passageway of his ear. It tingled along every nerve, and stroked every cell of his flesh until he could no longer control himself. Panting hard, he made one last thrust and shot every last drop of himself into her warm, soft cunt before collapsing on top of her. When he rolled off her, he slipped his arms around her. Lying close to her, he'd held her tightly, reveling in his position as protector. Her tender flesh melted into his and they became as one.

He waited for her to "deal with things" but she didn't. He knew it was a risk women took when they gave themselves completely to a man but she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she seemed truly comforted by it, taking complete and utter pleasure with him before her nightmare began. Instead, she curled up close and fell asleep before he did. Her breathing slowed into a gentle rhythm. He found it wholly satisfying and wonderful to listen to. But her impending fate with McCabe weighed heavily in his heart.

Fuck the man. He wasn't going to let it end like that. He and Jed would deal with the bastard one way or another.

Luke woke first but all he could do was lie there and watch her adorable face as she breathed slowly and rhythmically. She looked a picture of loveliness. He wished it could always be like this. When Hannah woke too, they made love again. As the sun streaked through the window and onto the bed, it lit up her hair with strands of gold, and bathed both of them in its early morning light. It painted a picture so beautiful, he wanted to lie there with her forever.

When breakfast was ready, he went down to the stable to call Jed and to tell him that they would be staying put until they'd dealt with McCabe, maybe even longer. But Jed's bed was empty and his horse

gone. It didn't take long to deduce where he'd disappeared to, so after breakfast, he rode into town.

A saloon girl sat at the bar. She silently beckoned him over to her as soon as he stepped into the saloon. Luke frowned in concern when he saw her cuts and bruises. Even the dim light of the room did little to disguise the vivid array of colors they'd now become, testament to the beating she'd received.

She slipped her arm flirtatiously through the crook of his and laid her body suggestively against his big frame.

"Pretend you're interested in my services," she said softly against his ear. "I can't see any of McCabe's men around but I don't want to attract unwanted attention. Try to act naturally and treat me as a potential bit of fun. I need you upstairs, alone, to tell you about your brother."

Luke's heart gave a start. Suddenly, he had an ominous feeling. Despite the game she played, the woman, pressing her body into his, seemed unnaturally anxious. And her face, could that be something to do with Jed too? Had McCabe caught them together and given them both a beating? He played her game and followed her up the wooden staircase.

On the way to her room, she introduced herself as Maggie, whispering softly to him that she'd seen Jed the previous night. Closing the door quickly behind them, she turned the key in the lock and spun round to face him. "I tried to stop him," she breathed fearfully. "But he wouldn't hear any of it. He said I had to look out for you and tell you where he's gone and why."

Fearful for his brother's safety, for a moment Luke forgot himself and grasped her roughly by the shoulders.

"Stop him?" he asked. "From going where? What's happened?"

His anxiety now matched hers but, as fear materialized in Maggie's eyes at his violent handling of her, he quickly let her go. He could sense that she was frightened for her safety, too.

"I'm sorry," he said, as he dropped his hands to his sides. "I didn't mean to grab you so hard."

He gently touched her elbow and guided her to the bed. He indicated that she sit beside him. The room was brighter than in the bar-room, and he could clearly see her injuries now. A rainbow of assorted shades and hues, the woman had taken some beating. He wanted to ask her what had happened but fears for his brother overrode any sympathy he had to spare for her plight.

"He came back here last night," she explained. "We talked for a while. He was so angry about this." She indicated her injuries. "But I told him not to worry himself about me. That it happens." Like his brother, Luke felt sick that some grown man had treated her that way. "He got even angrier when I told him Mr. McCabe had done it."

The sickness coiled even more tightly in Luke's stomach. It rose into his chest where it knotted hard. It brought fresh anger and fear churning in his gut, knowing that Hannah would be heading for that kind of treatment too.

"I told him he wasn't to do anything about it. That McCabe has you and Jed already in his sights and that he'd kill you both as look at you after what happened yesterday."

"But he's still gone after him?" Luke cut in. His anger now diverted toward his brother. How could he be so stupid? Did he think he could take on the man single-handedly?

"No," Maggie reassured him. She seemed a little flustered that Luke had interpreted Jed's disappearance incorrectly. "He's gone after Miss Hannah's brother and Jacob."

"What?" Maggie's statement crashed down on him like a ton of bricks. "Where? How?" He couldn't get his head round it. All of a sudden, too many questions crowded his brain, and none made any sense.

She laid a comforting hand over his and told him what she'd told Jed. How McCabe had taken her and Lydia up to McCabe's ranch, and what had happened while he'd kept them there.

“One of his men brought a telegraph from the post office, she explained. “He’d picked it up after McCabe left town with me and Lydia. I was in the bedroom but I could hear their voices. It seems Jacob had sent Miss Hannah a message on that new telegraph we’ve just got in town. It said he was only a couple of days’ ride away and that he’d got her brother with him. He would be back in time to settle the debt. It seems Mr. McCabe has been picking up Miss Hannah’s mail this past year and keeping her in the dark about Jacob’s progress.”

“What?” Luke expostulated. “But that’s illegal.”

Maggie gave him a little look that only confirmed the stupidity of his exclamation. Illegal? Luke decided he ought to now better by now. When would McCabe be worried about doing anything illegal? He expected, like everyone else in town, the postmaster would be shit scared of McCabe, too.

“So, he’s worried he’ll make it back in time, after all?” Luke said as he still pondered over his brother’s sudden departure.

Maggie shook her head.

“No, he’s not worried at all. He’s sent some of his men to kill them before they even get near.”

Ah! Now he understood.

“He’s gone after them. To stop them,” he said.

“Yes,” Maggie nodded.

“Shit!” he swore. “How many men is he up against?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. Her voice caught in her throat. “But I’m scared for him. He’s a good man, your brother. And McCabe’s men are mean bastards.”

Luke sprang to his feet.

“I’ve got to go after him.”

“No,” Maggie protested. She laid a hand against him. “He said you weren’t to do that. You have to stay here and protect Miss Hannah.” She met Luke’s eyes anxiously and paused for a moment.

“In case he doesn’t make it back in time.” Luke knew she only added the final two words as means of hope.

He ran a hand over his worried face as he took a deep breath. He blew it out in one long, slow exhalation. It still remained a futile attempt to quell the tangle of emotions raging inside him. His first loyalty had always been to his little brother, ensuring he always remained safe. But now, with Hannah thrown into the equation, fury filled him that McCabe had reduced him to this. Making a choice between his brother and a woman he barely knew.

Bastard. He wanted to squeeze his bare hands round the fucker’s throat and throttle the life out of him.

“We have to get the townsfolk on our side,” he said.

Maggie gave him another of those looks. “I don’t think there’ll be much chance of that,” she said softly. “They’re all too scared.” She looked scared, too. “And please, don’t let anyone know I told you all this.”

He sat down again and laid a kindly palm against her hurting face. His heart ached to see her suffer so. Not just physically but emotionally, too. He wouldn’t add to it.

“I won’t,” he promised. “But I’ve got to do something.”

Short of barricading Hannah and himself into her home with plenty of ammunition when McCabe came for his prize, he seemed devoid of ideas. Anyway, he wasn’t convinced Hannah would even let him do that. As a woman of principle, she’d stand by the bargain she’d made, however distasteful it might be.

Moreover, once she knew Jacob was on his way back, all Luke’s previous hopes that perhaps her feelings for the man weren’t as fierce as she’d tried to make out, might be for nothing. Knowing Jacob also had her brother with him might reignite any desire she still had lurking for him. After twelve months left alone and living on hope, gratitude could be a mighty tough master to fight.

“And please,” Maggie begged again, as though reading his thoughts. “Jed said not to tell Miss Hannah yet about Jacob and her

brother. There's no point in getting her hopes up high if Jed's too late getting to them." Her words trailed to a whisper.

The futility was clear in her voice. Even she thought Jed's journey would be pointless and that McCabe's men would get to them first.

Chapter Twenty

Luke alternated between sitting and pacing the room as he tried to get his head round Maggie's news. Finally, unable to stand the tension any longer, he made his way across to the mail office.

He flung open the door. It rattled on its hinges and the glass shook in its wooden frame as he slammed it shut behind him. Two middle-aged women, standing at the counter, turned nervously at his noisy entrance. Luke couldn't even find it in his conscience to say sorry for startling them. He strode up beside them, reached over the counter, and grabbed the postmaster by the front of his jacket. The fabric puckered into a bunch of creases around Luke's hand and stretched tightly across the man's back. Luke hauled him halfway across the counter.

"I hear you haven't been delivering some mail," he growled into his face.

The man's eyes grew huge and rolled in their sockets. His face grew pale.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," he stammered.

"Don't lie. You know exactly what I'm talking about," Luke spat back. He pushed the man backward in disgust as he released him. The postmaster staggered for a moment before regaining his balance.

Luke turned toward the two women who now shuffled toward the door. "Sorry, ma'am, and ma'am." He tipped his hat to each in turn, "I don't usually get so fired up. It's injustice and lily-livered cowards who won't stand up to bastards like McCabe that get me riled." He turned back to the postmaster. "What does he pay you to give him Hannah's mail?" he snarled.

The man visibly trembled.

"N-nothing," he stuttered again. "She gets her mail. See here." He scurried toward a wall full of pigeon holes and extricated a letter from one. "Here's a letter from her mama back East. It's just waiting for her to come into town to fetch it."

The two women had made it to the door but Luke needed them to stay. He was sorry he'd frightened them. There'd been too much of that going on round here for too long but he wanted them to hear what he had to say too. So, he indicated that they shouldn't move any further.

"And what about those from Jacob?"

"Th-there hasn't been any," he lied lamely.

"Or that telegraph she got from him yesterday?"

The man's eyes now flitted nervously from Luke to the women watching him from the door. His wife had now joined them and Luke could see a teenage girl hovering in the doorway between the office and the back room.

"I-I don't know what you mean," the postmaster attempted to lie again. McCabe might put the fear of God into him but Luke could see he scared the shit out of him too.

He reached out to grab him again but stopped midway as the man flinched and jumped back a step. Suddenly, he wasn't sure what angered him the most: the way everyone kowtowed to McCabe or the way he now let his anger get the better of him. The way he was performing, he was no better than McCabe and his men.

At his hesitation, the postmaster's wife stepped forward.

"You're a stranger round here," she said more calmly than her husband had spoken. Fear haunted her face but she still pressed on. "You don't know what goes on in this town and you'll soon forget about any *injustice* when you go. So, leave us alone and get out of here while you still can."

Five pairs of eyes fixed firmly on him and Luke could smell their fear. The girl in the doorway almost melted into the jamb. Mesmerized by yet another violent newcomer to the town, she stood and trembled.

Luke's voice softened. "I'm sorry," he said, yet again. "I don't mean to get all het up like this but can't you see he has you all for fools? He's cheated you out of land and money. He treats women with total disrespect." He paused a second. "You all know what's going to happen to Hannah, don't you?"

The three women exchanged nervous glances. The postmaster looked down at his feet as if it might somehow make Luke's accusations go away.

"You do know what he'll do to her once he gets her up to his ranch. What he does to all women he takes up there? That he's got a room there with all sorts of implements." He allowed his words to sink in for a moment. "And when he's done with them, he hands them over to his men to have their fun with them, too. And when *they've* had enough, he sends them out to one of his brothels in the big towns."

Maggie had filled him in on all McCabe's sordid little secrets while he'd been trying to calm down. It had fired him up all the more.

The women flinched at his plain talking but Luke pressed on.

"I suppose you're all just relieved he's set his sights on Hannah and not your daughters. At least she's new here and not one of your own." Again, he paused. "Do you have daughters?" He looked at the postmaster and his wife. "I see you do."

Luke nodded toward the girl still standing in the doorway. A sweet-faced redhead in the early stages of blossoming womanhood, she had tiny, budding breasts and ruby-red lips that would one day tempt young men to kiss them. The postmaster and his wife never said a word. They didn't need to.

The other women didn't reply either but Luke could see from the glint of tears sparkling in their eyes that his words had hit home.

“And what about when he’s done with Hannah? Who’s he going to turn his attention to then? Why should he just please himself with the whores he brings in from out of town when he has all he wants here?”

The postmaster’s wife pulled their daughter protectively into her arms.

“Get out of here,” she spat. “You’re disgusting.”

A muscle twitched in Luke’s jaw as he ground his teeth in despair.

What was wrong with these people?

He took a deep breath and tipped his hat one last time.

Furthermore, what was wrong with him? His outburst had served no purpose to anyone at all, least of all himself.

“You deserve everything you get,” he said cruelly as he stepped back outside and straight into Ethan McCabe.

Chapter Twenty-One

The two men glared coldly at one another.

McCabe gave way first. A cruel smile twisted one corner of his mouth.

“Well, well, what have we here? Still in town? I thought I made it clear yesterday we don’t welcome troublemakers.”

“Then, maybe you should take your own advice,” Luke suggested coolly. How he’d love to put his fist into that supercilious smirk. But the four men accompanying the bastard had already encircled him, blocking any exit from the walkway.

They all drew themselves up to their full height in order to intimidate him but Luke still stood half a head taller. Nevertheless, their mean looks showed they meant business, especially the one with the fat lip and black shiner that Jed had dealt him so effectively the day before.

McCabe laughed carelessly at Luke’s comment. Despite the tough look Luke gave him, he appeared unconcerned, as if he had nothing to fear with so many of his own men with him. He glanced around.

“No brother with you? Where is he? Entertaining himself in the saloon again?” He gave his head a slight toss in that direction. It drew Luke’s attention toward the building where he saw Maggie consoling another woman. She busily folded reassuring arms around her weeping frame. No prizes for guessing it was Lydia whom she comforted.

He turned his attention back to McCabe and paused for a moment. He knew his next comment must be a positive one concerning Jed. McCabe obviously wasn’t aware he’d ridden off during the night to

stop his men from killing Jacob and Hannah's brother. However, one of McCabe's men, the one with the fat lip, beat him to it.

"Maybe if we rough him up a bit, he might come over to help him out again." He drew his gun and stroked it lovingly. "It'd give me real pleasure to deal with him permanently this time."

"Then you'll have to wait a long time," Luke retorted. "He's up at the ranch helping Hannah out with a few chores." He lied so perfectly even he believed his brother was doing just that, and not risking his life for a man he didn't even know.

McCabe raised an interested eyebrow.

"As long as that's all he's doing," he smirked. His steely eyes glowered at Luke. "I've got a deal with that little lady that's ready to mature."

He bit off the end of a cigar and spat it onto the ground.

"So I believe," Luke replied. His icy stare matched McCabe's. Like two predators locking horns, neither would give way.

McCabe's eyes darkened. "I hope you're not thinking of doing something you might regret," he said.

"Like?" Luke taunted.

"Like encourage her to back out of our bargain. After all, it's been done all legal-like."

"As if legalities bother you," Luke sneered.

McCabe struck a match on the heel of his boot and lit his cigar. He flicked the stick to the dusty street. It hissed for a moment before fizzling out. He looked back at Luke.

"I hope you're not slandering my good name." He grinned maliciously. He followed it up with an almost imperceptible nod, as he gave a silent order to the men flanking Luke's sides.

They moved so quickly, Luke didn't have time to react. They pinned his arms behind him but, as he struggled to escape their tight grip, they kicked his legs from under him, too. He staggered for a moment in a useless attempt to remain upright but there were too

many of them. They kicked again, and, despite every bit of resistance he could muster, he was totally at their mercy.

The two cowboys twisted his arms high up behind his back. His shoulders felt almost ripped from their sockets. McCabe's other two cronies took great delight in raining blows to his face, and pummeling his chest and belly with their fists and feet. The breath whooshed out of his body, all wind knocked out of him. Finally, battered and bloodied, he was forced to his knees in front of McCabe.

The man bent forward, pushing his face into Luke's bloody one. He blew a cloud of cigar smoke at him. Luke coughed and tried to turn away. One of the cowboys caught his face in one hand. His fingers and thumb pressed so hard, Luke's teeth bit into his inner cheeks. The man twisted it round until Luke faced his boss, who now gave him the benefit of his advice.

"Now, see here. Because I'm a generous man, I'm giving you and your brother one last warning. Get out of my town and leave things that don't concern you well alone. That way you might just get to live."

He smiled and straightened. Sucking on his cigar once again, he gave his men another silent nod. As he strode off, they each dealt Luke once last kick and pushed him off the boardwalk. Luke collapsed, landing face down on the dusty street.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Unable to move, Luke lay in the dirt for several minutes. His breath rasped in his throat. It came in short, sharp bursts as he tried to suck in air and ease the pain searing through his body. He felt as though someone had stuck a knife through his ribs and the resulting lack of oxygen made him lightheaded. His fingers and toes tingled and he felt sick, although he doubted he even had the strength to vomit. His head spun and a carousel of lights flashed in front of his eyes. It looked like he'd not been so clever after all, telling them Jed was up at the ranch with Hannah.

The street remained deserted, just as it had the previous day when he and Jed had gone to Hannah's aid. With no one prepared to help her then, they definitely kept a low profile over him now. He'd been stupid to think they'd rally round to help her over her deal with McCabe. If the postmaster and his wife were anything to go by, none of them would lift a finger to help even themselves.

"Luke, Luke, are you all right?"

Maggie's soft, Irish lilt pierced the fog that clouded his brain. Mere minutes had passed but he felt as though he'd been lying there for hours, trying desperately to inhale some precious air. As her hands touched his shoulders, he finally succeeded in sucking in that deeper, priceless breath. It brought his head back into focus.

Pain exploded through his body as she helped him to his feet. Doubled over in agony, Luke clutched his ribs and belly. Each tiny movement took incredible effort but he finally made it up onto both legs. Leaning against her, he still towered above the plucky little lady.

He was glad for her help. Maggie was the only one to show him a bit of compassion in this godforsaken town.

“Been better,” he coughed, spitting out a mouthful of blood. He touched his jaw gingerly and moved it slowly from side to side. The inside of his mouth felt sore and full of cuts but at least his jaw wasn’t broken. “How’s your friend?” He indicated toward the saloon where one or two scared faces still peered through the windows. Still no one had stepped out onto the street. They waited for McCabe and his gang to go.

“Not good,” Maggie said softly. Her eyes filled with tears. “He’s a no-good bastard. It’s about time someone did something about him.”

She positioned herself beneath his armpit and supported some of his weight as he stumbled back to his horse. She stood by, watching him in concern as he struggled to climb upon it. He winced with every movement.

“Come back with me. And bring Lydia, too,” he said quietly. “Hannah won’t mind. We’ll dig ourselves in. If no one else will make a stand against him, we will. We’ll beat him or go down fighting.”

Maggie gave him one of those looks that, in such a short time, he had come to recognize well. She made it very clear that she thought it could only ever be the latter. The two of them weren’t enough to win a battle with McCabe and his gang.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling wanly. “But we’ll take our chances here. He’s had his fun with us so he’ll leave us alone for a while now.”

Luke looked down at her from his horse. He admired her spirit. He doubted she was as confident as she sounded. From what he’d learned of McCabe, almost certainly he would see fit to punish her again for coming to his aid. As they’d staggered back to his horse, he’d seen McCabe watching them. He’d looked none too pleased. Nevertheless, Maggie had raised her chin defiantly at him.

Luke’s heart went out to her.

“You sure?” he asked between gasps. His ribs hurt like hell.

She gave a little smile and surreptitiously patted her waist. “Don’t worry about me,” she said. “If he comes back for me again, I’m ready for him this time. I’ll stick him with my knife before does any of those things to me again. I’ll even cut off his vile dick and shove it down his wicked throat if I get the opportunity.”

Luke laid a comforting hand against her cheek. He could see the anger in her eyes. Yes, he really believed she would.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Luke sat naked on the bed while Hannah fussed around him. After he'd slid from his horse in a state of near collapse, she'd helped him into the warm bath that she'd just vacated. It would help to ease the pains in his muscles and to wash the blood from his body. Wrapped in just her cotton gown, she bathed his cuts and dabbed gently at his bruises.

He'd tried to keep quiet but winced several times while she helped him remove his shirt and pants. She cursed McCabe, and she apologized repeatedly for her part in Luke's agony. Luke repeatedly told her that it wasn't her fault, that McCabe was an evil bastard.

The warm water had felt good as it cleansed his wounds. It stung a bit to begin with but, eventually, faded into more of a dull ache. His muscles relaxed a little and he'd lain there like a baby, letting Hannah's hands soothe his hurting body. Huge, red swellings, where McCabe's men had punched and kicked him, would soon turn into a myriad of colors once the bruises developed fully.

Hannah gently dabbed a towel over his wet skin to dry him while he pressed the cold compress, which she'd given him, to his groin. One of McCabe's bastards had dealt him a swift and final kick between his legs. Luckily for Luke, his aim hadn't been too good. On target, it would have popped his balls.

Despite her gentle ministrations, the breath still caught in his throat. As he sat on the bed, sharp pains seared through the sides of his chest. Hannah gently probed and prodded his body, still hot from the bath. Her cool fingers caused tiny goose bumps to stalk his flesh.

"Sorry," she said at his grimace, her voice trembling with anger and distress. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. She swallowed down hard on them. "My hands are cold."

Luke caught them in his. He pressed them to his mouth. He didn't care how cold her hands were. He thought them the most beautiful and most loving hands to have ever touched his body. He needed to savor the moment. After all, he wasn't sure how many more intimate times like these he would share with her. He just wished it was in better circumstances. It was the first time he'd ever sustained such a going over. Usually, he and Jed could avoid such situations but, when they couldn't, they always had each other for support.

He brushed his lips tenderly over her slender fingers as she raised her eyes to his. He all but drowned in her soft gaze. He thought them the prettiest eyes he'd ever seen. His heart rolled around his chest like a ball of tumbleweed, searching for a place to settle. She looked a little shy and awkward but she still managed to give him a little smile as she caught a corner of her mouth between her teeth. Pink and luscious, with a perfect Cupid's bow, they beckoned for him to kiss her. The memory of their earlier kisses sent a frisson of electrical impulses along his lips.

Adding to her awkwardness, she caught the tie of her gown when she stepped away. It loosened and separated a little, revealing the dark valley of her breasts. Self-consciously, she pulled it back together and refastened it more tightly around her waist as a pink flush flooded her cheeks.

"I don't think anything is broken," she announced, practically. "But I'll wind a bandage around your ribs just in case. It may help your breathing." Luke watched her lovely face twist, yet again, in concern for his well-being.

Her still-damp hair fell about her shoulders and she had to keep sweeping it off her face as she bent over him. Transfixed by her every movement, Luke stared at the long line of her neck and the creamy

smoothness of her throat. Slender and elegant, he wanted to reach out and nibble his way around the tender flesh and watch her skin turn to gooseflesh as desire flooded her veins.

Except he didn't. Instead, he wrestled his thoughts that, if Jed was successful, he might soon be in competition with the man for whom she would lay her honor on the line. He reached out and took her hand.

"You can walk away from all this, you know. It isn't even your fight."

She gazed into his imploring eyes. She removed her hand and tilted her chin defiantly.

"Don't you think I've been telling myself that for months? But I made it my fight and I'm a woman of my word."

"But he's nothing to you. Not your family. Not even your husband."

"But he's my friend," she said. "And I have principles. I shall stand by them even if no one else is prepared to do so. Someone has to show these people that they too can have the strength to stand against McCabe, however despicable he is. I saw what weakness did to my father. There is no way I shall ever be like him."

Luke admired her spirit. She was right. Her father had been weak, taking the coward's way out. She put him to shame. He could have learned much from his vibrant, steadfast daughter. She had the strength and fortitude of a lion. His heart swelled. He felt so proud to know her. He took her hand again and squeezed it affectionately.

"You are one gutsy lady, you know that?" he smiled and, despite the bruising to his groin, that tell-tale tingle of desire resurfaced. Hot blood flooded his manhood and he quickly shifted the cold compress, although this time more to cool his ardor than ease the pain. It suddenly throbbed so much more intensely, even though, with Jacob on his way home, and he in so much pain, now wasn't the time to nurture a love affair.

However, common sense was a terrible thing when faced with a barrage of emotions. He couldn't help himself. He caught her fingers again and pressed them to his lips.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The air between them sizzled, and the heavy looks Luke gave Hannah only added to her quandary as she wondered how life could be so cruel as to deal her such a hand.

She thought she'd loved Jacob but, now, she wasn't sure anymore. She even began to question whether she'd just been lost in the excitement of her adventures in this wonderful, new land. Had she just been in love with love? Had she just reveled in the excitement of the lust and carnal joy Jacob had taught her to enjoy and not really loved him at all? So many questions and thoughts gnawed at her very being. Her heart ached with every one of them.

What if Jacob *did* make it back? Would it mean she'd never see Luke or Jed again? Much to her chagrin, the memory of Jed's hands and tongue upon her, manipulating her sensual, wanton body, excited her as much as Luke's.

And what if Jacob *didn't* make it back?

She didn't even want to think about what that would mean.

Because it would mean Jacob would be gone forever.

Yet Luke would be, too.

McCabe had made it perfectly clear to Luke exactly what he was capable of. If he ever dared to cross him again, no way would he let him live. At least Jed was safe and out of the picture, for now.

Her mind spun with the turmoil.

"So, where has Jed gone for help?" she asked a little too brightly, needing to dispel the thoughts suddenly crowding her brain.

She also hoped the distraction would ward off the flush that suddenly stained her neck and cheeks. As she'd fastened the bandages

and touched his bare skin, it only served to remind her once more of the beautiful night she'd spent with him. She'd also seen how his hand had shifted to cover his growing erection at her delicate touch. She needed something to divert her thoughts quickly away from his firm, lean body and long, muscular legs with their forest of blond hairs. Her thoughts were in overdrive, remembering how she'd run her fingers over them that very morning.

She'd stroked all the way up the length of his calves and thighs until she'd reached the bush of darker ones nestling in his groin, where his hard shaft had protruded proudly in all its glory. Taking the rock-hard organ in her hand, she'd stroked along its silken sheath and then impaled herself on it.

She struggled to stifle a moan at the memory, forcing herself to concentrate on wrapping the binding cloth around his torso. At the same time, she inhaled sharply to help her focus. Earlier, Luke had told her Jed had ridden off to get help, although he'd seemed reluctant to say more. She put it down to the pain he suffered.

"He won't get anyone from round these parts to stand up to him, you know," she continued softly when Luke didn't immediately answer. No one had raised a finger yet against McCabe to help even themselves. They weren't going to do so for her. They'd always been friendly and polite to her, but she knew they blamed her for taking Jacob away from Becky. That she was an intruder into their lives.

"I know," he answered quietly. "I tried earlier. Everyone is shit-scared. But I'm not going to let you give yourself over to him. The man's an animal."

She slid her fingers reluctantly from his warm grasp. His lips, pressed against her flesh, felt so good. But this wasn't his fight.

"I made a deal," she said resignedly. "I'll stand by it. It's not your problem."

"You haven't seen what he's capable of. What he's done to those two saloon girls. I'm not letting him do that to you."

Emotion welled up and a huge lump filled her throat that Luke would do this for her. She ran her hand over his scalp, weaving strands of his hair through her fingers. The ends tingled and fired little shockwaves through her arms and down through her spine. He was such a good man.

He slipped his free arm around her waist and drew her close while, at the same time, he buried his face against her soft belly. Sliding her arms around his neck, she stooped a little and kissed the top of his head. Her warm lips pressed against Luke's skull and the wetness of silent tears ran from her cheeks into his hair. He gently drew her down to his level and held her face lightly between his big hands, a look of grim determination etched into his face.

"I mean it, Hannah. I don't care what bargain you made, you're not keeping it. I'll kill him first."

Hannah sniffed. The lump that still filled the back of her nose and throat now threatened to choke her. She reached forward and kissed him ever so lightly on the lips. She didn't want to add to the pain of his injuries. She tasted the saltiness of her own tears as he kissed her back.

"Thank you. You're a good man," she whispered hoarsely. As they broke apart, she slipped to her knees in front of him. "But I can't ask you to do that. His men would kill you before you even got to him. And I did sign a legal document."

Luke slid his hands from her face to her shoulders. He gripped her firmly and fixed his eyes purposefully on hers.

"Legal documents can be undone," he said. "Let him take you to court over it. I don't think there'll be a judge in the country that would uphold such a scandalous deal. In fact, I doubt whether it's legal at all. And let me worry about me. We'll barricade ourselves in here with plenty of ammunition so that McCabe and his men can't get in. We have a couple of days to organize ourselves. And hopefully by then, Jed will be back."

For the first time in nearly a year, Hannah couldn't deny her relief that she had a champion at last.

And she'd been without a champion for so long.

Her body ached.

She loosened the tie of her gown and let the garment fall open.

* * * *

Luke inhaled sharply. His eyes, drawn to her soft curves, fixed on her smooth, creamy breasts. They hung like two perfect globes before him and their rosy tips contracted into tight little buds. They invited his caress and warm lips and tongue to suckle and tease them, circling and nibbling, and lighting the fire that extended all the way down to her womanhood. He moved his hands to her hips and felt the soft roundness of her buttocks beneath his hands as he gazed upon her golden bush, which nestled in a V at the junction of her thighs. The cold compress failed miserably at its job. He brushed it aside and drew her closer to him.

Burying his face into the naked skin of her belly, he inhaled her unique scent and slipped his fingers into her creamy cleft. But a sharp pain seared through his ribcage and made him gasp. He withdrew them and dug his fingers into her round, peachy cheeks as he buried his head against her chest, struggling to catch his breath.

"I'm sorry," he panted. "I don't think I can." He gave a little groan. The swelling in his groin nearly killed him, too. "The spirit is willing but the body hurts too damn much."

Hannah's gaze dropped to his engorged shaft. When she lifted her eyes to meet his, she had a cute little smile playing on her mouth.

"Don't you worry yourself about that," she purred hoarsely. "I'll make you feel better. Lay back and let me help you lift your legs up onto the bed."

Luke tried hard not to groan as she helped him lie down. The picture before him appeared just too outrageously beautiful to result in such a negative sound. Her gown had now slipped completely from her and she stood totally naked. Her curves swelled in all the right places and her breasts jiggled with every movement. His eyes feasted upon every part of her and he felt like a man drunk, but from imbibing beauty not hard liquor.

Having made sure of his comfort, she knelt astride him with her back to his face. She slowly bent over him until she took his cock between her lovely lips and stroked the tip of her tongue across its tender tip, twirling and circling. It drove him to distraction, although he was already distracted enough as he gazed upon her heart-shaped derriere. Her tiny butt-hole and rosy cunny on display for his visual pleasure, she slowly moved back and forth, gently teasing, with every stroke of her lips until she took his full length into the warm, wet cavity of her mouth.

As endorphins flooded his body, the pain magically disappeared. She drooled and licked spit and juices all around his throbbing dick, while he clasped her rear firmly between his hands. Drawing her down to meet his mouth, he jabbed and probed, and lapped and licked her sweet juices. Beneath his palms, he felt the tiny rotations of her hips as she began to move slowly and erotically against him. She gave a little cry.

Luke drew away for a moment to watch the moisture leak from her glistening slit. She teetered on the brink while her breath grated in her throat. Determined to make her wait a little longer, he tormented her rising libido. That way, it would be better for her when she did come. When she started on him again, he lifted his mouth to her clit and clamped his teeth firmly round it, flicking his tongue across it and searching for the trigger.

As she approached her pinnacle, Luke felt the intense rhythmic stroke of her mouth along his cock begin to slow down. Eventually she released him as she gave a little tremor and came, fast and hard,

bucking against his face. Luke held on for dear life until her pleasure reached completion.

She collapsed against him, her face lying against his groin. She sighed against his burning shaft. Her hot breath traveled its full length, and all the way to his balls and round to his ass. He swelled further as his cock lay strained and rock-rigid against her cheek.

At long last, her mouth fell upon him again, resuming its steady rhythm. It built to a crescendo that finally opened the floodgates, bringing with it the heaviness of blissful release as he pumped warm semen out of his body into hers.

He supposed he ought to feel a little guilty, screwing around with another man's woman and not telling her that he could soon be coming home.

But, in that moment, he couldn't give a fuck.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jed had ridden all night and most of the morning. At first, only the moon and stars had been his guide. Later, the rising sun brought with it a clear blue sky, dotted with tiny, puffball clouds. It filled him with a renewed zeal for the freedom of wide open spaces.

This was what life was about, he told himself. Riding the plains and moving from place to place, he'd lay his head wherever the journey took him. After nearly twenty five years in one place, surrounded by the cut and thrust of city life, he welcomed the freedom of his new one. Thank goodness his brother had made him see sense and rescued him from Rose's plot to saddle him with another man's child. He'd been such a fool back then but he knew better now. He loved the fairer sex but, since Rose, he made sure he always stayed one step ahead. He'd never let himself get trapped like that again.

She'd been a hot little hussy once she got her claws into him. She'd really turned his head. He should have suspected something was afoot but he'd been bowled over by her beauty and a sexual appetite that more than matched his own.

She'd been so cool with him for so long. As the son of one of the *nouveau riche*, Jed was not of higher class like herself. Consequently, she'd always treated him with total disregard. His father had worked hard to build up his business, but his roots still lay in the lower classes, and Rose and her family made that very clear. That someone of Rose Chandler's social standing should even consider a match with the likes of Jed Daniels would be nothing short of impossible.

However, with a child in her belly, left by her married lover and which she was eager to conceal, she suddenly became desperate to

find someone to shoulder the blame. She decided she could do no better than blame Jed, and his morals, considering where he'd come from.

Her lover had taught her well in the art of seduction, and she seduced Jed with accomplished skill, although he'd not taken much persuasion. He'd teased and flirted with her for weeks but to no avail. When she suddenly reacted to him, he mistakenly thought his charm and perseverance had won the day. It was only when she lost the baby, and his big brother proved he could work out the dates better than he could, that he realized just how wrong he'd been. It also coincided with the bank crash, when their father lost almost everything. Consequently, Jed's life had been thrust into complete turmoil.

It didn't take Rose long, he thought ruefully, to decide she wanted nothing more to do with him either. With no child left to conceal, and Jed's father virtually penniless she didn't want a husband who couldn't maintain her standard of life. So, she set her cap at someone more suited to her station in society, the man, ready to bail out Jed's father and invest in his company. Matthew Holden.

Along with her family, Matthew was one of the few to survive the debacle created by Cornelius Turner's scandalous monetary shambles. He was also the very gentleman who'd recently been rebuffed by the said man's daughter. For some reason, Matthew Holden seemed to fancy himself as the savior of families who found themselves in shocking circumstances. After all, he'd even been prepared to marry Hannah Turner and support her now widowed mother and brood of sisters, although, he'd watched her catch a train to God-only-knew-where instead.

Jed had heard all the stories about this Hannah. The town had been rife with the scandal. Gossip-mongers had a field day, saying Matthew was plain stupid where women were concerned. Wherever

Jed went, there was someone only too ready to pass on the juicy details.

At the time, Jed had merely shrugged them away, grateful to have had a lucky escape from Rose's scheming, little mind. However, despite never meeting this Hannah, he secretly admired the girl's guts. It took a lot of courage to do what she had done. Now, by a strange quirk of fate, he could see just what attracted men to her, with her strong, forthright manner and pleasing looks.

It was one of the many things he and Luke had discussed earlier in the barn. They agreed she had enough problems without telling her that they already knew everything that had happened to her family, especially as Matthew Holden's broken heart was the talk of the town after she left. He'd milked it for every dime. Women fell over themselves to console him and tell him the girl was off her head to give up all that he offered her, and to travel out West to find her equally troublesome brother. She'd no doubt end up working as a whore, and it would serve her right.

It didn't take long for Rose to wield her charms on Matthew, either, and she returned to treating Jed with unequivocal disdain. She made it plain for all to see. Who needed a poor boy when rich pickings were available?

That was when Luke stepped in. Five years his senior, he'd always looked out for Jed. He made sure he did so then. He wouldn't allow anyone to treat Jed, or his family, with such blatant disrespect, especially a snotty-nosed little hussy who couldn't keep her legs together and try to lay the blame at another man's door.

The uproar that followed became nothing short of absurd. Instead of Rose being humiliated by his denouncement of her morals, Luke and Jed were denounced as the bad guys. Matthew slated their ungentlemanly behavior as jealous revenge that Rose had sought to rid herself of such a cad who had foisted his unwanted attentions on such a sweet girl. Such was Matthew's outrage that the plans he made with their father came close to collapse.

In the end, for their father's sake, the only thing left for them to do was to get out of town. Anyway, they had a baby brother far more suited to the business acumen that their father had always wished they had. Brought up at a time, when he hadn't had to watch his father work hard manually on the factory floor, the way he and Luke had, he'd make a much better partner in the family business. They decided they owed their father a little bit of pride after their condemnation of the Channing clan.

His life flashing before his very eyes, Jed lay beneath the shade of a tall, leafy tree, around noon, and reflected upon the life they had left behind. It also struck him funny that lives could intertwine in the oddest of ways. Meeting Hannah had stirred up all the memories of a time that had once been both the best and worst parts of his life. Certainly after Rose, he decided he'd never get embroiled with another woman again. So he found it ironic that he should now find himself looking out for the very female whose father had ruined their father's business and put him at the mercy of vultures like Matthew Holden.

He drank a little water from his flask and chewed on a piece of beef jerky left over from the cattle drive. If he'd had time, he would have built a fire and made a pot of coffee. He'd even spotted a couple of plump rabbits that would have made a tasty meal. But it was their lucky day. He couldn't spare more than a couple of hours rest, and his eyes felt heavy. A short nap was in order. Maggie hadn't known if McCabe's men had already started off on their journey but he'd catch a couple of hour's shuteye while the sun was at its hottest. Afterward, he'd be more refreshed and alert to take them by surprise, or better still, warn Jacob and William if he reached them first.

Later, when he reached the forest trail, the light was fading. He'd still seen no sign of a single human being. He hoped it was a good indication of things to come.

He started talking to his horse. He'd picked up the habit on the cattle drive when he'd spent hours alone out on the flanks or scouting up front. From the very first day, he found he had a knack for scouting. Luke had often teased him about his odd quirk. In response, he'd only laugh. He'd tell him that he talked to his horse because he got more sense out of it than he did from most of the men. Luke hadn't disagreed with him on that score. Yes, life might have been tough but it was the making of him.

As night fell, the smell of smoke drifted on the air. Jed's belly suddenly growled at the delicious aroma of cooked meat that accompanied it. Some poor creature hadn't been as fortunate as the rabbits he'd spied earlier. He followed his nose until he found himself by a crop of rocks hidden in the trees.

He didn't know who'd made the camp so he tethered his horse to a branch and crept up the bank of rocks until he had a good view of the makeshift camp below him. Set up by a tiny stream, four horses were tethered to a tree. They stood quietly and swayed a little from side to side. Their tails swished rhythmically as they took a welcome break from their journey. In the silence, the only sound was the crackle of flames as it burned freshly chopped wood. The smell of cooked meat also became stronger. It accompanied the aroma of strong coffee. It tickled Jed's nostrils and taste buds, and made his mouth water.

A man sat huddled by the fire wrapped in a blanket, his hat perched atop his head. While watching the meat and the coffee pot, he seemed to have nodded off. The skewered rabbit dripped mouth-watering juices into the flames, making them spit and spark. There also appeared to be another cowboy getting a bit of shut-eye too. A lumpy bedroll lay in the shadows, a little way from the fire.

As he crept a little closer, to get a better look at whom he might be dealing with, Jed suddenly felt the cold steel of a gun barrel press into the back of his neck. It accompanied the click of a gun as it echoed through the evening air.

“Hold it right there, cowboy,” a voice softly growled. “State your business or you’ll be drawing your last breath.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jed's heart skipped a beat. He slowly raised his hands in surrender.

Damn. He was usually better than this. So busy thinking about food, he'd become distracted and failed to hear the gunman creep up behind him. He needed to take things one step at a time now. The man below, by the fire, hadn't moved but for all he knew, more waited in the shadows ready to shoot him.

"Steady on there," he said carefully. "I'm not meaning you any harm. The delicious smell of coffee and food led me here. I haven't eaten since yesterday." At least, he told the truth on that score.

"So why are you sneaking around and spying on us like you are?" his captor asked. "You could have ridden straight into our camp."

Into McCabe's camp?

Into Jacob's camp?

Jed still didn't know who he might be dealing with.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," he explained. "I don't know how kindly you folks take to intrusion." He hoped he sounded convincing.

The end of the barrel pressed harder into the base of his skull.

Not very, he decided.

"Get to your feet. Slowly. Maybe then we'll go down and discuss hospitality," the gunman ordered. "You alone?"

"Yes," Jed answered and gradually got to his feet.

Once standing, the position of the barrel altered slightly. Jed sensed the man at his back was smaller than him. That might be an advantage should he need to fight his way out of trouble. However, as his captor pressed the gun even more firmly against his head, any

thoughts of turning and taking him by surprise seemed out of the question. He'd pull the trigger before he even got to throw a punch.

"And don't try anything funny," the man said softly. It confirmed his decision to remain passive for now. "My finger is a little itchy. Know what I mean?"

Yes, Jed did. He also decided that now wasn't the time to have his brains decorating the landscape. He'd rather hang on to them for a while longer.

As they entered the camp, the man by the fire didn't move. In fact, if Jed didn't know better, he'd say he still slept, like his partner under the bedroll, instead of watching the grub. Huddled over, he'd pulled his hat well down over his eyes. But then another figure, gun in hand, stepped out from the trees and into the clearing. Jed felt his scalp prickle with fear.

Shit. So there were more of them.

Unlike his captor, the newcomer stood taller, a bit like himself. Jed didn't recognize him as one of the men with whom he and Luke had fought the previous day. However, from what Maggie had told him, McCabe had a whole load of men up on his ranch. They'd slithered in from all directions and were more than happy to work for him and terrorize the townsfolk. Judging by his size and demeanor, this man might well fit the picture of one of them. All the same, he didn't seem to have bothered much about his appearance for a while.

His black hair hung long and unkempt. It matched several weeks' growth of facial hair. For a few minutes, his keen, dark eyes regarded him curiously and with suspicion until, finally satisfied that the man standing behind Jed had everything under control, he slid his gun back into its holster. Like the rest of his clothes, a layer of grime covered his gun belt. Jed quickly decided this man had ridden the trail for a long time.

"Found him spying on our camp," his companion, still behind him, said.

The dark-haired man glanced back at Jed for an explanation. He'd still not spoken but his mean look demanded one.

"Like I told your friend here," he said. "The smell of your cooking drew me here. I wasn't sure what sort of reception I'd get if I rode straight in."

The man contemplated him for a few more seconds before nodding toward his companion.

"Take his gun just to make sure," he ordered. His rough voice grated, deep and gravelly. It bore all the hallmarks of a man who wouldn't be messed around with. He indicated a spot by the fire. "You're welcome to join us if it's a morsel you want. But you can understand our caution. Can't be too careful round these parts." He crouched by his motionless companion, still huddled by the fire.

Light dawned. Suddenly, Jed could see it wasn't a man at all but a bundle of provisions covered by a blanket and with a hat sitting on top for good measure. He glanced across at the bedroll. Again, no man lay beneath it, just saddlebags and provisions. He frowned. What were these men playing at?

The cowboy picked up the coffee pot sitting in the embers. He poured some thick brown liquid into a tin mug, stained dark brown from weeks of usage.

The gun slowly moved from out of Jed's neck. He felt further heartened. The click told him it was now returned to safety, although, as he stepped away from his captor, Jed felt his gun slide from out of its holster. Nevertheless, gut instinct told him that these weren't McCabe's men, after all.

He turned to get a good look at the man who'd bettered him, pleased to know he'd got something right. The man didn't stand as tall as he did yet he would still make an imposing foe if anyone got on the wrong side of him.

Like his partner, after weeks on the trail, he appeared disheveled and dusty. His blond hair was bleached almost white by the sun, and his cornflower blue eyes, surrounded by crow's feet, sparkled in a

tanned, weather-beaten face. However, he'd paid a little more heed to his facial appearance than his companion. A thick moustache covered his upper lip, while just a few days' of beard growth covered his chin. His eyes looked astoundingly familiar and Jed couldn't deny the strong likeness to a golden-haired young woman he'd left back in town. His heart leapt.

Thank God. He'd found them before McCabe's men had. No wonder they seemed so damned jumpy about the security of their camp. It looked like they expected trouble after all.

"You William Turner?" he asked.

"And who's asking?" The man's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Jed offered him his hand.

"Jed Daniels," he replied by way of introduction.

"And do I know you?" The man still sounded suspicious.

"No, but I know your sister, Hannah."

Jacob, for clearly that was who the other traveler was, sprang to his feet. He caught Jed roughly by the shoulder and turned him to face him.

"What about Hannah?" he demanded.

All Jed's previous presumptions about the man vanished. Here stood a man who wasn't going to suffer fools gladly. His dark features regarded him menacingly. For a second, Jed thought he might hit him just for speaking her name.

"Whoa there," he protested, raising his hands above shoulder level and presenting his palms in submission. "I'm here as a friend. McCabe's sent some of his men out to intercept and kill you before you get back to town. My brother, Luke, is with Hannah. He's doing all he can to make certain McCabe doesn't call in your father's debt before you get back."

Jacob's brow pulled together in a hard frown. Jed could see he remained uncertain of his intentions. After all, he could still be one of McCabe's men staking out their camp before the others came along.

That would certainly explain his sneaking up on them like he had done.

“He hasn’t touched her—yet,” Jed pressed on but the slight pause emphasized that he knew all about McCabe’s business with them. “But no one is lifting a finger to help her. Everyone in town is shit-scared of him and his men.”

He was also tempted to say that Jacob was long overdue in getting back to help Hannah and pay off his debt but the grim line of the man’s mouth, and the steely glare of his eyes, didn’t invite Jed’s criticism at this particular stage of their acquaintance. If he wanted to hang on to his looks a while longer, he’d be best not inviting Jacob’s fist in his face. The way he’d balled his hands didn’t present a comforting sight.

“Luke and I got into town yesterday and heard what was going on,” he explained. “We got on the wrong side of McCabe ourselves.” He gave a short chuckle but it didn’t contain any humor. “Then I discovered that McCabe’s been taking all your mail intended for Hannah, including that telegraph you sent yesterday. Hannah has no idea you’re on your way back or what you’ve been up to this past year. She’s been living on hope and nothing more. Anyway, I thought it best to get out here and warn you and let Luke keep his eye on her.”

The man still didn’t speak. All earlier menace drained from his face. His eyes now filled with concern.

“Hannah hasn’t received *any* of my letters?”

“Only one at the very beginning,” Jed answered, remembering the conversation they’d had over supper.

Jacob’s hand found his forehead. He circled the tips of two fingers, on the spot between his eyes to alleviate the stress. As he pondered Jed’s news, he closed his eyes for a moment.

“Poor Hannah,” he eventually muttered. “I wrote to her every week, wherever I was. I didn’t expect her to receive them all, what with bandits and Indians still attacking travelers, but I thought some might have got through.” He paused for a second. “Bastard,” he spat.

Jed deduced his expletive was aimed at McCabe. "She must think I've deserted her altogether."

"Hannah still has faith in you and that you'll make it back in time," Jed reassured him. "But she doesn't know McCabe has sent some of his men after you."

"And your brother? He's capable of protecting her?"

"Yes, but I've warned him not to say anything to her about where I was going. After all, I didn't know whether I'd be too late. That's why you found me sneaking around. I wasn't sure whose camp I'd come across. When I saw four horses, I thought maybe you were some of McCabe's men."

"Two are pack horses," William explained.

Jed nodded in understanding. They'd made a long journey over some inhospitable country.

"So, if you're already here, McCabe's men won't be far behind," Jacob said.

"And your fire and the smell of food will lead them straight to you. Like it did me," Jed announced.

Jacob and William exchanged a knowing glance. Jed quickly looked from one man to the other.

"That's your intention," he said in acknowledgement.

"Nothing finer than the smell of coffee and meat cooking to attract an empty stomach," Jacob grinned.

Jed grinned back and nodded. He now recognized his foolishness. He'd walked straight into their trap. They'd made it look as though a man sat by the fire while another slept. They'd hidden and circled the camp while keeping watch for intruders. They'd anticipated McCabe's treachery all along.

"Does McCabe know you're here?" Jacob asked.

"Hopefully not," Jed replied.

"Good. That gives us an extra element of surprise. And an extra gun." He turned to Hannah's brother. "Give him back his weapon,

William.” He grinned back at Jed, “And you’d better grab that coffee and a leg off that rabbit. Can’t have your belly growling and giving our positions away, can we? Then, we’d better get into place and wait.”

Jed stooped toward the fire, his grumbling belly eager to do as Jacob suggested but, halfway there, he froze. The horses gave little whinnies and shuffled nervously in the darkness, the way they usually did when they sensed intruders.

The three men exchanged silent glances. Jed reached out and took his gun from William’s hand. It looked like they didn’t have long to wait, after all.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Guns in hands, the three men melted into the trees and shadows surrounding the camp. Only the pile of provisions, its hat still perched on top, remained in its pose by the fire. The bedroll, on the other side of the fire, still looked suspiciously like a sleeping man. They reminded Jed that he'd totally misjudged the two men. They'd both known exactly what to expect from McCabe.

His senses on alert, he heard a twig crack.

In the distance, horses crushed the undergrowth beneath their hooves.

Jed tried to figure out how many.

Five? Six?

He wasn't sure but it certainly sounded as if they outnumbered Jacob, William and himself.

Another crunch broke the silence. It was so slight, it might have been a wild animal hunting for food, but Jed's hair prickled in the nape of his neck. He knew it was a predator of the human kind who scouted round the camp. A short silence followed. Charged with anticipation, Jed had to force himself to breathe slowly, quietly, and evenly.

Suddenly, several shots rang out. They echoed round the forest.

The bullets thudded dully into the two dummies that Jacob and William had positioned by the fire. The one sitting by the fire crumpled over into a heap and fell into the flames. The blanket around it caught alight. The bedroll never moved.

Jed kept his eyes firmly on the top of the crop of rocks, where he too had first spied on the camp. The gun flash had come from up there. But still he didn't move. He just waited.

The shooter stood up and hollered excitedly, "I've got 'em. Got 'em both! They're both dead."

It would have been so easy to shoot him there and then, but all three men resisted the temptation to fire. They needed to know exactly how many other gunmen they would be dealing with.

The killer slithered down the rocks and into the clearing. He gave a raucous hoot of laughter as he strode across the camp toward the bedroll. He pulled back his foot to give it a good kick as five other men rode into the clearing. As his foot made contact, he sent the pile of provisions scattering over the ground and into the fire.

"Shit." His eyes nervously met those of McCabe's other cronies. They all looked in unison at the burning hat and blanket, now well ablaze in the flames. Comprehension dawned.

"Shit," he repeated.

It was the last word he uttered as Jed put a bullet between his eyes. At the same time, Jacob and William opened fire on the other riders.

Simultaneously, two men fell to the ground, lifeless. Their horses shied and whinnied in fear at the sudden explosion of noise. They trampled supplies underfoot, and created further mayhem around the camp. The three remaining riders attempted to whirl their horses around. At the same time, they fired erratically into the trees, in the hope of hitting the two men whom they'd come to kill.

Jed, Jacob, and William continued shooting.

Another of McCabe's men clutched his chest. His mouth agape and his eyes wide, he fell from his horse and thudded onto the ground. His horse reared up. It cried out in terror and circled the camp aimlessly with the others, kicking up clouds of dust and adding to the chaos.

The last two riders, realizing they'd been ambushed, hurriedly made for the trees but Jed and William had already anticipated their move and ran ahead of them. They fired from opposite sides of the track. One man crashed straight down into the thick undergrowth. The other slumped over his horse's back. For a moment, he lay there very still. As he finally slipped slowly down its flank, his foot caught in the stirrup. His horse, terrified by the commotion going on around it, bolted and dragged his lifeless body along the ground and through the trees.

Jed and William stopped firing and listened. The only sounds they now heard were those of the horses, crashing through the vegetation. Soon, even that stopped and silence reigned over the forest once more. Guns still clutched tightly in their grasp, they stepped into the clearing to survey the damage, and the bodies strewn on the ground.

But where was Jacob? There was no sign of him.

Their eyes met anxiously.

Quickly, they rushed to where Jacob had taken up his position. A pair of boots poked out from beneath the undergrowth.

"Fuck!" William swore. The two men exchanged fearful looks.

William took a step closer to where Jacob lay. Nervously, Jed stepped up behind him. Both men stopped dead as they stood over him. Jacob wasn't moving. Flat on his back, blood covered the front of his shirt.

"Fuck." Jed whispered, echoing William's expletive. It looked like he'd failed in his mission, after all.

But even worse, McCabe had won.

Jacob wouldn't be returning to pay off his father's debt—or to save Hannah from a life of hell.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dawn broke. It held all the promise of a beautiful day. But, other than the weather, Luke knew there'd be nothing beautiful about what today would bring. He placed a rifle by each window and a pile of ammunition within easy reach. McCabe's men would most likely attack from all sides. Hannah would cover the back and he the front. They'd be prepared for any eventuality and move to wherever the fight took them.

Fully resigned to the fact that Jacob wouldn't be coming back, Hannah still protested that he didn't need to get involved. It wasn't Luke's fight. She'd honor her bargain, however repulsive it was.

Luke wouldn't hear a word of it. The only way she'd surrender to McCabe would be over his dead body, although he hoped it wouldn't come to that. Nevertheless, time was running out fast.

He thought Jed would have made it back by now, with Jacob *and* Hannah's brother. Yet, even allowing for any delay, he started to think Jed might be cutting it rather too fine. Fear gnawed through his chest until its icy fingers clutched painfully round his heart. Perhaps Jed hadn't succeeded after all, in more ways than one.

He tried to banish the negativity of his thoughts. He didn't care to think about a world without his little brother. Instead, he focused on Hannah, trying hard to ignore the cauldron of mixed emotions that had embroiled him for the past two days.

At first, anxiety had engulfed him as he waited for Jed to return with Jacob. Sadly, he contemplated that he might never be able to compete with the man for her long-term affections. He told himself that at least he'd been given the opportunity to meet and make love to

such an astonishing, brave woman. He'd be forever grateful for the happy memories he would have of her.

Later, guilt haunted him. After Hannah had made such wonderful, gentle love to him, remorse suddenly gripped his heart. She was another man's woman, for God's sake. With that man on his way home, he shouldn't be letting her do all this to him.

After she'd finished performing such delicious oral sex on him, Hannah had lain beside him and gently held and nursed his hurting body. That night, she begged him to sleep in her bed. He told her his wounds felt too tender. He slept in the guest room instead.

He hadn't lied. A mass of cuts and bruises, his face and body hurt like hell. He was lucky McCabe's men hadn't killed him. He also foolishly said that he didn't want to disturb her rest with all his moaning and groaning every time he moved.

Hannah said she didn't care if he did disturb her rest. She wanted to feel his body next to hers but she did accept his explanation. He was glad she didn't suspect his true reason. He didn't want to put her in an even more impossible position when Jacob got back. She would have enough to deal with.

However, as Luke continued to plan for their stand against McCabe, a tiny part of him secretly hoped that Jacob's long absence might, at least, have lessened her affection for him. However, he didn't hold out too much on that score. He remembered the saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder. Then, after tossing and turning alone in his bed the past two nights, he began to wish he was less noble. With still no sign of either Jed or Jacob, maybe he should have taken her up on everything she offered. It certainly looked like only the two of them would be here to face McCabe and his gang, after all.

Through the window, he saw a cloud of dust rise up on the horizon. It came from the direction of McCabe's ranch. High in the air, the dirt polluted the cloudless, blue sky with its swirling patterns

of choking filth. Like an angry monster, it filled the landscape with impending doom.

Luke knelt by the window and clutched his rifle. He checked the bullets. Hannah, who'd been sitting, nervously drumming her fingers on the wooden tabletop, stood, as he said quietly, "They're here."

"It's too early," she whispered back softly. Unable to hide her distress, Luke heard the fear tremble in her voice. "We've been such fools to think we could break McCabe's stranglehold on the town."

Long before dawn arrived, Luke had held her in his arms. Unable to sleep, Hannah had spent the night pacing the floor, telling him that Jacob had abandoned her, or worse, had died.

He'd stroked her hair and kissed her forehead and beautiful, bewitching eyes. He told her, over and over again, that he wouldn't let McCabe take her. She kissed him too. Her lips, like gentle feathers, brushed his lips and they'd laughed a rare laugh when he tried not to wince. Despite her delicate touch, the bruises to his mouth and face still hurt like the devil. It also gave him an excuse that his body still hurt too much to make love to her. Under any other circumstances, he would have willingly gone through the pain barrier but his conscience still played havoc with his feelings. He wondered if she realized just how fond of her he had become. He hoped not.

"We agreed midday," she explained.

Luke nodded. "Then we have to remind him of that," he said reassuringly, although a few more hours seemed irrelevant now. One way or another, the shooting and killing would soon begin.

Hannah stepped onto the front porch. Luke stood beside her. Both clutched rifles firmly in two hands, ready to commence battle.

McCabe dismounted and strode up to the house. His spurs clinked ominously in the silence. He stopped at the bottom of the three steps that led up to the porch. He tipped his hat politely at Hannah.

"Good morning," he greeted civilly. "I believe it's time to call in a debt."

"Not till noon it isn't," Hannah replied, equally civilly, as though their discussion concerned cattle or crops and not her impending fate.

McCabe gave a short laugh and glanced back at his men. Still astride their horses, they joined in his laughter. Luke saw Hannah shudder. He knew McCabe's men were more than eager to capture their boss's prize because that prize would one day find her way to them too.

Luke did a quick headcount of twelve.

The odds were definitely stacked against them.

McCabe fixed Hannah with a cold smirk. It sent a bolt of anger shooting down Luke's spine. It curled and twisted into a huge knot that sat ominously in his gut. He wouldn't let the bastard have her.

McCabe tipped his hat again. "You drive a hard bargain, ma'am," he said. "But you're right. Noon it is."

Then, turning his attention to Luke, he said, "You still here? I hope you're not planning on causing anymore trouble. We have a real *bone fide* deal. Don't we, Hannah?"

The way he turned to her and spoke her name now sent a shiver of dread coursing through Luke. He could only imagine how Hannah felt. However, the way she shrugged in response, belied any fear she might be suffering. Luke was proud of her.

"If you say. Your lawyer drew up the papers."

A corner of McCabe's mouth curled sardonically.

"And what might you be meaning by that?" he goaded.

She tilted her head defiantly and looked him straight in the eye.

"That if it's anything like the rest of your scheming, cheating ways, it's probably not even worth the paper it's written on," she sneered.

* * * *

A short, intimidating silence followed. McCabe's lips turned up fully. His smile exuded pure evil. He always felt at his best when he had his prey cornered, and he had Hannah well and truly cornered, despite, the brave act she put on. His men hadn't returned yet but that fool Jacob hadn't come back either. That meant only one thing. They'd successfully, and permanently, dispatched him and her brother to that big graveyard in the sky for any idiot who dared to cross him. His men were probably still on their way back, along with Jacob's little fortune in gold that he'd worked so hard to gather. Just wait until he screwed her in his bed, making her beg him to stop hurting her. After he'd done with her, he'd show it all to her.

Hannah's Gold. That was what Jacob called it in his letters.

His imagination ran riot, thinking of how he'd taunt her with it. He'd crow in delight, boasting how he knew everything about Jacob in those months he'd been away. That he'd written to her and told her how well he was doing. How the fool had described how hard life was but that he would soon be home to pay off his father's debt and release her from hers.

Hadn't he realized he would never let him pay it off?

These people were so weak and such pushovers.

He could have taken Hannah any time he wished but he'd enjoyed the little games he'd played with her this past year, cruelly taunting her and whispering crudities in her ears. Frightening her, he hoped, with thoughts of what would become of her. Yet, at the same time, he'd let her hold on to that sliver of hope that her shining knight would one day return to rescue her.

So, let her think she had a little more time. Let her think the two strangers would protect her and save her from her inevitable fate. He'd put a bullet through this one now but his brother probably skulked inside, waiting to shoot him if he tried. He'd ride a little way off first and get out of harm's way before pulling the trigger.

He climbed back on his horse.

“Midday, it is then, ma’am,” he said, before turning to Luke, “And I hope you and your brother will have come to your senses by then and gone.”

He turned his horse and indicated for his men to follow him. Their horses trotted idly behind. None of them displayed a hint of a hurry in them. McCabe knew Hannah and the strangers were watching them. He also knew they’d never shoot a man in the back. Let them think they’d won this round. The fools. It only delayed the inevitable.

As far as he was concerned, there would be only one outcome from this, and one winner—Ethan McCabe.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

A bullet crashed into the door jamb. It missed Luke's head by inches. Wood splintered. Both he and Hannah ducked. Rifles at the ready, they backed into the house and slammed the door firmly shut. Another bullet thudded dully into the wood.

"Get to the other window," Luke ordered, as he settled himself beneath the one by the door. "And be careful. Although it's me he wants to kill. Not you."

Despite the brush with the bullet, he grinned.

"At least you don't need to worry anymore about breaking your agreement with him. He's done it himself. He's determined to get you before the deadline. To do that, he's got to get rid of me and Jed. He still doesn't realize there's only the two of us here. He must have thought Jed had his gun sights on him."

He peered through the window. The horses had scattered. McCabe and his men had taken up positions by the stable and behind the wagon that Hannah always left close to the house. He noticed one man scoot round the corral and head toward the back of the house. Hannah saw him too.

She gathered up her skirt in one hand and hurried to the window in the bedroom.

"There may be some more out back already," she called out, as she made her way.

She broke the glass with the rifle butt, rested the barrel on the sill and fired. The man took cover. Hannah scanned the property for others.

Luke saw a hat bobble above a stack of wooden boxes by the stable.

Gunfire rang out again. Bullets thudded into the wooden walls.

Luke fired back, his eyes alert for the tiniest of movements. Hannah still shot from the bedroom. He rolled to the window at the other side of the door. If McCabe thought there were three of them, he had to keep moving. It wouldn't take a genius to realize that only two guns fired.

One of McCabe's henchmen fell in the dust.

"Luke, there's more coming round the back," Hannah cried out anxiously.

He joined her and they fired together. A couple more men went down. The others took cover. There were more gunmen than he'd originally thought. While McCabe had spoken with them at the front, others had approached quietly from the rear of the property.

Shit. He should have known he'd do that.

Her mouth set in a grim line, Hannah's aim was true as one bullet followed after another.

Luke moved quickly from window to window, firing at everything that moved.

He slid more ammunition toward her when she ran out of bullets.

"Promise me one thing," she said breathlessly, her cheeks flushed as she lay for a moment against the wall beneath the window. The look she gave him said they would both be out of bullets soon.

"If I can," he said, between shots.

"Save one bullet for me. Don't let him win. I never thought it would ever come to this. It was all just a ruse to keep him at bay until Jacob came back. I don't want to be his whore. I'd rather die than let that happen." She paused for a moment as she looked him straight in the eye. She meant every word. "Will you do it for me?"

Luke hesitated for a second, and then ran to her, catching her by the arm. He slipped his arm around her waist as he pulled her to him.

He pressed his lips hard against hers. He wasn't sure he could do what she asked but he nodded anyway. How could he look her in the eye and pull the trigger and snuff the very life out of her? However, he didn't have time to reflect on the problem. On their feet again, they fired at every movement, and heaved a sigh of relief every time one of McCabe's men fell to the ground.

Yet still they kept coming.

A fire torch hurtled through the front window. It landed in the middle of the kitchen floor. Luke stamped it out. Another flew through the bedroom window straight onto the bed. Hannah hurled the basin of water, with which she'd washed her face that morning, over it. Turning, she shot a man attempting to climb in through the window between the shards of broken glass. He fell backward into another of McCabe's cronies. She fired again and turned to look through the doorway at Luke. He glanced up and gave her a reassuring smile as he stamped out yet another fire. He could see the panic written on her lovely face as if wrestling her thoughts, as well as her fears.

She checked there were no more following him, and joined Luke in the kitchen. Her face was flushed and she paused for a moment before she spoke. Luke watched her tremble as she took a deep breath. He heard it quiver in her throat. Tears pooled on her lower eyelids.

"What am I playing at?" she asked, sadly. "How dare I ask you to shoot me? If you do that, then you'll end up dead too. I won't allow it. It's asking too much. No one deserves to die because of what me and Jacob agreed to do. Let me appeal to McCabe. I'll give myself up and make one final deal with him. I'll make him promise to let you go. There are too many of them. Jed's not coming back, is he? There is no help, is there?" She seemed resigned to her fate, unable to carry on.

Luke grasped her upper arms at the sound of defeat in her voice. This wasn't the time for arguing, so he gave it her straight.

"There was help," he said. "Jed found out that for months McCabe's been taking letters intended for you. Jacob's. He'd almost

made it home but McCabe sent men out to kill him and your brother. Jed went to stop them and to make sure he got the two of them back here before McCabe came for you.”

Hannah's eyes widened. Still glistening with unshed tears, a mixture of anger and despair crossed her face.

“You never told me.” She couldn't hide the recrimination in her voice.

“I didn't want to raise your hopes in case he didn't make it,” Luke explained gently. He paused for a moment. “Even so, I would have expected them back by now.” His voice trailed off. He didn't need to spell it out. He thought Jed had become a casualty, too.

“Oh, Luke,” she cried. She now wore her despair like a mantle. Luke drew her to him and gave her one last hug as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

The door burst open.

Luke spun around. He fired at McCabe's henchman.

Just in time, Hannah also shot one who'd finally succeeded in crawling in through the bedroom window. They were closing in fast. They could hear them on the other sides of the walls. Their eyes met one more time. So, this was it. One last stand. At least they'd die together. They turned, standing back to back, ready to face their fate.

That split second spun unhurriedly around them. It slowed into an eternity. Everything forgotten as they took up their positions. In the heavy silence that surrounded them, time virtually stopped. Each second became an hour and each heartbeat thumped loud and long. At last, they heard the rhythmic chink of spurs. A pair of boots thudded deliberately on the wooden porch.

“McCabe,” Hannah whispered. She peeled herself from Luke's back and stood by his side, facing the door. “I'd know those footsteps anywhere.” She raised her gun and took aim. “If it's the last shot I ever fire, I'll make sure it goes straight through his heart.”

But before McCabe even reached the door, the sound of more gunfire rang out. It echoed in the distance and kept getting closer. Even the sound of horses' hooves and wagon wheels rent the air. Hannah and Luke exchanged a fleeting, puzzled look. They flew to the window.

A fresh cloud of dust approached from the direction of the town. An army of townsfolk drew near, bearing down on McCabe and his men. Men and women alike charged toward the ranch and all with guns blazing.

McCabe's henchmen fell like flies until only a few remained standing. Acknowledging their defeat, they laid down their guns and raised their hands in surrender. Surrounded by the angry mob, they no longer looked like the arrogant bunch of thugs who'd strutted round town, intimidating anyone who stood in their way.

As the gunfire ceased, Luke and Hannah stepped out onto the porch. Now in charge, the sheriff barked out orders to tie up the bunch of gunslingers and to check how many were dead. Luke smiled in satisfaction and gave Hannah's hand a reassuring squeeze. He walked down the steps and left Hannah on the porch. A look of dazed relief crept across her face. After everything that had happened, the townsfolk had come to her aid at last.

A familiar figure leapt down from one of the wagons. She hurled herself toward Luke. "Luke," she squealed.

"Maggie," he said. He too reeled from the shock at the unexpected display of solidarity and retaliation from people who had cowered from McCabe for so long.

She flung her arms around him and hugged him hard.

"We've done it," she shrieked in delight. "We've killed the fucking bastard."

She planted a huge smacker of a kiss on one of his bruised cheeks.

"I don't think so. You might just want to think again." McCabe's hard voice cut through the jubilation going on around them.

All heads turned as one toward the front porch of the house.

Having crept round to the back and through the bedroom window, Ethan McCabe now stood threateningly behind Hannah. He gripped her firmly with one hand while, at the same time, he pointed a gun with his other at her head.

Chapter Thirty

The cheering and shouts of glee turned to silence. All eyes turned and fixed on the sight of Hannah's front porch. A muscle twitched in Luke's jaw. He took a menacing step forward. Still gripping Hannah hard, McCabe now aimed the gun in his hand toward him.

Maggie grabbed Luke by the arm before he did anything stupid.

"No," she cried. "We haven't come this far to let McCabe kill you and Hannah after all."

McCabe turned the gun back on Hannah. If he was worried about the townsfolk's show of resistance, he didn't show it.

"Release my men," he demanded coldly.

No one moved.

"Now," he barked. "Or I kill her here and now."

"Let him shoot me," Hannah shouted out. "Then he's got no one to hide behind. You mustn't let him get away with his tyranny again." She stopped abruptly. A squeal of pain tore from her lips. McCabe twisted her arm cruelly. At the same time, he struck her hard on the cheekbone with the butt of his gun. The crack of metal against bone made Hannah cry out again.

Luke took another step forward. Maggie grabbed him again.

"Come on," McCabe goaded as he turned the gun on him once more. "Make my day, after all. Try to stop me. I should have let my men kill you and your brother the first day you arrived in town." He paused for a second before giving a short laugh. "Where is your brother, by the way? I don't see him around. Did we kill him?"

The click of a gun preceded Jed's voice by a split second as he growled,

"No, you didn't. Now drop the weapon." He thrust his gun firmly into the man's ribs.

McCabe didn't move.

"Now!" he repeated, threateningly.

The smile melted from McCabe's lips. He stretched his arm out wide until he held his gun hand well away from his body. He let the weapon fall to the ground. At the same time, he let go of Hannah. With a cry of relief, she fled down the steps straight into Luke's arms.

As Jed kicked McCabe's legs viciously from under him, he forced him to his knees. He ordered him to clasp his hands behind his head. A cheer went up from the crowd as the man knelt before them in defeat.

Maggie gave a shriek of joy and scurried toward Jed. She leapt into his arms, wrapped her legs around his waist, and planted a smacker of a kiss on his mouth. She squeezed him hard. In open delight, she pressed her cheek against his stubbly one, rubbing it against his hard bristles.

"You made it back." She still squealed but, now, grinned saucily at him as she inhaled deeply too. "Mmm! You smell so good. All sweat and horses." She buried her face into his neck. "God, you feel good too." She planted a succession of kisses all over his face as she squeezed him yet again. "All strong and hard." She paused for a moment to look him mischievously in the eyes. She gave a cute little smile that was full of unspoken innuendo. "Just how I like a man." She moved her mouth closer to his ear. "You sure are a sight for sore eyes." She nipped his ear lobe and, then, ran the tip of her tongue around it. She lowered her voice a fraction. "Mmm! Given everything I know about you, I can't wait to taste you either."

He grinned lasciviously back at her as she slid slowly and provocatively down his hard frame. After finally settling herself back on the ground, she pressed her body close to his for a moment.

“I see you managed to persuade the townsfolk to turn on McCabe, after all.” Jed sounded impressed.

“Me, and your brother. We both said some things to shake them up a ways. In the end, the women shamed their men-folk into doing something about him.” She looked down at the man kneeling beside her. “Bastard,” she spat at him. She kicked out a foot and watched in delight as the force of her kick sent him sprawling. “See how you like it.”

He snarled at her. She drew back her foot to kick him again.

Jed reached out a hand to catch her arm and stop her. Not, that he didn’t share her sentiments, but McCabe had what was coming to him anyway. He’d soon be swinging on the end of a noose. However, in that split second as Maggie raised her foot, McCabe grasped her ankle and dragged her down beside him. He rolled over and, before anyone had chance to react, he had Maggie firmly in his grasp. One hand snaked round her slender throat and held it in a powerful grip. His fingers pressed deep into her flesh. Her face turned red as she coughed and spluttered, and struggled to breathe. With her firmly in his stranglehold, he stood slowly.

“Let me through or I’ll break her pretty, little whore’s throat,” he rasped. “And bring me a horse.”

Maggie gasped for air as they descended the steps. On tippy-toe, it was the only way her feet could touch the ground. McCabe’s hand still squeezed her throat and pulled her head upward, stretching her neck for all to see. The slightest movement and it would snap. No one saw her fiddling with her skirt with one hand, as she clawed at McCabe’s hand with the other.

“And how are you going to climb up on your horse?” Luke asked, now drawing his gun once again. “Once you release her, you do know you’re a dead man.”

Another dozen guns joined Luke’s. All pointed in unison, and all cocked, ready to fire.

"I'm dead anyway," he smirked. "So I may as well take another with me." He looked hard at Hannah. "I'd rather it was you but I suppose I'll have to make do with the whore." And with one last meaningful look in Jed's direction, McCabe smirked and prepared to twist her neck. "Bitch," he sneered softly against her ear.

"No," Jed cried out. He lunged forward.

However, suddenly, McCabe released his hold on Maggie. His eyes bulged and his mouth fell open in surprise. He gasped and struggled to draw breath. Maggie had finally managed to slip her knife from beneath her skirt and stick it under his ribs. Now, having found a firm foothold, she turned fully to face him and thrust it all the way up to the hilt and into his belly.

Grasping the handle in both hands, she twisted it and cut him deep and hard. She dragged the blade up toward his ribcage, stopping only when the steel met the resistance of bone. Her lips, pressed together in a grim line, paled beneath the black and purple bruises he'd inflicted on her only a few days earlier. Her eyes narrowed in hate. It was her turn to sneer at him.

"Try calling me a bitch now. Now that you're stuck like a fucking pig on the end of my knife. Can't, can you?"

The blood gurgled in his throat and, as the life drained out of his eyes, he sank boneless into the dirt. Everyone stood and watched, their mouths agape. The earth turned red as life blood pumped from his dying body and stained the ground around him.

Jed caught Maggie's shoulders from behind. He gently drew her away from the lifeless corpse. McCabe's blood stained the front of her dress.

"It's over," he whispered softly in her ear.

She spread her bloody hands out before her. She turned them, palms up. As if unable to comprehend the enormity of what she'd just done, she just stood silently and looked at them.

Jed slid his hands down her arms and took her slender wrists in a strong, yet gentle, grip. He pulled her lovingly backward into him. Then, raising her hands above her head, he held them up for all to see.

A roar of approval and joy rent the air.

Chapter Thirty-One

The ranch soon became a hive of activity.

The undertaker arrived. He'd followed after the mob that had descended on McCabe and his gang. He busily shouted orders to willing assistants who threw bodies, unceremoniously, into an open wagon. Business had suddenly perked up. For a while, it promised to get even better.

The sheriff had the prisoners from McCabe's gang back up on their horses. His willing deputies had tied their hands to the pommels of their saddles. There would be trials. After all, they were all good, law-abiding folk who lived in the town, but it looked like there'd be some hangings come next week. So, once the undertaker had finished with this bunch of corpses piled up on his wagon, there'd be a few more to deal with, especially when Jed mentioned another six bodies made their way back into town.

Hannah hadn't waited around to hear any of that. Jed had returned alone and, with so much she wanted to ask him, she was scared to do so. Instead, she whisked Maggie inside her home and provided her with water for washing and a dress to replace the one she wore. Covered in McCabe's blood, it was only fit for the fire.

Later, when she'd finally gathered her jangled nerves into some kind of order, she left Maggie alone. She approached Jed nervously. Watching the goings-on around them, he and Luke spoke in hushed tones as they leaned against the fence that surrounded the corral.

Now was the time to have those questions answered.

Jacob.

She had to know.

And William.

Had he found them?

What had happened to them?

And why had he returned alone?

The two men turned to her as she approached. Her throat tightened. The words constricted in her voice box as she fought the conflict of emotions. They rode her veins like open rafts on white-water rapids, making her fingers and toes tingle with apprehension. Her eyes searched Jed's face for answers. She dreaded him saying the words that would tell her things she didn't want to hear.

But it was Luke who spoke up.

"Jacob's on his way back," he said gently. His eyes held hers. He looked anxious, almost haunted, but he sounded honest and forthright in his account. She watched him swallow. His Adam's apple rose and fell slowly. Her heart skipped a beat, fearful of the news. "He got hurt but he'll be okay. William's with him."

Hannah's eyes suddenly glistened. Pain clawed at the inside of her chest and loud, erratic thuds palpitated in her chest. She wasn't sure what to think anymore. Emotion suddenly overwhelmed her. But was it relief, sadness, or guilt? She couldn't even begin to decide. She didn't know what to say. It seemed to her that Luke had the same problem, too. His voice had failed him as well. So, Jed continued the tale.

"When McCabe's men attacked their camp, he took a bullet in his upper chest," he explained. "Luckily, it just missed the lung. Your brother managed to dig it out but he lost a lot of blood. We constructed a makeshift stretcher to pull him along behind William's horse. When I knew he'd be all right, I rode straight back here. Luckily I arrived in time. I managed to sneak in round the back while everyone's attention focused on McCabe threatening you."

Hannah gave a tiny smile and rested her hand on Jed's arm.

"I haven't had chance to thank you for that," she said softly. Her voice husky, tears crackled in the back of her throat. It was all too much for her. There was so much to take in. "And thank you too for saving Jacob's life." Her words drifted into a hoarse whisper.

"It's what any decent man would do," he said, with an appreciative smile. He nodded toward those still clearing up the mess of bodies. "And despite everything, it looks like everyone else came good in the end, too."

Hannah followed his gaze. Taking in the enormity of what everyone had finally risked for her, and themselves, she felt truly humbled and so proud that, at long last, they'd found the courage to stand up for themselves.

In the distance, movement caught her eye. A group of horses rode in from the west but only one man sat astride his horse. Each of the other horses that followed in line had a bundle tied to its back. Some carried provisions but six clearly carried bodies, wrapped tightly in blankets and tied to their saddles. The rider's horse dragged a palanquin along behind it. As it drew closer, Hannah could see a dark-haired man strapped to it. The man lay very still with his upper body swathed in bandages. She closed her eyes for a moment to absorb the extent of what she saw. When she opened them, the sight that filled her vision, made the breath catch in her throat. Tears prickled at the backs of her eyes and nose once more.

Jacob. She whispered his name and the floodgates opened. Tears silently spilled and trickled in two streams down her cheeks. All those months of waiting had finally come to an end. She turned to Luke.

"I have to go to him," she whispered softly. The emotion, thick in the back of her throat, almost choked her. Luke nodded. It was all the consent he gave her, and she turned, and ran, before he had chance to stop her.

* * * *

Luke watched sadly as she took to her heels and raced toward the incoming travelers. Her skirt billowed behind her and her hair blew back from her burning face. She looked a vision of loveliness. His heart turned to lead as he watched the rider stop and speak to her. The man slid from his horse and hugged her to him. Finally, as she fell to her knees beside the injured man, Luke swallowed hard. He knew she'd made her choice.

His face contorted for a moment, and his heavy heart squeezed hard and violently in his chest. It tore at the very edge of his soul. It made him think it was being ripped from his body. The pain wrung the very life out of him. He could barely breathe. His thoughts only returned to the time in hand as Jed rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I think it's my turn now, bro," he said, "to get *you* away. Hannah might care a great deal for you but I think, maybe, you were just a passing fancy. Me too. We just conveniently satisfied a mighty powerful need that woman has."

Luke still didn't speak. He couldn't find the words and, if he had, he wasn't sure his mouth could have formed them.

"Jacob's a good man," Jed pressed on gently. "He'll take care of her. He's worked hard to pay off his father's debt. And he came back to fight for her honor when it would have been easier to have stayed away and left her to her fate."

Luke roughly shrugged Jed's hand away. He knew Jed was right but his words didn't ease the pain. There was no comfort in them at all. Anyway, Jed didn't know it all. He wasn't there that night when she'd wrapped her legs around him and wouldn't let him go.

As she fell fast asleep, he knew she protected his seed inside her beautiful body. If only for a brief moment, he sensed, without any doubt, that they shared the same dreams, wishing that Jacob wasn't a shadow between them and that they could be set free to spend the rest of their lives together.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Two weeks later, Luke and Jed set off back on the trail.

Hannah's brother, William had left the week before. He'd helped to get the ranch up and running again with Luke and Jed while Jacob was still incapacitated. He'd also played his part in helping the townsfolk to get their affairs in order after McCabe's iron rule. With both him and his cronies now permanently out of the picture, everyone developed renewed vigor for a quick return to normality. Financial skills that William had learned from his father had not been forgotten and he helped out at the bank, advising them on how to adjust mortgages and accounts. However, he soon decided the time had come to go home. Alone for far too long, his mother and sisters needed him back and they would be more than happy to see him.

Jed had wanted to leave at the same time, but having become the town heroes, they'd been persuaded to stay on a while longer. Luke knew that Jed had thought a few more days in the arms of Maggie and some of the other lovelies would be all the distraction he'd need to stop thinking about Hannah. He couldn't have been more wrong.

While Jacob had lain recovering from his injuries, Hannah had spoken to Luke just the once about what had happened between them. Everything else had just been awkward, banal, small talk connected with the ranch.

They'd been alone in the barn where Jacob couldn't hear them. She told Luke that she knew he and his brother would never reveal their little *secrets d'amour* but she also needed Luke to know that the time they'd spent together was beautiful, and that she would never

forget it. She would always hold a special place in her heart for him. Perhaps things could have been different if she didn't still have other responsibilities to her family, and to Jacob. After all, he'd worked hard this past year, not only to settle his debts, but hers too.

When she'd spoken the words, they tripped from her mouth so matter-of-factly. Not a shred of emotion showed on her lovely face. Luke merely nodded, afraid to speak lest she hear the crack in his voice. He didn't need her to spell it out. She loved Jacob more than she did him. Too much of a gentleman, he wouldn't embarrass her by putting up a fight. Instead, he recalled Jed's words when he said they'd just been a passing fancy for her, and that they'd just been there in her moment of need.

Trying to be blunt and forthright about it all, he nearly convinced himself it was true. He told himself they'd soon be off on their travels again anyway. After thirty years of life, he craved adventure now, not romance, and it wouldn't be fair on Hannah to ask her to give up everything she'd fought for to go with him. After all the excitement, maybe a settled home and babies was what she dreamed of now. Jacob could provide her with that, so, better to leave her now and forget about her before he became even more involved in her life. A few weeks back on the trail would mend his broken heart, although God only knew there wasn't much of it left to break. Shredded and chewed into tiny pieces, it was ready for spitting out into the trash with the rest of his feelings. Her cool words had only confirmed what he'd dreaded, and imagined, all along.

Jacob had only been back a couple of days when Luke knew he had to walk away from her. Unable to sleep one night, he'd walked from his bed in the stable up to the house. A lamp still burned there and, in the darkness, he'd been looking at the stars and reflecting upon all that had happened.

He hoped he might catch Hannah alone and maybe ask her to leave all this behind and join him and Jed on their journey west. They'd had no time to speak together since the shoot-out. William

had taken over the running of things and time passed by in a flurry of schemes and tasks to get the town, as well as the ranch, running smoothly once more. When they did speak, the conversation was always a little awkward as if neither had the nerve to confront their feelings.

As he stood outside the bedroom window at the back of house, he heard Hannah talking softly to Jacob. He couldn't quite make out the words but he could certainly imagine the way her soft breath would have been dancing and tickling across Jacob's neck and down his spine. After all, he'd experienced it himself. His bones had melted at the soft whisper of her voice.

Next, he'd heard the bedsprings as two bodies fell together. Laughter followed. Jacob hollered deeply, groaning to stifle his pain with every guffaw and Hannah too laughed uncontrollably. She had a wonderful giggle that showed her complete and utter ease with a person. Only this time, he reminded himself, it was Jacob who received her joy, not him.

At that point, he walked away. He wasn't in the habit of eavesdropping and he didn't need to listen to anymore. His thoughts were fired up enough already. He imagined her delightful, naked body flaunting itself on top of Jacob's, with her full breasts bouncing and jiggling as she sat astride him, riding him hard and furiously. Jacob's injury might be healing fast but Luke knew from firsthand experience that Hannah knew of ways to pleasure an injured man. She'd used her same charms on him after his beating.

His head pounded and he had to rest a finger and thumb at each side of the bridge of his nose to try to massage away the pain. His brain felt fit to burst. Images of her throwing back her head and arching, exposing the length of her throat as her hair fell across her shoulders and down her back, filled every nook and cranny of his mind. He had to get away before he heard her cry out in glorious

rapture and then, fully satiated, fall against Jacob's body while receiving his juices as he spasmed and ejaculated inside her.

Luke curled his hand into a ball. Jealous as hell, he knew the time had come for him to go before he did anything stupid. So, decision made, he raised his head, inhaled deeply through flared nostrils, and strode back to the stable. Jacob made her happy. That was all that mattered.

He saddled his horse and rode into town where he got a room and joined Jed and Maggie for the rest of his stay. There would be plenty of girls only too ready to reward him for his part in liberating their town. He'd keep his promise to help William and the new hired hands to get the ranch up and running again, but he'd steer clear of Hannah and give her space to make amends to Jacob for what she'd done. It was the least he could do.

All the same, when the time came to bid farewell, he still needed to hold her in his arms a fraction longer than Jed had done. Highly unlikely they'd ever pass this way again, he needed to inhale her scent and lock the memory away in that secret part of his brain where he would always remember her. However, as her lips pressed against his cheek, she left them there just long enough to send one last jolt of electricity coursing down his spine.

Their eyes locked and, for a moment, Luke thought she might tell him that she wasn't going to stay here after all. That the man standing behind her on the porch wasn't the man she wanted to spend her life with. Jacob was almost recovered now, although he would always bear a scar on his upper chest. Hannah had nursed him back to health, along with other women from the town who had flocked to his side with a succession of supplies and support, including that doe-eyed, dark-haired Becky who hung onto his every word. He felt sorry for the girl. It was clear as day that she loved him but she would never be able to compete with a strong, feisty woman like Hannah.

He knew just how she felt.

Hannah never said a word. She just looked up at him sorrowfully with her beautiful, sapphire blue eyes, and a gaping hole opened up in his chest where his heart used to be.

* * * *

“Okay, bro?” Jed asked.

Luke had stayed quiet for most of the journey so Jed too had kept a respectful silence. He was glad of it. He needed time to come to terms with the fact that he would never see Hannah again.

Dusk had fallen as they pitched camp. They’d followed the trail west, determined to reach and cross the mountains before winter came. After Jacob’s and William’s descriptions of the new life and towns being built in California, it had fuelled their desire to go there too. They decided they wanted to reach the Pacific and see the beautiful blue ocean about which they’d heard so much. With the expertise that they’d learned from their father back East, they could see a whole lot of work available for them out there too.

On the way, they might even latch onto a wagon train. With their hunting and scouting skills, they could make themselves useful to the pioneers who also made their way out West.

“Never better,” Luke mumbled.

“Liar,” Jed laughed. “But just wait till we get out there to California. There’ll be women lining up to fuck the pair of us once we show them what a good time we can give them. That’ll soon put all thoughts of the lovely Hannah out of your head.” He paused for a moment. “My thoughts, too, come to that. She’s one heck of a woman. Never seen one quite so hot for a man as she was that afternoon watching you wash yourself buck naked in the bath.”

Trust his little brother to raise a smile from him. With Jed’s words now carving a pleasant pathway through his memories too, Luke allowed the smile to slither to his mouth. It curled his lips a fraction.

“All right, I think that’s enough. Anyway, I thought you might be missing Maggie just a tad.”

“Naw,” Jed replied. “She was fun but she’s got her sights set on that rancher.”

“And his sons.” Luke finally chuckled.

Jed joined in his laughter. “She was one hell of a fuck though. She certainly knows how to pleasure a man.” He raised his eyes knowingly. “Two men even.” He paused for a moment, indicating that Luke could have joined in the fun, too, if he’d let himself, instead of spending his nights drinking or losing himself in card games until the early hours of the morning. “I’m also glad she joined us for supper last night with Hannah and Jacob. I know it would have been hard for you otherwise.”

Luke answered with a grunt. Yes, his brother was right, as if he wanted reminding, but at least Maggie’s presence, and her wicked turn of conversation, had made it bearable. A good friend to Hannah in the days following the shoot-out, everything had worked out well for Maggie. He was glad somebody had come out of it better off. At least he could be happy for someone.

Chapter Thirty-Three

There'd been a few raised eyebrows at the friendship Hannah and Maggie had forged, even though Maggie had become something of the town heroine. The womenfolk in the town admired her for what she had done, although they still remained nervous of her reputation. So, despite the fact that Maggie spent many a night drinking *thank you* offerings from the menfolk, the women made certain that they tightened their leashes on their husbands.

However, Maggie hardly noticed. She kept herself busy with Jed, tending to his every wish and desire. Nevertheless, there had been one notable exception, and, as they'd shared their farewell supper the previous evening, she'd looked fit to burst as she told her friends her news.

"Remember me telling you that I might settle down one day?" she said, reminding Jed of a conversation they'd had that night when he'd found her battered and bruised after her encounter with McCabe. "Well, there's a rancher who's been calling on me for a while. His wife died a couple of years back and he's been rather lonely in the female department so I've been attending to his needs in that way. Well, since I've earned such wonderful notoriety as *The Girl Who Killed Ethan McCabe*." She spoke the words theatrically. "He's been visiting more than usual. He can't keep away."

Her eyes sparkled, and she paused dramatically to let everyone absorb her news, while Jed raised his eyebrows knowingly.

"And guess what? He's asked me to marry him and go live with him up on his ranch. He's quite a bit older than me but he can still

fuck for Ireland. He certainly knows plenty of ways to give a girl a good time. I like it when a man is ready to put a woman's needs first. And he most certainly does. Just like someone else I know." She shot Jed a wicked, little smile.

"Congratulations," Jed smiled, and then teased, "but are you sure you'll get enough satisfaction with just one man. And an old one at that?" As the past two weeks had proved, Maggie's sexual appetite was nothing short of voracious. She'd certainly kept Jed busy, and fully satisfied.

Her soft laughter gurgled wickedly in her throat.

"Well, he's also got four strapping, grown-up sons. So, I suppose if I do get a little bored..." She deliberately trailed off as she shot all of them a naughty look. As Jed already knew, Maggie wasn't averse at satisfying more than one man at a time. In fact, she positively reveled in it. He just wished Luke had gone all the way with them. It might have taken his mind off the delectable Hannah who sat across from him, doing her darnedest to look happy, and failing miserably. Thank goodness for Maggie. At least she'd brightened up the conversation and they could all laugh with her, knowing she meant no malevolence. That it was just her way.

Before she rode back into town, she insisted on giving each of them a parting gift. Drawing long, sock-like objects from her bag, she gave one first to Jed and then to them all. They recognized them immediately as condoms.

Hannah had been fascinated when Maggie first showed her one. She'd told her so much about her wayward life and Hannah had learned so much from her. Hannah had thought herself a woman of the world. It made her realize how innocent she really was.

"Any whore worth her salt knows ways to protect herself from unwanted babies and the dreaded pox," Maggie told her one afternoon. "And even a married woman needs to learn ways to restrict babies too." She paused for a moment as she added dramatically, "Although the manly powers that be think it ungodly for us women to

have access to them. They think we should only open our legs for procreation and nothing more. If we don't want babies, we're the ones who should show restraint. Someone ought to tell them that it's a bit hard to do that when it's a man's cock that puts the babies there. It's not easy for a married woman to say no to a big burly husband when most men only ever think with their cocks. They're more concerned with sticking them up our cunts than doing anything to protect us from getting pregnant. You should hear some of the things men say to get out of using one." She spoke in a deeper voice, adopting an exaggerated tone. "'I tell you, it's like making love to a sock,' they'll say. So, I'll say, 'Better to make love to a sock than have your cock drop off, isn't it? You don't know *what* some harlots have got.' And put like that, how can they refuse when it's their precious pricks that are put in danger?"

Maggie made Hannah laugh. Quite a revolutionary in her own way, Maggie was also the only one with whom Hannah had shared her innermost thoughts. One afternoon, she'd expressed her doubts about staying with Jacob. At the same time, she told her that she didn't want to let him down after all he'd done, for her as well as himself.

Maggie realistically pointed out that, as a man, he'd soon get over it. There were a bevy of beauties who'd be only too willing to accommodate him should he suddenly find himself free of her, noticeably that Becky who fairly swooned every time he spoke to her. He'd once had feelings for her. They'd soon return once he fathomed out that Hannah had just turned his head for a while. That, in her, he'd found a worthy ally with whom to fight against McCabe

Hannah had giggled a little shyly, too, that he probably thought her a good fuck as well. Hannah, also, finally found the courage to confess her wicked past with him to her newfound friend.

"Well, if it's a good fuck you're after, you should go with Luke and Jed," Maggie suggested, "because maybe, just maybe, I think you

might just love that Luke a little bit more than you do Jacob.” Maggie was far too perceptive for her own good.

At first, Hannah pooh-poohed the idea but eventually admitted a little sadly, “What Luke and I had was good. But now that Jacob’s back, he’s ignoring me like hell.”

The shock of finding him packed and gone just two days after Jacob’s return had cut to the quick. There was so much she’d wanted to say to him but, having done his duty by her, he obviously saw his job as finished. That was why she’d been so calm and down-to-earth that day she’d spoken to him in the barn. Better to let him think she loved Jacob and was staying with him than let Luke think he’d have to deal with some emotional, lovesick woman. Hannah had stood on her own two feet for too long to start begging for affection.

“Only because he doesn’t want to get hurt, darlin’,” Maggie said. “And that’s what’s going to happen to you, too, if you stay here. You’re not ready to settle down and have babies yet. You need a bit of adventure in your life first.”

“As if I haven’t had enough of that this past year,” Hannah scoffed.

Although, last night, when Maggie handed her the condom, she knew for certain she wouldn’t ever use it as Jacob’s wife. She cared for him but she wasn’t going to marry him. She didn’t even belong here anymore.

But what would she do instead? Return to her mother and sisters, and brother who would be almost back home by now? What would she do then? Let her mother talk her into finding her a suitable husband? The thought filled her with horror.

No, what she really wanted was to continue traveling. She loved this land and she wanted to explore it. Jacob and William had talked of the exciting new world out in California and she needed to see it, too. If only Luke and Jed would ask her to go with them. She’d do so like a shot. But they didn’t.

Sadness gripped her cruelly, viciously twisting its knife through her heart and belly. However, no one would have guessed. As they sat, so civilized, eating supper together, she painted a wide smile on her face and hid behind her mask.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dusk fell. Hannah nudged her horse through the trees. She'd been full of confidence and hope since setting off but the farther she traveled the more anxious she began to feel. She thought she might have caught up with them by now.

She'd watched Luke and Jed ride away until they were nothing more than mere specks on the horizon. The pain ripped through her heart to think she'd never see them again. She looked up at Jacob. Last night she'd finally made up her mind. She wouldn't be staying.

She'd not said a word to him but she could tell he already knew. She could see it in his eyes, not sadness but relief. Hannah might have proved a loyal and steadfast friend in their battle against McCabe but, the truth was, she was too much woman for him.

He'd come back from California full of dreams and plans not only for his ranch but for the town too. After explaining his ideas to them, the townsfolk saw in him a strong man who could run the town fairly as their new mayor. They persuaded him to run for office and he wanted, by his side, a good woman who would complement and support him. He needed a woman who would serve on committees and work with other women, leaving him to deal with matters of more importance, men's work.

Much as she cared for Jacob, Hannah knew she could never be that woman he envisioned. If only they'd been truthful with each other, they would have probably seen it from the very beginning. They'd both been infatuated beyond belief, and had turned each other's heads.

For that, they would be forever grateful to each other. How else would they have achieved all they had this past year? But she knew was too dangerous for him. She'd seen the look on his face as Maggie had handed out her gifts. She was more comfortable with men and whores who dished out unsuitable gifts to women. He was old-fashioned enough to think that preventing babies was the husband's prerogative, not a wife's. Jacob's look also told her, that he doubted whether he would ever be able to trust her to remain faithful to him. He'd caught her stealing glances at the two cowboys, several times. She'd met his eyes guiltily. She knew he could smell the lust on her. A lust that no longer included him.

Nevertheless, as they watched the two men ride away, Hannah still struggled to find the words to tell him it was all over. He'd been particularly quiet and subdued since supper the previous night. Hannah decided she needed to take the bull by the horns, once and for all. She took a deep breath.

"We did well, didn't we?" she said softly. "We fought McCabe and won." She paused for a moment, knowing full well that Jacob expected to hear her next words. Nevertheless, it didn't make it any easier. She took another deep breath. "You do know I care very much for you, don't you?"

He silently nodded.

"But it isn't enough," she continued. "And we both know it. We need a bit of honesty here. What we did was good but we can't risk the rest of our lives on that alone. It was exciting and exhilarating and really scared me at times and I'm glad it's all over." She stopped again for another second. "But I'm not ready to become a wife or a mother yet. I'm not even ready to settle down." She waited another heartbeat and then the words came thick and fast. "But Becky is. She's never looked at another man since you, and, if you'd just open your eyes, you'd see how she looks at you every time you go into

town. And how she looks at me and wishes me anywhere but here. Marry her, Jacob. She'd bear you fine sons and daughters."

"And leave you free to follow them?"

Their eyes locked. Watching the two cowboys ride away, she still wished she rode with them, too. Suddenly, she knew what she had to do.

"If they'll have me. Yes." She wasn't ashamed of how she felt. She just wished she could have been more honest over the past two weeks. Instead, she'd let Luke think she loved Jacob and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, when all she really wanted was to go with Luke, and Jed, to share their adventures. Where else could she find two men who made her feel the way they could and who could do things to her body that made her crave for more?

Jacob took her hand and he bent to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

"Then you'd better hurry before they get too far." His face broke into a broad smile. "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Hannah Turner. Thank you for all your help. I couldn't have done it without you."

"It was a pleasure for me too," she smiled.

So now, here she was, ready to share her life with the two brothers if they'd still have her.

She drew in the horse's reins and stopped for a moment. Her horse shuffled in the undergrowth, its hooves click-clacking on the stones hidden beneath. She smelt smoke and saw a gray whisper curl up through the trees. She urged her horse toward it.

As she entered the clearing, she saw Luke putting a fresh pot of coffee onto the embers. He looked up at her as Jed too strode into the camp from between the trees. Naked from the waist up, he rubbed his face and torso dry. He grinned up at her.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

Luke turned in surprise toward his brother.

"You knew she was coming?"

"I spotted her around midday. I've been keeping an eye out for her ever since. Why do you think we stopped here? I couldn't risk us going farther into the forest and her getting lost."

"Why didn't you say? I never noticed."

"You didn't notice because you were too busy wallowing in your own misery at having left her behind. Anyway, you know my thoughts on the matter. Keep women waiting and they'll be all the more eager for it when you do fuck 'em. Men too, come to that." He threw her a teasing look, which Hannah returned with an equally cute one of her own.

She slid from her horse. Her heart now tripped unevenly all over the place. For a moment, she didn't trust herself to speak. She stood for a moment and watched Luke. He looked dumbfounded, as if unable to comprehend her being there. She quickly crossed the distance between them and pulled his face to hers. Waves of emotion rolled through her veins as she gazed into his handsome face. She kissed him hungrily.

As they parted, she took the opportunity to reprimand both him and Jed. "I've told you two before not to speak about me as though I'm not here."

Luke grinned down at her with a silly, lopsided smile. "If I remember correctly, the last time you accused us of that, you'd just been rendered speechless by one of the best orgasms of your life."

Hannah shot him an impish grin, too.

"Only because I'd not had one in months," she teased. She couldn't have these boys getting too complacent. "Maybe it's time I had another."

"What? Jacob lost his touch?" Luke asked a little shortly.

"You're jealous," Hannah teased again. Relief overwhelmed her that maybe she'd made the right decision after all. "Well, for your information, Jacob and I haven't—we didn't—not since he came home."

“But I heard you. You spent time in the bedroom together on the bed. You sounded happy together.”

Hannah gave a little laugh. Her heart felt suddenly free and light. This just got better by the minute.

“What you might have heard was friends talking and laughing, and me tending to his wounds. He could barely move at first. I had quite a struggle to turn him over to bind his bandages. We’d fall and he’d hurt like hell but he’d laugh it off and say it was all worth it because of what we’d achieved.”

“But I thought you wanted to stay with him.”

The pain Hannah had felt over the past fortnight now faded fast. She suddenly felt light-headed simply standing here with him. She reached up and kissed him fully on the mouth again. Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes. “I wanted you to ask me not to,” she whispered huskily.

Luke groaned as he squeezed her to him.

Jed rolled his eyes. “See. I said you should have asked her along. But, oh no, big brother always knows best. Well, I’ll leave you two alone awhile and go finish washing down at the stream.”

Neither really heard him. They were both too busy, gazing into each other’s eyes. Luke removed Hannah’s hat. Her curls tumbled around her shoulders. He ran his hands through them and stroked them behind her ears.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he asked.

“Why didn’t you?”

He smiled at her. “*Touché.*”

Hannah giggled lightly. “Oh, so you speak French, too, among all your other talents,” she teased. Her heart was on fire all over again.

Luke laughed and pulled her tightly to him. “Yes, I can speak French, the important words,” he whispered gruffly. “*Je t’adore.* I love you, Hannah Turner.”

Hannah’s heart leapt and a pulse fluttered in her throat. *He loved her.* She glanced coquettishly up at him through her lashes.

“Je t’aime aussi,” she whispered softly back. “I love you too.”

Luke groaned and tucked her under her chin. He raised her face to his. Hannah felt the desire rise within her. She ran her tongue across her dry lips, desperate for his kisses. He obliged her, falling on them with his wonderful, passionate ones. His mouth plundered and ravaged hers, while his hands dropped to her bottom, squeezing her cheeks through the fabric of her pants. He groaned again. This time, against her cheek, and his breath travelled along the folds of her ear, sending shivers of delight coursing through her body. As he stroked his hands up each side of her body, he reached the swell of her breasts. He lightly traced his fingers beneath them, and, then, caught their tips ever so slightly as he raised his hands to the top button of her shirt. It created just enough pressure to send threads of wanton pleasure coursing through her veins and down into her groin. The breath caught in Hannah’s throat.

Moisture formed and leaked from her aching slit. And, as he began to unfasten her buttons, she gave a little whimper in expectation of the delights to come. However, he was taking far too long about it all. Quickly, she reached for the buttons of his shirt, too. She tore them open, eager to touch the hard flesh beneath his smooth skin and run her fingers through the coarse hair covering his chest.

“For fuck’s sake, Luke, hurry up.”

Luke laughed. “You remember what Jed said. It’s all the better for waiting.” Nevertheless, at her ardent request, he quickly freed her breasts. Her skin dimpled and turned to gooseflesh in the cool, evening air. Her nipples contracted tightly and he stooped to kiss them, circling his tongue over their proud tips as he cradled her breasts in his rough hands. Hannah’s hands traveled in rabid frenzy all over him, too, clawing at his back and tearing at his pants but, to her dismay, he still took his time.

“Let’s get you closer to the fire,” he said softly. The night had turned cooler and the sun had disappeared “I don’t want you catching a chill.”

“I doubt there’s much chance of that,” she cried. She was already burning with the heat of her yearning, and the touch of his hands on her breasts was close to making her come. Nevertheless, she obeyed. They both struggled out of their pants on the way.

The sight of his naked beauty filled Hannah with unadulterated joy. As he swung her into his arms, he kissed her, and laid her down on a blanket by the fire. His stiff shaft stood to dutiful attention, and looked fit to burst from its silken sheath. It rose like a thick snake from its hairy lair. As she parted her legs for him, he dropped to his knees, between them. She was so wet, his fingers just slipped inside her as he circled her clit with her dripping juices.

“Oh God, that’s wonderful,” she murmured. She reached up with one hand and tangled her fingers through his hair, drawing his face down to hers as she sought his mouth. She gave one last moan and pulled him on top of her, raising her hips to his. He pushed his cock inside, rocking into her as her sex swelled and throbbed hotly.

Their movements deepened, growing stronger and more urgent as they bucked and ground. A multitude of lights flashed through Hannah’s brain as the floodgates opened, tumbling her through wave after wave of blissful passion. She cried out and wrapped her legs tightly around him as she felt him begin to peak too. But he suddenly stopped, panting hard. She felt him twitch inside her. He groaned as if in pain as he held back.

“No, Hannah, not this time. If we’re going to make this journey together, you mustn’t put your life at risk by carrying a child. It would be too dangerous. Let me go. Please.” His voice, raw and thick with passion and control, pleaded with her. “There’ll be time for babies when we reach our destination. I promise.”

She opened her eyes to gaze into his. They pleaded with her, begging her to let him go. She did so. He pulled sharply out of her and

fell heavily onto her as hot semen pumped out of him onto the warm skin of her belly. An intense groan of pleasure rumbled from deep within him and he shuddered with the joy of his release. Finally, as he laid his head against her cheek, her heaving breast rose and fell beneath his powerful chest. The world around them vanished, cocooning them both in the center of a breathtaking universe.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hot and panting, they slipped against each other, sliding in sweat and sticky cum. They laughed. Hannah reached down and scooped her palm across her belly and smeared the sticky issues across his chest, rubbing it into his rough hairs. They laughed again.

“I guess that should keep us stuck together for a while,” he joked as he rolled off her and held her in his arms. “We must remember to use one of Maggie’s condoms next time. Then I can come inside you.”

The thought struck her as wholly sensuous. Hannah groaned and pushed him onto his back and quickly sat astride him.

“And when is that likely to be?”

She felt like a total hussy. The feel of his spent cock and pubic hair beneath her wet cunt already sent fresh sparks of desire coursing through her veins. She’d missed his sexy, delicious touch, and she squirmed and rotated her hips sumptuously against him. Luke moaned and reached for her breasts, grasping them and, lightly, tracing his fingers around them. Only minutes gone, and she could already feel his cock twitch into life once more.

“Not done yet?” Jed’s voice drifted through the surfeit of hormones still engulfing the pair of them. “I could hear plenty of ooh-ing and aah-ing and seeing the two of you lying there stark naked is enough to send a man crazy for a hand job. He rubbed his crotch and the incriminating bulge threatening to burst its way out of his pants.

Luke and Hannah exchanged a knowing look. Luke nodded and a silent acknowledgement of understanding and agreement passed between them. Hannah had loved it when she’d been held by both

men, and been given every bit of pleasure they could provide. Luke now gave her permission to experience that delight once again. She sat up straight and reached out an inviting hand toward Jed. Her outstretched fingers beckoned him without even moving.

"You could always come and join us," she smiled flirtatiously. Out of the blue, she suddenly blushed, a little shy about her suggestion. Until now, she'd always believed that the sexual act was mutually exclusive, for one man and one woman. She'd never imagined the double pleasure it could arouse of performing it with two men at the same time. It seemed almost *sinful*.

She watched Jed's gaze drop to his brother who still lay flat on his back. She recognized Jed's need to confirm Luke's agreement to join them. He knew how Luke felt about her. She thought it sweet that he'd never touch her without Luke's express permission. As Luke continued to squeeze her bottom around his growing member, she carried on running her hands over his body and chest. She too couldn't keep her hands off of him. She now threaded the fingers of her other hand through his hair. Luke silently smiled at her and, then, nodded at Jed.

As he turned his gaze fully back to her, he said, "You know I'll do anything in my power to pleasure you, you gorgeous woman. And I know just how to do it. Ever had two men at once?"

Hannah's heart skipped a beat.

"Two? How?" Despite her bold, newfound sexuality, she suddenly felt like a complete innocent once more.

"Well, we'll show you, if you like," Luke said gently. "But only if you agree."

Two men?

At once?

Hannah's heart scudded across her ribcage. It sounded wholly erotic and sensual and so *bad*.

"Yes," she whispered huskily. "Show me."

“You do also realize that once you’ve done this, you may never be satisfied with just one man again,” Jed teased, as he unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants. In the firelight, his body gleamed, bathed in its golden light. His muscles rippled as he strode purposefully toward them and joined them on the blanket. He knelt behind her and cupped her breasts in his cool hands.

Hannah gasped afresh as she caught Luke’s eye. He smiled seductively up at her, basking in her delight. Her cunny pulsed, hot and needy. “I’ll risk it,” she whispered breathlessly. She gasped again as Jed rolled her nipples between finger and thumb. “Only...only, I’m not sure what to do. Will it hurt?”

Luke groaned and caught the back of her neck. He pulled her to him and kissed her hard. His tongue plundered her mouth.

“Don’t worry, we’ll teach you and we shall be so gentle,” he whispered tenderly. “The journey west will be a long one and we’ll have plenty of time. I know you’ll be a magnificent and willing pupil.” He ran a finger lovingly across her cheek and dropped his hands to her ass.

He cupped her buttocks and slid his fingers down the valley between them until he reached her butt-hole. The juices from her cunny flowed thickly and he used them to lubricate around it. He slowly slipped a finger deep inside. A little moan caught in her throat and the world around her receded, leaving just her pulsating pelvis at its center, a black hole ready to suck in every bone-hard erection around it.

“Jed will be using this,” he said softly. “Just relax and let him fill you too.”

He grasped her hips and raised her up onto her knees. His rampant shaft sprang upright from beneath her wet cunt. She struggled to impale herself on it but he continued to tease her. “Don’t be in such a hurry, Hannah,” Luke said. “Remember what we said about waiting a little longer. It will only increase your pleasure when you do come. And there is one last thing I need to ask before we do this.” He

sounded serious. "Just how did you manage to tear yourself away from Jacob and all that gold he brought back with him? With McCabe now gone and no debt left to pay, he must be a rich man. You're not seriously telling me you've given all that up for two poor cowboys?"

Hannah stopped struggling for a moment. Behind her, Jed also joined in the fun. He squeezed her breasts more tightly as he lifted her away from her pleasure too. She could sense their mirth. She cast Luke a saucy smile and reached down between her legs. She clutched Luke's hard cock in one hand and snaked her hand behind her to grab Jed's monster in the other. She squeezed them both hard. Both men groaned in unison at her bold move.

"I have my own gold mine right here," she said sweetly. "And you two boys can sink a shaft into it any time you want."

Simultaneous growls rumbled up from the bellies of both men. This time at her dreadful innuendo, although the growls quickly transformed into low, desperate groans as, this time, she kept them away from their precious prize. She laughed.

"But for your information, as a gesture of goodwill and thanks, Jacob did give me a cut of it for all the help I gave him while he was away. It'll be more than enough to get me, us, started once we reach California." She paused for a moment before adding somewhat provocatively, "Providing I don't die from frustration first." At which point, she released her hold on both men and let Luke lower her onto his waiting shaft.

She gave a little cry. In pure delight, she fell in relief against him, loving the touch of skin against skin. Her breasts squashed against his hard chest. Behind her, she felt Jed part the cheeks of her ass and gently push a finger into her waiting hole. He leaned into her back, his skin brushing against hers, as he whispered softly against her ear,

"You still sure you want to do this?"

"Oh, yes," she purred. Her body now throbbed and ached with a pulsating need that crowded everything else out of her life.

Oh, God! Oh, my!

Already wide open from Luke's throbbing cock, she now welcomed Jed inside her, too, as he thrust gently, parting her body to take his thickness and fill her with his sex. Fireworks exploded in her brain.

Then, as they all rocked together in glorious harmony, the forest filled with the rapturous cries of fulfillment and love.

THE END

www.cindy-crane.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cindy Crane has two grown up sons and lives with her husband in Yorkshire, England, with the beautiful Derbyshire Peak District on one doorstep and the lovely Yorkshire Dales and Moors within easy reach of the other.

She has been beset by a vivid imagination for as long as she can remember. It was a trait picked up from her mother who used to tell stories 'from her head' while she sat at her knee. Even as a child she'd pen tales and comics for friends and siblings. Early retirement from teaching has finally allowed her to pursue this passion.

When not writing, she spends time researching family history, travelling or supporting her local football team. But she also makes time to meet regularly with friends for lunch and walks, girly chats, and putting the world to rights.



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