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Amber Carlton

Three in Paradise

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Tasty Treats

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

THREE IN PARADISE

Copyright © 2010 by Amber Carlton

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-693-8

First E-book Publication: January 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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THREE IN PARADISE

Tasty Treats

AMBER CARLTON

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Chapter 1

Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory

1869

Shannon ran a hand across the nape of her neck, then dropped her head back and stared at the beams in the ceiling. “Oh, by all the saints above, ’tis more than a body can bear. Take a fuckin’ lesson.”

The music spewing from the piano set Shannon’s teeth on edge. The so-called musician jammed his fingers into the keys in a seemingly random pattern of notes and chords. The tinny sound echoed through the saloon, scraping over her nerve endings like tiny pieces of glass. With the arrival of that piano, she’d lost the few precious moments of sanity the early morning offered her.

“Ah, to get me hands on an ax,” she murmured.

She envisioned methodically hacking the piano into unrecognizable bits of wood and ivory. She’d had the same daydream for two weeks now.

She tuned out the horrible music by scrubbing the planks harder, concentrating on the harsh sound of the bristles against the knotted wood. The circles of suds grew tighter and tighter as she pressed down on the tabletop, putting the weight of her small body into her

chore. Leaning over the table, the muscles of her arms straining, her gaze flickered over the occupied tables and the last of the drunks. They'd grown quiet as dawn arrived, too inebriated to form a sentence much less an argument. They'd be sorry now that the sun heralded another day of grueling labor in one of the warehouses or stockyards. Every now and then one of the men winced. Shannon didn't know if it resulted from his blossoming hangover or if he hated the music as much as she did.

The batwing doors swung open and thumped back into the frame with the regularity of a giant ticking clock. The regulars filed in for their breakfasts and shots before heading off to the depot to unload merchandise from the train. The rough men entered the world of the Royal Princess Saloon and Dance Hall singly and in pairs, but none of them looked happy to be there. The men clomped across the hardwood floor in worn boots, then dropped their overused, tired bodies into chairs. Some rested their heads on their arms as they waited for the cooks to spread out the food on the wide tables at the rear of the hall. Others grabbed a drink from the bar and stared upward eagerly, their eyes already glazed with lust.

The whoops and hollers began as the doors on the balcony level opened and closed, and the doxies began their morning parade down to the lower level to ply their wares. Shannon grimaced at the extra noise and glanced up. The whores wore dirty, gauzy petticoats and unlaced corsets that displayed their ample assets for all to see. They rubbed bloodshot eyes as they pursed their painted lips and strolled about the floor, swinging their hips and caressing their breasts. None of them said a word to Shannon as they sashayed past her. That suited Shannon just fine.

The women slid into any willing lap and held out hands for coins from those who wanted a quick fuck before their workday began. One woman fell to her knees in front of Vic Dean and licked the cock he angled toward her. When Vic pressed the back of her head, her face disappeared into his lap.

The clatter of dice competed with Vic's moans as several men took a chance, hoping that Lady Luck would find them today and end their misery in Cheyenne.

Good luck to you, then. 'Tis sure I am it won't be happenin' here.

The spinning of the roulette wheel became a background noise punctuated only by a sharp clack as the rolling ball found its destination. Jud's announcement of "No winner! Place your bets" brought groans from several of the players. Shannon wondered if Jud even watched the wheel anymore. His pronouncements of doom most often came before the ball found its slot.

An argument brewed in the corner between two men playing poker. Mercifully, their raised voices almost drowned out the piano. Shannon could tell one of them would soon be lying on the sticky floor. She hoped only that the men wouldn't tumble in her direction. The last fight had caught her off guard and nearly broken her arm.

"'Tis better than Five Points," Shannon muttered. "Anythin' is better than Five Points."

A shaft of sunlight pierced the gloom and fell onto the table she scrubbed. She sighed. The table was not clean yet. Not even close. Shannon wiped her sleeve across her forehead, and her gaze caught and held on the two men who strode into the Royal Princess. As the doors swung closed, they stood for a moment murmuring to one another as though debating the merits of the place. Shannon could have told them there were better and worse places in town to spend a morning. She kept it as clean as she could, and the food wasn't all that bad, but they probably wouldn't ask the opinion of a woman cleaning blood off a table.

They were big men, nice looking, too, and far cleaner than most. Since they'd obviously bathed recently, she assumed they'd spent the night at a hotel. Nary a speck of dirt dusted their boots. With their long coats and those dark hats pulled low over their brows, she thought they might be local men, possibly even from one of the new ranches a little north of Cheyenne. Aye, either of those cowboys

would do to warm a girl's bed at night. Where had they been when she'd taken that wastrel of a husband into her life? These men didn't look the type to steal a woman's reticule with all her hard-earned savings, vanish into the back alleys of Cheyenne, and turn up dead the next morning.

'Tis a welcome goodbye to you then, Joseph Connelly. 'Tis hopin' I am you've found your proper justice.

The men shifted forward, still unsure of their decision, and the shadowy form of their combined bodies nearly blocked out all the light coming through the door. The backlighting made it difficult to inspect their features, but as one turned to talk to the other, his profile stood out in stark relief against the dingy glow. He had a strong, determined face. A dark moustache outlined his upper lip and a well-groomed beard covered his chin. His tense body seemed primed for danger. This man looked like he would take no guff from anyone. He might even be the type to hand it out. His companion stood slightly more relaxed as he listened.

"Aye, 'tis a mighty fine sight for a wee girl's eyes," she said softly.

"Get your ass moving, woman. I've got a business to run."

Shannon whirled around, the scrub brush clutched in her fist. Jaw clenched, she took a step closer to her boss and lifted her face to peer into his beady eyes.

"Did you say somethin' to me then, Harvey Lightner?" she asked sweetly.

He waved a hand in the direction of the two men standing on the threshold. "I said hurry up. There's men over there waiting for this table."

"Aye, 'tis seein' them I am with me own eyes. And do you think they want to eat their bacon and drink their whiskey smellin' the blood o' a dead man?" She smiled and batted her lashes as Lightner shifted backwards.

He waved his hand again. "Just clean it up."

She stomped toward him. “I can’t just *clean it up*, you addlepated moron!” She clamped her mouth shut when several sleepy patrons stirred and glanced toward them. One of the men in the doorway took two steps forward. His companion reached out to stop him, then moved his hand beneath his coat. The last thing she needed this morning was more blood to clean up, even if the Irish luck finally found her and made it Lightner’s blood. That would make for a cheery day, but quite a mess. She took a deep breath, then forced the rest of her words through tight lips. “’Tis a man’s blood. How in the fuck were you thinkin’ I’d be able to just *clean it up*?”

Lightner glanced toward the door where the cowboys watched them quietly. “Scrub more.”

“I cannot scrub more, or harder, or any other damn thing. The blood leached through and has become part o’ the fibers. ’Tis your own sorry fault the stain exists. If you’d have moved the body last night like I told you to, me job would be a wee less difficult this mornin’.” She shoved the crimson-stained brush against his chest, grinding it into the dirty fabric of his vest. “If ’tis unhappy you are with me work, Harvey Lightner, would you be wantin’ to do it your own self?”

Lightner jerked backward and swiped furiously at the faded brocade. His glance shifted to the balcony railing as he whispered, “Keep your voice down. Mr. Barrows doesn’t know about the...accident yet.”

“Accident me ass,” Shannon said. “What charming tale will fall out o’ your mouth when Barrows discovers you had a dead man sittin’ here most o’ last night? That, in a fit o’ conscience, Calvin Clark put a gun to his own head because he was unworthy to live among the upstandin’ people o’ Cheyenne? Oh, truly, that will be a pitiful story worth hearin’.”

“Be quiet,” he ground out.

His gaze darted restlessly over the patrons, but the Cheyenne sunrise brought complacency. Most of the men found escape from

their miserable lives in warm, lush flesh or stared with anticipation toward the food tables.

Shannon shook her head. “You’ve helped Clark cheat men at cards. You cheated Dwight Fisher last night.”

“There’s no proof of that.”

“Continue your dreamin’, Harvey Lightner. Dwight Fisher will be quick to tell the error o’ whatever story you concoct, and he’ll be a hero in this town. Calvin Clark’s cheated every sorry son-o’-a-bitch that’s come through that door.” She stabbed her finger toward the small shaft of sunlight that penetrated the gloom between the two men. “*You* let Clark steal men’s coin for a share o’ the profits.”

Lightner clenched his fists. “I did no such thing.”

“I imagine Mr. Barrows would be interested in knowin’ how much money you have in your pockets.”

“I have none.”

Shannon reached out and skimmed down the side of Lightner’s vest with her finger. “Oh, but wouldn’t it be interestin’ to take a look?”

Lightner slapped her hand, and Shannon laughed.

“How’d you get so fuckin’ stupid? I knew how this was goin’ to end, you brainless yank.”

Lightner pulled on the edge of his vest and his ugly, beady stare once again darted upward. “You don’t know anything, Mrs. Connelly, so I suggest—”

“I know you passed off a dead man all night as a drunk so Barrows wouldn’t know you’d caused murder in his place. Where’d you put the body, Harvey Lightner? How much did you pay from your profits to get rid o’ the carcass?”

“That’s not your concern.”

“No, o’ course not. ’Tis nothin’ I am but the body that cleans up your incompetence. But ’tis knowin’ I am that Clark could not have cheated so many without your help. ’Twould seem you’ve lost your gravy train now that Fisher’s murdered your partner.” Shannon

glanced around, tapping her finger against her cheek. “Now where did Dwight go? Mr. Barrows is goin’ to want to speak to him once I—”

“Stay out of it. You can’t prove anything.”

Shannon shrugged. “No, but ’tis sure I am he might like to know you’re runnin’ a rigged game and skimmin’ the blackjack profits.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Mrs. Connelly?”

“Oh, blackmail. ’Tis such an ugly word, but I see it holds your attention. ’Tis concerned you’ve become this mornin’ with me performance and that’s not somethin’ I’m willin’ to let you do. I need this position.” She pressed her face as close as his foul breath would allow. “I’ll not let you jeopardize it. Find someone else to inflict your sorry self on.”

“I’m your supervisor, Mrs. Connelly. Mr. Barrows—”

“Will slit your sorry throat if he finds out what you’ve been doin’.” She pressed an inch closer. “So remember that and remember what I know. For now, you can kiss me pert, little ass.” She slammed the brush on the table and blood-flecked soap suds shot upward and splattered across his vest.

Eyes wide, Lightner stared horrified at the mess for a moment then his ratty gaze shifted back to her.

“You’ll apologize for that, Mrs. Connelly, and clean this vest as well, or I’ll toss your pert, little ass onto the street.”

“Back the fuck off. Apologizin’ is the last thing I’ll be doin’, you rodent-face weasel!”

“It might just *be* the last,” Lightner said. “I have other friends in this town besides Calvin Clark.”

“Oh, ’tis threats you’re calling on now, is it? Well, ’tis not shocked I am to hear them fall from your stupid, rodent mouth.”

“Your mouth can be put to better uses in this place.” He nodded toward Dolly Mae sucking on Vic Dean’s dick. The smile that spread on Lightner’s ugly mouth sent a shiver down Shannon’s spine, but she forced herself to hold his gaze. “Maybe I should talk to Mr. Barrows about a promotion for you.”

Shannon spat in his face. The glob hit him right on the cheek. His arm shot out and gripped her elbow, hauling her against him. Then he shoved her back against the table. Shannon twisted, but he held on tightly.

“You’ll pay for that, Mrs. Connelly, starting today.”

“I’ll ne’er be a whore, you vile, ugly—”

“Let the lady go.”

At the sound of the rough growl, Shannon turned her face and met a hard, dark blue stare. The steely length of a gun barrel pointed in her direction.

* * * *

Lightner decided he wanted to live through the morning so he released the girl. That was a good decision on his part because the sound of the piano ground on Eli’s last nerve. The smell of burning eggs drifting from the back of the saloon combined with the stench of unwashed bodies and stale liquor made Eli want to puke. Watching the whores did nothing to stir his dick. He’d just as soon jack off in the alley than let one of those diseased women touch any part of his body. Eli had already told his brother they should head back to the hotel. At least the Union Pacific had a restaurant where they could eat in relative peace and quiet. They’d been ready to turn and walk out, but then Josh spotted the girl. He got stubborn as a mule after that.

Eli watched the girl’s spit ooze down Lightner’s cheek and perspiration pop out on the man’s brow. Eli cocked his head and waited for Lightner to decide what the day would bring. If forced to shoot the cocksucker, it would be just one more thing in an already foul morning, but he wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. He knew Lightner was a sorry excuse for a man, even for Cheyenne.

Eli felt his brother’s presence slide up behind him. Ordinarily Eli would assume Josh moved to cover him, but glancing down at the little piece of fury standing in front of him, he knew better. Josh just

wanted to get closer to the girl. Eli didn't blame him. She was a beauty. Even with her blood-streaked hands and sweaty brow, she seemed like a breath of mountain air next to everyone else around him. She barely came halfway up his chest, but looking at those clenched fists and that stubborn set of pink lips, Eli thought she possessed enough determination to dispatch Lightner off to his just rewards with simply a glance of those sharp green eyes.

The knot of hair at the nape of her neck had come undone during Lightner's manhandling, and a thick braid of burnished red trailed down her back, nearly touching the bloody tabletop. He wanted to pin it back in place before the stain of a dead man touched another part of her, but he had no idea how to fix a lady's hair. Instead he reached out and grabbed the braid and swung it over her shoulder. Her gaze shifted back to his eyes, and that's when he knew he'd be taking her with them.

The girl inched sideways, her face crunching into a grimace as her body slid against the man's crotch.

Lightner took a step backward. "Mr. Payne."

"Lightner."

"Mr. Payne." The man nodded toward Josh then tugged on his blood-stained vest and smiled. Eli wished he hadn't. The condition of his teeth took what remained of Eli's appetite and dumped it into a manure pit. "What brings you two to our establishment this fine morning?" The stench of his breath wafted forward, and Eli hoped Lightner would take another couple steps backward. The toad glanced down at the gun still pointed in his direction. "Looking for a little breakfast?"

"It crossed our minds," Eli said.

Josh moved forward. "What we weren't looking for was a cocksucking shit roughing up a pretty little lady."

Lightner's glance darted toward Josh, then the woman. "Just a slight misunderstanding."

“Ha!” The girl slammed her fists on her hips. “’Twas not a misunderstandin’ between us, Harvey Lightner. ’Tis a damn sight more than that. I understood every slimy word that oozed from your mouth.”

“Now see here, Mrs. Connelly. Your performance—”

Eli waved his gun for Lightner’s attention. “Is there a problem with her performance?”

Lightner gestured toward the table. “As you can see we had a slight accident last night.”

“Those things happen.” Eli slipped his gun into the holster and Lightner’s shoulders sagged as he released a breath. “What exactly does an *accident* have to do with this woman?”

The girl sidled closer to him. He felt the warmth of her body hit him like the summer sun. She lifted her chin and glared at Lightner. “He’s a *rat*. A worthless, vile, malodorous *rat*.”

Eli nodded. “We can see that, darlin’”

Josh laughed. “And smell it.”

Josh’s laughter drew her toward him like a lure. Damn his brother.

* * * *

Josh knew the moment he saw her she’d be coming home with them. He didn’t give a damn what Eli thought. This was the woman for them. He could see it in the firm set of her lips, the serious, intent look in her eyes, and the determined way she insisted that stain would come out if it took dynamite. The Payne spread needed a woman with her conviction, and they needed a tough woman to handle them. This was their gal.

He would have wanted her no matter her appearance, but Lady Luck was on their side because he hadn’t seen a woman this pretty since they’d left Pittsburgh. He sure liked the color of her hair. It looked like a banked fire glowing on a winter’s night, and the sight of her small body made his cock ache. Oh, well, he’d probably have to

forget about that, but maybe once she got to know them, maybe even like them a little, he might be able to convince her. Things got a little lonely out on the ranch and even a mite boring at times. Fucking might be of interest to her eventually. He'd just try to play his cards right and possibly win her hand.

She pressed her body against his side, the soft swell of her breasts sliding across his arm. She smelled nice, like roses.

"What's your name, darlin'?"

Her little face lifted toward him, and she smiled. The sight of it nearly melted his heart. "Shannon Connelly."

He risked a glance toward Eli who wore his usual stony expression. He'd probably catch hell for this, but he didn't give a fucking damn what Eli wanted right now. "Shannon, how'd you like to see the prettiest spread in the Wyoming territory?"

Her mouth dropped open and those beautiful green eyes suddenly sparkled like the brightest emerald. Eli made some kind of grunting sound that Josh chose to ignore. Shannon clutched at Josh's hand then lifted it, pressing it against her breast. His cock lurched, and in that moment, he decided he might be playing that hand a lot quicker. He wanted to win this lady. Her words came out in a soft sigh.

"'Tis me greatest wish."

"Then go pack your bags."

She squealed and launched herself toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her little face tucked into the side of his neck. Her breath rushed across his skin as giggles burst out of her like bubbles. "Thank you, thank you."

"We haven't got all day for lovey-dovey shit," Eli drawled. "The train'll be here in an hour."

Josh glanced at his brother. Eli wore his bored look as he tugged absentmindedly on his moustache. Josh smiled because that simple gesture meant everything would be okay. Reluctantly, Josh let Shannon slide down his body. He took his time releasing her because

having her so close made him happy. And Eli was happy, too. Josh could tell.

Shannon suddenly threw herself at Eli. He caught her easily and lifted her until they were eye level. Her forehead hit the brim of his hat. She steadied herself with her hands against his shoulders then tilted her face and planted a kiss on his mouth. Josh loved the look of shock in Eli's wide eyes. He loved Shannon's smile more.

"Me thanks to you, sir, for comin' to me rescue."

"Any time, darlin'." He dropped her to the floor and nodded toward the staircase. "Now go get your things 'cause we have to meet the train."

Shannon jumped up and down, her hands clasped together. Another burst of giggles came from her before she strode toward her boss and shoved him in the chest. Lightner made a sound that reminded Josh of a rabbit caught in a trap as he staggered backward and fell back onto the table. She lifted the scrub brush and ground it into his chest, punctuating each word with another twist of the brush.

"I fuckin' quit, you scum-suckin', rat-eatin' turd." She dropped the brush onto the table with a flourish and then put her hands on her hips. "'Tis me heartfelt wish you go to hell, Harvey Lightner, and when you get there, tell me dead husband I've had a better offer."

She laughed then and whirled around. Lifting her skirts, she flew up the staircase, the sounds of her delight drifting down around them like raindrops. Eli's gaze followed her until she disappeared through a door at the top of the stairs.

"Lightner, make yourself useful and get us some grub," Eli said. "We have supplies to pick up."

The man scrambled off the table and scurried toward the food, brushing at his vest.

Eli pulled out a chair and settled down at the table. He ran his hand over the damp top. "She does good work."

"Noticed that," Josh said.

Lightner dropped two plates of food on the table then darted away.

Josh leaned toward his plate. “The eggs smell great.” He lifted a forkful and shoved it in his mouth. He rolled his eyes in bliss, then nodded toward the piano. “The music sounds good, don’t you think?”

Eli glanced up. “It’s not too bad, but the player could use a lesson or two.” His mouth curled into a slow smile. “She’s perfect.”

“My thought exactly.”

Chapter 2

Wyoming had never seemed so beautiful to her. How had she failed to notice how clean and bright, airy and full of wonder it was? The last few hours had miraculously transported her into a different world, one bursting with promise and overflowing with vibrant, earthy colors. The soft, musical sounds of lilting birds filled the air and the breath of the wind sighed through the grasses with a lulling melody. Cheyenne seemed a distant memory already, and she ached to stuff her head full of new ones. She would never be able to repay the Payne brothers for what they'd done for her.

She stood up in the wagon and stretched her arms upward, then twirled in a circle. She stumbled a little, nearly falling into a crate, then laughed and leaned over the back of the seat.

The older brother, Eli, glanced over his shoulder at her. "You're going to kill yourself if you don't stop doing that."

"I cannot seem to help it. If I stop, I might bust." Shannon smiled and pressed against his back. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze. "If 'tis me fate to die, then I'll die happy."

She turned toward the horse that trotted up next to the wagon. The saddle creaked as Josh leaned toward her. "Don't go dying on us now. We just found you."

"'Tis not me intention to die today," she said. "Not on the most perfect day o' me life."

She hadn't decided which of the brothers was the most well-favored. Both had dark blue eyes and black hair though Josh wore his hair a little shorter than his brother. It curled around his neck while

Eli's fell straight to his collar of his shirt. Eli also wore a moustache and a small beard, whereas with Josh, she had a much better view of his full, luscious mouth and the slight cleft in his smooth-shaven chin. Such beautiful, worldly men, but they blended into the landscape around them. They looked at home on this wild prairie. The landscape suited them. She found it hard to believe they'd come from Pittsburgh. She'd traveled through that city, and though the size couldn't compare to New York, it seemed rather daunting.

"I cannot wait to see your home," she said. "I've an image o' it in me head, and 'tis a lovely sight."

"You're a lovely sight," Josh said.

Eli made one of his noises, but she ignored it and concentrated on Josh. She loved the look in his eye. He made her feel all gushy inside as though her blood moved faster. Her skin grew hotter and her pussy throbbed when he glanced at her. That never happened with Joseph Connelly, and now she knew why. She always hated that bastard.

"You might be a bit sorry to see the house," Eli said.

She turned toward him. "Now why e'er would you be thinkin' that?"

"He's right," Josh said. "The ranch keeps us pretty busy. Not much time to take care of a house."

"Sure if 'tis only a matter o' dirt and dust, 'tis thinkin' I am the concern is all for naught. Cleanin' is me specialty. 'Tis not the best o' skills, but 'tis me own."

Josh leaned a little closer from his saddle. "Do you cook too?"

"I've had a cause to cook a time or two," Shannon said. "And I'm not too bad at the task."

Eli smiled. "That might be the best thing I've heard all day. We've been chowing at the bunk house. Might be nice to have a real supper."

Shannon stood and tipped when the wagon lurched over a ridge in the path. She tumbled over the edge of the seat in a flurry of skirts and petticoats. A strong arm wrapped around her waist and hauled her up.

She landed in Eli's lap and felt his cock twitch and grow beneath her ass. She stared into that dark gaze and seriously wanted to plant her mouth on his again. She'd liked the tickle of his moustache, and though she'd previously had no thought of wanting another cock in her for quite some time, the idea seemed appealing right now. She smiled, hoping he might be able to read her mind. She licked her suddenly dry lips. All she could think of was that length of hard steel pressing against her skirt.

"Scout on ahead, Josh."

"No need, Eli. We're—"

She cast a quick glance toward Josh. "'Tis me thinkin' you should check for savages. Right now."

Josh's brows drew down as he frowned. "Savages? What would a little lady like you know about—" He cocked his head when Eli's dark stare lifted to his. Josh scratched his head. "Oh, well, that's not a bad idea." He waved his finger toward the creek in the distance. "I'll just scout on ahead."

Josh kicked his heels against the horse's flanks and the animal shot off, spewing a cloud of dust around the wagon. Shannon sat as still as a mouse and waited.

* * * *

Eli hadn't held a woman since Pittsburgh. It seemed like a lifetime ago, possibly even longer. This one felt perfect in his arms. She had strong limbs and just enough padding to make her feel soft and cozy. The smell of her enveloped him, and the scent conjured a lost memory. He struggled to capture it until he realized she smelled like their ma's garden when they'd been kids. *Roses*. The scent of home, family, love. He owed his brother for this one.

A soft smile curled her lips. "Are you just goin' to stare at me then, Eli Payne? I've a better thought in me mind." She blushed prettily. "If you'd be so inclined."

“And what’s your thought, pretty lady?” His heart thumped like a hammer on an anvil. How could one girl make him feel so damn good?

She wiggled her little ass and his cock noticed right off. “’Tis alone we are.”

“I noticed.”

“And there are things a man and a woman can do when they’re alone.”

He swallowed hard. *Kiss her, you dumb cowboy.* “Heard tell of those things.”

She shifted, and for one moment, his heart stopped. He’d lost the opportunity. He wanted to kick his own ass to Pittsburgh and back, then give it a quick jab with a branding iron. How could he have been so goddamn stupid?

The scent of roses washed over him as she lifted off his lap and just as quickly settled back down. This time she straddled him, her skirt and petticoats hiked up around her thighs. He nearly dropped the reins as her arms slid around his neck, velvety bands that swept under his hair and made his heart race faster. Holding tight to the reins with one hand, his other reached blindly. He found the texture of a stocking, then followed it up and over her knee until he met the warmth of her bare thigh. She scooted closer, the heat of her body coiling around him and burning hotter than the April sun above. Her pussy pressed against his denim-clad crotch, and he swore he could feel the damp pulsing of the blood rushing to her clit and smell the hot, wet moisture from the depths of her body.

Shannon swept off his hat and dropped it onto the seat. Reaching between them, she skimmed across the bulge in his denims, then her palm curled around it, squeezing gently. His body wanted to arch toward her along with his cock, but he forced himself to stay still. She tilted her head and stared at him for a moment.

“And is steerin’ without hands one o’ your skills, cowboy? ’Cause I’ll be needin’ both hands on me, if you’re wonderin’.”

He stared into those green eyes that watched him with a spark of amusement. “You don’t have to do this.” *Dumbass*.

Shannon laughed. “You don’t have to do it either, but ’tis me sincere hope that you’ll accept me offer. I’ve a need for you, Eli Payne. ’Tis hot I am,” her hand drifted across the bodice of her dress, “and ’tis me thinkin’ you could help with that.”

“I could help.”

“Good then.”

As her fingers began to work the buttons on his pants, she leaned toward him and her mouth caught his with a playful kiss that made him want to laugh but also made his dick hard as a rock. When she pulled away, he dropped the reins and then cupped her cheek, dragging her back. His other hand curled around her hip and yanked her body tight against his. He didn’t hesitate, and didn’t stop to wonder again why she made him feel like he did. None of that mattered. He stole her mouth in a kiss that made her melt into his chest and he almost melted into the seat. Damn. At least he hadn’t forgotten how to kiss. And she sure as hell knew how. Her lips opened and her tongue pushed into his mouth. He sucked on it like a sweet-tasting candy and listened to the small noises that told him she was pretty darn content.

Her nipples pebbled beneath the calico dress. The feel of the hard little points straining against the fabric and poking through his shirt made his cock ache like a bitch. He fiercely needed to nestle in the heat of her pussy.

When they came up for air, she sat back and frantically began to work the buttons of her dress. He watched each move she made as his hand found other things to do. He reached between her legs and followed the trail of fire. When his finger dipped between the hot, moist lips of her pussy and touched her clit, she jerked upright and her head fell back with a moan. She yanked at the last of the buttons and spread her dress open, revealing the smooth, white expanse of her breasts.

“Don’t be thinkin’ to stop. ’Tis heavenly.” She rocked into him, and his finger slid over her plump, juicy folds. She cupped her breast in her hand and the tantalizing peak of her nipple caused his mouth to water. “Suck me. I want to feel your mouth.”

His hand swept under her ass, and he lifted her. His lips locked on her nipple while his fingers continued to stroke and tease her clit. He hadn’t tasted anything so good, and if they weren’t in a damn wagon on a dry, dusty stretch of Wyoming wilderness, he’d spread her legs and taste every inch of her pussy, inside and out.

She splayed her fingers through his hair, clutching him closer, as his tongue circled her nipple. He bit the rosy tip gently, causing her to lurch. The rhythm of her hips increased, rocking harder and faster against his hand. Her breathing quickened and suddenly her groin slammed against him, her body convulsing. He steadily circled her clit until she expelled a tiny gasp and she dropped her head against the top of his. He released her nipple reluctantly, letting his tongue sweep around it for one more taste.

“Eli Payne, ne’er did I expect such a wondrous gift.” She cupped her hands around his jaw and lifted his face. Her soft lips caressed his mouth, her tongue darting between his lips and teasing him with fleeting jabs of sensation. “’Tis my turn to give a gift.”

She reached between his legs and her hand dipped into his pants. Curling her fingers around his cock, she drew it out. She lightly caressed the head with her thumb, stroking over the slit and the drop of pre-cum that dotted the tip. She licked the fluid from her finger, rolling her eyes with a small moan.

“’Tis a succulent treat on a dry afternoon.”

That did him in. He knew he’d never last. His cock throbbed in her hand, the pounding blood beating a steady rhythm against the swollen, aching flesh. She pumped him several times, her hand gliding up and down his shaft with a sensual precision that nearly stole his willpower. His cock wanted to burst—in her hand, her pussy,

her mouth, it didn't seem to matter. He gritted his teeth, willing himself to control his release.

Steeling himself against the torture of her smooth strokes, he lost track of things until the head of his cock touched something that felt like liquid fire. Shannon swept his cock head back and forth across her damp pussy, mixing their juices and stealing a little bit more pleasure for herself. Small tremors raced through her body, and Eli felt grateful that he played a part in giving her such a delight.

She sank onto his cock slowly, burying his length and surrounding his flesh between the hot, moist and fluttering walls of her pussy. He nearly groaned with the pleasure of it. His throbbing cock steeled itself for the challenge of holding down his release until she found hers again. He wasn't a selfish man and aimed to please. He wrapped his hands around her hips, watching her face as small smiles skimmed across her mouth and her eyes darkened as she sought her orgasm. He let her take the lead. She seemed a woman who liked to make her own decisions, and hell, he was willing to go along with this one.

She laid her hands on her thighs and rode him in a gentle, fluid motion, pulling back, then grinding against his groin with an excruciating friction. She bit at her bottom lip as she struggled to control her breathing. The image of those small, white teeth clamping onto flesh was almost more than he could take. He decided she wouldn't mind if he took a little control. He slid a hand behind her neck and tugged her face closer to steal a kiss, just one, but once his mouth touched hers, a spark ignited in his body. His mouth sealed over hers, and he yanked her hard against his lap. His cock thrust into her as far as it could, and she made a sound under his lips that told him everything was still good. Everything but his control.

"It's been too long, darlin', and I'm not going to last much longer."

"Take your pleasure," Shannon murmured. "We have all the time in the world."

Her permission gave him strength, and he managed to hold on as he pumped her body up and down on his cock. A small catch of her breath and the clutch of her pussy around his dick told him she was close. Just a couple more strokes and—

The walls of her pussy clenched violently around his cock, and her mouth slammed over his, her tongue sweeping into his mouth. He held her, taking her tremors against his body. When his cock spilled fluid into her, he combined her vibrations with his own. He poured into her, reveling in each spurt of cum that shot from his dick and filled this woman who seemed to promise more than he could have hoped for.

When her trembling subsided, she dragged her mouth from his and took a huge breath. She blinked. Then her beautiful, slightly glazed eyes scanned the prairie around them.

“The wagon stopped.”

Eli glanced at the horses and laughed. “So it has.”

“I thought me imagination was playin’ tricks, but ’tis true I felt the earth move.” Shannon threw up her arms, leaning backward to gaze at the sky. He grabbed her waist to keep her from falling off his lap. Deep, throaty laughter tumbled over him like the rushing white water of a mountain stream. “I love Wyomin’!”

Eli couldn’t have agreed more.

* * * *

Josh rode about half a mile, crossed the creek, and settled down to wait under the only tree large enough to offer shade to a man and a horse. He lay in the new strands of grass and tucked his hands under his head. Staring up into the blossoming leaves, he squinted against the rays of sun that filtered between the limbs and thought about his brother.

Eli had woken in a foul mood though Josh’d be damned if he knew why. They’d gambled a little last night and won enough to pay

for their dinner at the hotel. That alone should have made Eli happy. Dealing with his brother was sometimes like poking a bear with a stick. Not a good idea. Josh had long since given up coddling his brother's moods, but lately there'd been plenty of moods, and grumpy seemed to be Eli's favorite.

Sometimes the mere sights and sounds of Cheyenne put a frown on Eli's face and a growl in his voice. Eli hated to part with money, and in the last year, they'd parted with plenty. Their venture in Wyoming to establish a profitable ranch and breeding facility took far more than their initial backers invested, forcing them to add capital from their own portfolio. Each trip to Cheyenne seemed to pull more out of their already over-extended pockets—for supplies, stock, ranch hands, and for that damned divorce.

When his brother had headed to the telegraph office that morning, Josh thought a good guess for Eli's mood might be his ex-wife. Thinking of and dealing with Hattie always put a frown on Eli's face. Josh hoped Eli had finally sent that damned message ordering Hattie from the family home in Pittsburgh. So far she'd refused to vacate. With all the money she received, Hattie could live anywhere in the country comfortably. She stayed on the Payne estate to spite them, and even if they never set foot in Pittsburgh again, they wanted her gone. Hattie had taken enough of the Payne fortune, and she needed to be jettisoned from their lives. Time for Eli to lighten the load, both spiritually and financially. Josh was sick of sharing their lives, money, and name with a woman who didn't appreciate anything Eli offered.

Shannon, however, seemed like she appreciated everything.

Josh lifted up to see if he could spot the wagon. Nothing yet.

He decided to remind Eli it had been his idea to go to the Royal Princess. They'd been there plenty of times but they'd never run into a little Irish firebrand before. Hard to believe they could have missed her because she seemed like a burst of spring after a dreary winter. It seemed Eli might owe him for not only steering him toward the Royal Princess but also for giving them a little time alone.

Josh wanted to spy. He couldn't deny that, but he'd been a complete gentleman. He'd have given anything to see that cute little bundle of Ireland in the throes of passion, even with another man. That small yet pleasingly shaped body offered all kinds of goodness. She had that look in her eyes, the one that said a man would be more than satisfied with the outcome of the encounter. Not the whore look. Josh saw that glazed, dull look on every trollop he'd encountered from one mountain range to the next. Shannon's eyes were different. They lured a man to take a chance. They sparkled with mischief and adventure, as though aware of what a man craved and needed. Josh sensed she knew how to deliver it.

He wanted her. No denying that, and he'd been about ready to take that chance and fall into those green pools of promise and enchantment and let her lead the way. But he hadn't seen Eli that interested in a woman since Hattie's refusal to come west with them. Part of Josh still hated Hattie for her blank refusal to take a chance. Now he wondered why he'd bothered with such wasted emotion. It seemed a better woman had just fallen into their laps. If he had to let Eli have her, he would. It seemed only right.

The wagon finally lumbered across the creek. Eli and Shannon looked like two kids with a secret. They nestled against one another, hip to hip, and Shannon had her arm twined through Eli's. Lucky bastard. Josh rose to his elbows to get a better look. Oh, yeah. They'd fucked all right. It was written all over their faces and in every touch and gesture between them. Josh's cock twitched just thinking about it.

He waited until Eli pulled the wagon to a stop beside the tree. Shannon reached behind the seat and grabbed the canteen. She took a big swig of water, then wiped her sleeve across her mouth.

"So, Eli, you been filling her in on ranch business?" Josh asked.

Eli gave his standard answer to a stupid question. None at all.

Shannon, though, hopped down from the wagon with a laugh. "Aye, ranch business indeed. 'Tis as sure as the sunrise you can be guessin' what business we've been about, Joshua Payne."

She came toward him like a beautiful dream, drifting through the shafts of sunlight like a fairy nymph emerging from a brilliant meadow. Her braid swung across the bodice of her dress and the long strand of burnished red blazed in the light like fiery silk. Her eyes locked on his and that twinkle, that spark of promise slammed into his gut like a well-aimed punch. His breath caught because he had a feeling he'd just gotten lucky, but he dared not hope for that. A man only got so much luck in one day.

Eli adjusted his hat lower and nodded toward the distant prairie. "I'll see you at the ranch." Shannon gave him a friendly wave, and Eli returned the gesture with a goofy smile. When Eli slapped the reins and the wagon lurched away, Josh shook his head in disbelief.

"I'll be damned. You made him smile."

Shannon dropped to the grass beside him. "'Tis easy to make a man smile. Sometimes it just requires a slight bit o' coaxin'."

"I usually have to beat one out of him."

A soft, rosy glow stained her cheeks as she lowered her eyes. "You're not a woman."

"Thanks for noticing." Josh smiled as she raised those gorgeous green eyes back to his. He glanced toward the wagon. "But Eli's not like most men. Usually he can't be coaxed out of any mood, especially like the one I saw in him this morning." He reached out and took her hand. Calluses dotted her palms, and he was sorry to see them. "I think you're good for him, Shannon Connelly."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Aye, I believe 'tis true." Her fingers wrapped around his, and she was quiet for a moment as she stared at the wavering grasses. Josh held his breath, waiting, hoping, wishing, and every other damned thing he could do, until finally her gaze came back to him. She bit her lower lip, then said, "'Tis me thinkin' I could be good for you, too."

His heart slammed against his rib cage, and his mouth just dried up. He reached for the canteen and for some reason found his hand shaking like a boy thinking about trying for his first kiss. He couldn't

get the lid off. Shannon didn't say a word. She simply took it from him, twisted the lid and handed it back. He poured some water in his mouth, nearly drowning himself in the process. He stared at the green boughs overhead, trying to figure out how he'd just become the luckiest man on earth.

She sighed. "I've rendered you speechless. 'Twas in me thoughts I'd found the best solution, but have I said the wrong thing then?"

Josh shook his head furiously. "No, no. *God no!*"

Shannon tilted her head and the smile that crossed her lips made him want to tuck her under his arm and keep her forever. He'd never known a woman who held such magic in the mere movement of her mouth.

"'Twas the right thing then?"

"It was the most perfect thing to say ever."

Kiss her, you dumb cowboy.

He didn't get the chance. She fell against him, knocking him to the ground, and her body nestled against his entire length. The cushion of her soft breasts pressed against the muscles of his chest, and he could feel the beat of her heart pounding in a rhythm to match his own. His dick lurched beneath her pelvis, eager and willing to accept anything she'd offer. She wrapped her hands around his face and crushed her mouth against his. If he thought he'd been kissed in his life, he'd been wrong. Nothing had ever felt or tasted like this. He decided if lightning struck him at that moment, he'd be okay with it and die a happier man than most.

But he got even happier because when Shannon finally pulled her mouth from his, she gave him a saucy wink and started to nibble on his neck. His dick grew harder as she slid down his body, spreading his legs with hers until finally she kneeled between his thighs. When she went to work on the buttons of his denims, his cock bumped frantically against the fabric, and an ache spread into his balls. She slipped her hand inside his pants and wrapped her fingers around his throbbing cock, pulling it free.

Without a word, Shannon leaned down and licked the drop of pre-cum from the tip and then her lips enveloped the throbbing head. Josh couldn't hold in the groan at the pleasure that swept through his body. She sucked hard, and his balls tightened as his dick swelled in her mouth. She lightly skimmed the rim with her tongue, then licked his entire length from balls to tip. She covered him with her lips and pressed downward, taking his entire cock into her mouth. When she swallowed, he thought he'd come right there and then. Josh fisted his hands in the grass, trying to maintain control, but he knew that would be fucking impossible. Not with a mouth like hers.

The inside of her mouth felt like heaven. The warmth and moisture of it, as well as that incredible, hard suction, made his cock tighten with an almost unbearable pressure. He felt every pulse of his heart as it shot the blood through his veins toward his dick and his dick wanted to release. He watched the rise and fall of her head as she fucked his cock with her mouth. Her braid swung over his exposed skin and tickled with each stroke she made. He reached out and gathered it in his hand, not because it tickled, but because he could no longer resist touching it.

She cradled his balls in her free hand and squeezed gently, massaging them and letting them roll in her palm. The sensation roared through his pelvis and made him grit his teeth. His dick thundered with want until every muscle in his body protested by tightening. With a downward stroke, she took him to the back of her throat, and when her muscles contracted with the impact, he lost it.

Josh trembled and then his body froze. His cock released and his hips lifted toward her as he pumped fluid down her throat, spurt after spurt of cum until he wondered when he'd be empty. Shannon continued to suck until she drained him dry, then ran her tongue up his shaft to lick the last drops of cum from the tip. She breathed deeply, as though relishing the musky aroma of a well-satisfied man.

She raised her face and Josh thought he smiled. He hoped he did, but he felt lazy and tired and thoroughly sated. Shannon lowered her

body back against his. Her thumb traced over his lips. "'Tis a lucky woman I am."

"I was thinking the same thing." Josh pulled her thumb into his mouth.

"That I'm a lucky woman?"

"No, that I'm lucky I forced Eli to go to the Royal Princess today. Who knew we'd find a real princess among the swine? You just might change our lives, Shannon Connelly."

"'Tis grateful I am for the chance."

"And can I offer something else you'd be grateful for? Right now I'd give anything to lick every and any part of you."

"'Tis countin' on that I am." Shannon dropped a kiss on his lips. "But first I want to see me new house." She scrambled up and held out her hand. "Take me home, Josh Payne."

Chapter 3

As the landscape of prairie grass and short, scrubby brush flashed by in a blur, Shannon could barely hold in her laughter. She listened to the hard pounding of hooves on the hard-packed dirt trail and loved the sensation of the wind whipping across her face. It was exciting, thrilling, and the most wondrous feeling she'd ever had in her life, unless she counted sex with two Wyoming cowboys. She intended to get more of that feeling after they'd settled in.

They'd passed Eli and the wagon a while back, and she'd nearly fallen off the saddle trying to wave to him. She cuddled back against Josh, luxuriating in the feel of his lean, muscled chest against her back and his strong arm around her waist. He wasn't as big as Eli, but she relished the differences between them.

She turned her face and shouted a little to hear herself over the sound of the wind whistling in her ears. "'Tis me first horse ride!"

Josh tightened his arm around her waist, and he leaned down until his lips touched her ear. "It won't be the last."

"Good because I love it! Can we go faster?"

"Anything for you."

Josh nudged his heels against the horse's flanks. The horse shot forward and bolted down the trail, galloping harder. Shannon's heart lurched, and she burst with laughter, clutching at Josh's arm. When the horse finally slowed, they waded across another creek, and the animal climbed a small incline. At the top they came to a wider trail and a split rail fence, and Shannon got her first view of the Payne ranch. Across the prairie, and seemingly to the ends of the Earth, cattle dotted the landscape as far as her eye could see. Nestled within

the tall grasses, about a mile beyond the fence, sat a large wooden cabin surrounded by several other outbuildings, including two large barns.

Shannon breathed out with a long sigh. "Oh, 'tis a beautiful sight."

"Welcome to the Paradise," Josh said.

"'Twas me thought heaven would be paradise. 'Tis what we're always told. But now I find 'tis been in Wyomin' all this time."

The horse trotted up the trail, looking happy to be home, and came to a stop in front of the smallest barn. Josh slid from the saddle. Shannon jumped down into his arms, and he held her close for a minute. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'll do me best to make you and Eli happy."

"Darlin', you already have."

* * * *

When Josh closed the door behind him, Shannon leaned back against it for a moment and she just couldn't hold them in any longer. The tears slid down her cheek, silent and unwanted, a warm track against her hot, flushed face. She had no idea what she'd done to deserve this. In fact, she was completely sure she'd never done a thing that could possibly allow fate and the saints to give her such a gift.

She'd found not just one, but two good men. After dealing with Joseph Connelly, she'd almost forgotten that good men existed. She'd known so few, and Joseph had nearly destroyed her faith with his drinking and beatings. She thought with his idea of a new beginning out west, they could leave the misery of Five Points behind. New challenges faced together could help them find a new life and maybe even give them a chance at happiness and prosperity. But he hadn't changed and, if anything, the harsh life they'd found in Wyoming made him worse. She thought she'd never have a moment's peace or contentment for the rest of her days.

And now... now it seemed as though she could have a lifetime of both.

She wiped the tears away and stared awestruck at the room Josh told her belonged to her now. A room of her own! She'd never had more than a few feet of space or a drawer to herself and now she had an entire room. She ran and flung herself onto the bed. It squeaked on its ropes as she bounced, but dealing with the noises at the Royal Princess made the little squeak seem like the sound of a tiny mouse after listening to the howling of wolves. The green and white quilt felt cool and crisp on her face and the pillows—she grabbed one and snuggled into it—were softer than anything she'd ever laid her head upon.

A dressing table stood opposite the bed, one a lady would use, filled with brushes and combs and small bottles. She decided she'd never ask why the Payne brothers had such feminine things or who they belonged to. She didn't want to know, but if she ever found out and met the lady outside of a grave, she'd give her a big thank you, then punch her in the face for her own stupidity.

"Oh, Shannon Connelly, 'tis the luckiest girl in the world you are."

She jumped off the bed and skipped to the window. She flung up the pane and let the golden rays of sunlight spill into the room with the warm April air. She leaned out, spotted the two men who had just changed her life, and waved.

* * * *

Josh yanked a crate toward him. "I dropped off her bag, then left her to settle in."

Eli glanced to the second floor when he heard the slide of a window. Shannon leaned precariously over the sill and waved. He waved back and Josh nearly dropped his crate trying to do the same.

“She’s a bundle of energy,” Josh said. “Hope she doesn’t kill herself around here. I think a woman like Shannon might need some boundaries, though I’m not sure she’ll listen, no matter—”

“You gave her Hattie’s room.”

Josh glanced at the window as Shannon dipped back inside. “It was a stupid thing to set aside a room for your wife anyway.” Josh started toward the barn.

Eli glanced toward the window again. “I thought with all the men around the ranch, Hattie might want her own space.”

Josh stopped and turned. “Oh, she wanted her own space all right. In Pittsburgh. Without you. If you could have figured out what she wanted beyond that, you might still have a wife.”

“Doesn’t matter anymore. The divorce is final.” Eli grabbed another box and followed his brother into the dark, cool interior of the barn. They settled the crates near a storage bin and then Josh turned with his hands on his hips.

“She was never coming, Eli. You know that.”

Eli rubbed his hands over his face. “Yeah, I know.”

“She refused to come with us, and every letter she sent after we left has been the same. Too busy with the charities. Too busy with her friends. Too busy on her trips to New York and Philadelphia. Too busy spending our money. You’re a real dumbass. Do you know that? Did she ever even *ask* you to come back to Pittsburgh?”

Eli shook his head.

“Did she ever say she loved you?”

“No.”

“Then be glad you moved on and be thankful she’s not here ruining your life.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Josh shoved the box across the planks with his boot, herding it into the storage area. “What it means is that Hattie was never good for you. She wanted money, position, and prestige, and that’s all she wanted. She hasn’t moved out of our house because she still uses your

good name to climb the social ladder. When we talked about selling the estate in Pittsburgh to move west, she balked. She looked at you with different eyes and started treating you like shit. You interfered with her vision of the future.”

“She kept her vision,” Eli grumbled. “She’s been living at the damn estate.”

“Yes, she is, because she bitched until she got her own way. Now you’ve got the financial burden for two places. Between them, they suck money faster than a baby sucks a mother’s tit. Hattie’s turned you into this.” Josh swept out his hands, and his face screwed up like he’d fallen into a pile of manure.

“And what exactly is *this*?”

“This unfun, too serious, uncommunicative block of stone.” Josh turned on his heel and sauntered back into the sunlight, talking over his shoulder. “You never used to be like this, you know.”

Eli strode after him. “And you’re so perfect?”

“Hell, no, I’m not perfect. But I’m still the same man I always was because I wasn’t saddled with Hattie.” Josh laughed, then turned around and clapped him on the shoulder. “And you’re no longer saddled with her either. So you want to know what I’d say to that?”

Eli sighed. “Doesn’t matter what I want, you’re going to tell me.”

“Damn right I am.” Josh turned his face toward the window, squinting in the sun. “I say take what life offers you, brother, and enjoy every moment of it. Particularly if life offers you a bundle of Irish passion.”

“And what do you do about the guilt?”

“Me? I wouldn’t have it. If we’re talking about you, I’d learn to live with it until time makes it less than nothing. You did everything you could, but Hattie’s perfectly happy where she is, and you’re perfectly happy where *you* are. You aren’t meant for each other. Just accept that.” Eli shuffled his boot in the dirt, avoiding his brother’s gaze. “Shannon made you smile, Eli. When you’re granted a gift like that, you take it with both hands.”

Eli glanced up and his lip lifted in a half-smile. “I kind of already did.”

“Yeah, I know, and that smiling Eli is the one I remember.” He grabbed another crate. “Let’s keep him around for good this time. Deal?”

“I think there’s a fair chance he’ll stick around.”

“Good, then sit down and write Hattie that fucking letter. Get her out of our house.”

* * * *

Josh breathed in deeply. “What is that *smell*?”

He tossed his hat toward the peg in the corner but didn’t come close to hitting it. He needed to find the source of that wonderful aroma. He started across the room toward the back of the house. Eli pulled him up short by grabbing his arm.

“Christ, Josh, look at this place.”

Pulling himself out of the hazy fantasy of a fabulous dinner, Josh noticed for the first time in a very long time he could see the planks of the cabin’s floor. The layer of dust had been swept away and the dirty footprints scrubbed clean. The parlor table had been cleared of its clutter of books and ledgers. A gas lamp glowed in its center, the light coming through a clear crystal chimney, finally devoid of soot. The desk had been tidied, all the papers combined into neat little piles. Throws and pillows, usually scattered randomly over the chairs and settee were folded and stacked on the chest in the corner. The mahogany piano shone in the light of the cheery fire flickering in the hearth. Everything seemed to sparkle and shimmer like a new day.

“She works fast,” Eli said.

“No blood to clean,” Josh said.

“It feels nice,” Eli said.

“It sure does.”

Eli grazed the edge of the parlor table with his fingers. “Like a home.”

Exactly like a home.

Josh walked to the corner and retrieved his hat, hung it on the peg where it should go, then went back outside and wiped his boots on the mat again just to be on the safe side. After that, he couldn’t resist the kitchen any longer. Eli beat him there.

Shannon stood at the table. Her arm plunged in and out of a pot as she ground the masher against a lump of potatoes. The smell of beef steaks drifted through the room and filled his nostrils. She glanced up as both men stood transfixed in the doorway.

“I made m’self at home. ’Tis just about ready. Sit.” She slid a plate of greens across the table, then dumped a huge mound of mashed potatoes into a bowl. “I hope you like your meat rare. ’Tis me experience that most men do.”

Eli dumbly slid into a chair, but Josh couldn’t stop his gaze from roaming the kitchen. This room, like the parlor, had been swept and polished, and every surface glistened in the sparkle of the lamps. How she’d managed to get so much done amazed him. They’d only spent several hours unloading the wagon and storing the supplies then another hour or so checking in with the foreman.

Shannon dropped three steaks onto a platter then settled into her chair. She waited until Josh sat, then she folded her hands and quietly said a few words that Josh could barely hear. He politely bowed his head until he heard “And thank you for this glorious day. Amen.” When he lifted his head, he saw that Eli hadn’t moved. He nudged his brother’s foot under the table. Eli jerked in his seat and seemed to snap out of whatever spell he’d fallen into, but failed to open his mouth, so Josh took the reins.

“Everything looks great, Shannon,” Josh said.

“’Twasn’t as bad as I expected.” She spooned out some potatoes and dropped them onto Eli’s plate. “After listenin’ to the both o’ you,

I found m'self wonderin' exactly what I'd find. 'Tis me thinkin' that men see a little bit o' clutter and don't know where to start."

Eli flushed as he glanced toward the parlor. "I forgot to wipe my boots on the mat."

Shannon waved her hand. "No matter. 'Tis an easy thing to remedy." She winked. "You'll be rememberin' to do it next time."

"I will." Eli pulled his plate toward him and started to cut his steak. Quiet settled over the table for a moment and then Eli laid down his knife and fork. "There was a woman."

Josh choked on a piece of meat. He nearly knocked over his glass of water trying to grab it, then downed it in one large gulp. Shannon pressed her lips together and nodded.

"'Twas me thinkin' the room held a bit o' frill for the Paradise." Her lovely green eyes settled on Eli, and she placed her hand over her heart. "She's with the angels then?"

Eli developed an intense interest in analyzing the shape of his potatoes. "Ah, no, she's in Pittsburgh."

Shannon's brow crinkled. "Visitin' parents then?"

Eli tensed, shook his head furiously, then scrubbed his chin, a sure sign that in a minute he'd get up and bolt. Eli might be a quick draw and the first to challenge a man, but women generally scared the piss out of him. Why Eli had opened this conversation when he couldn't follow through? Josh cleared his throat, and his brother's gaze snapped to his. Eli released his breath and relaxed in his chair. Shannon's gaze swung between them, her frown deepening.

"I'm not understandin'," she said.

"Eli is divorced," Josh said. "Hattie refused to come west and still lives in Pittsburgh at our family home."

"Refused? What is she then? A complete idiot?"

"Not even close," Josh said. "She got what she wanted with the marriage, and she intends to keep it."

"You're rich, then." Shannon nodded. "Aye, I can see it plain. You've given her the fancy clothes and elegant house, the garden

parties and the teas, the carriages and the balls. I've seen me share in New York, though from a distance. Oh, no, the gentry can't have the likes o' themselves spoiled and tarnished by the likes o' me. 'Twas me lot to stand below stairs and wait on their sorry asses." Shannon slapped a dollop of potatoes on her plate then scooped another mound and threw them at Josh's plate. Josh lurched backward as the food sprayed toward him. "I imagine your Hattie fits into the grand world quite well. Pretty she is?"

"Yes," Eli said.

"A true lady then." Shannon's jaw clenched as she stared at her plate. She lifted her face and stared at Eli. "Cultured, refined, soft and gentle, and every other damn thing a woman should be as well?"

"Yes," Eli murmured.

"So 'twas her wish to continue to be the lady o' Payne Manor and the darlin' o' Pittsburgh?"

Eli nodded.

"Bah! She's a fuckin' bitch is what she is." Shannon attacked her steak, wielding her knife with precision. The hard strokes of the knife sliding across her plate made Josh wince. "'Tis truly beyond me comprehension. Your Hattie must be blind as a bat to not see what is plain before me own eyes."

Josh put his hand over hers, stilling the ruthless sawing of the knife, and the room fell silent. "What do you see, Shannon?"

She stared at her plate, her face somber. "I see that for all the wealth she clings to and all the grandeur that surrounds her, she threw away the greatest treasure o' all. A right fool she is to not claim what is hers." She glanced toward Eli as a blush stole over face. "I've no problem claim jumpin'."

"Then you don't mind that I've been married?" Eli asked.

Shannon tossed her braid over her shoulder. "Not in the least. 'Tis not in me nature to turn down such a wondrous gift and I pay back in kind. Besides, 'tis true I was once bound to a fool as well. He was a heartless prick who didn't recognize treasure tossed in his direction. If

he hadn't gotten himself killed, I'd have no problem takin' it back and handin' it to another. Neither should you."

"I'm writing her a letter tomorrow to get her out of the house," Eli said. "Should have done it long ago."

"Then it's settled," Josh said. "We make our own paradise and fuck everyone else."

Shannon's gaze drifted between. "Everyone else can find their own fuck. 'Tis me hope I've found mine in the both o' you."

"I think we can accommodate you on that score," Josh said. "We can work out a schedule, or we can just let you decide on a day-to-day basis. I'm very easy to please."

Shannon laughed. "'Tis no doubt I have o' that."

"Eli's not much for sharing, but he'll just have to learn."

Shannon toyed with her water glass. "'Twas me thinkin' sharin' might not be a problem."

"Oh, it will be," Josh said, shaking his head. "You don't know Eli all that well yet. He can be a selfish bastard. It's a sad, sad thing."

Eli grunted and resumed cutting his steak. "I share well enough with you."

"Not women," Josh said. "Never women. Not that I'd ever want to be with the kind of women you pick."

Eli nodded toward Shannon. "I picked her, didn't I?"

"No, I picked her. As usual, you were dogging it, Eli."

Eli cocked his head. "Dogging it? I'd already made up my mind when you—"

"You're just not a quick thinker like I am," Josh said.

"Brainless is more like it. I hate to think what would happen if—"

A shrill whistle cut through the air, and Eli snapped his mouth closed. Josh's mouth dropped open. Shannon's hot gaze swung between them.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Josh asked.

"Me da taught me. Comes in handy when two beasts are goin' at it. Now that I have your attention, let me clear the issue. 'Tis not

sharin' I had in me mind. 'Twas me intent to give m'self to both o' you. At the same time."

Eli's knife clattered to the table. "Together?"

"Aye, if 'tis o' interest to you. I'm here, you're here. Seems a logical thing to me. We've no need for schedules and the like."

"I like the way she thinks." Josh stabbed his fork in Eli's direction. "And you, big brother, need to be more open-minded anyway."

Eli picked up his knife, and his hand clenched around it. "That's not open-minded. That's insanity."

Josh speared his fork toward Eli again. "You wouldn't know a good idea if you tripped over it."

"It was my idea to come west," Eli said.

Josh threw up his hands. "And you're losing your memory. It was *my* idea to come west."

Eli leaned over the table. "I distinctly remember—"

Shannon leapt to her feet and another whistle burst through Josh's eardrums. She slammed her hands down on the table. Her eyes blazed as she glanced between them.

"'Tis an answer I'll be wantin', gentlemen. And I'm wantin' it now."

"I think it's the best idea I ever heard," Josh said.

Eli lowered the knife. "I don't think—" Josh glared at him with narrowed eyes, trying to push the right words into his head. If his brother screwed this up Josh intended to make him pay. Eli stared back for a moment then lowered his eyes and speared a bit of steak. "I'm willing to try."

"Good." Shannon settled back into her chair and waved toward their plates. "Eat up. You'll be needin' your strength after supper. I'm feelin' a bit...frisky."

She winked at Josh.

"I'm feeling a bit frisky myself," Josh said. "And I really want to learn that whistle."

Chapter 4

“We insist,” Josh said.

Eli paused with a plate in his hand. “We do?”

Josh nodded. “Of course we do. Did you intend to make her work herself to the bone? She’s already done enough today. We can do the dishes. Finish clearing. I’ll get the water.”

Josh disappeared through the back door and the screen door hit the frame with a slap. Shannon sat back in her chair and watched as Eli’s big, strong hands gathered up the plates. All she could think about was how those hands felt roaming her body that afternoon. She toyed with the buttons of her dress, opening them one by one as heat enveloped her from the tips of her toes to the nape of her neck. She really needed to cool down.

The thought of having both Payne brothers at the same time sent a thrill bursting through her, one that made her tremble with anticipation. She wondered at herself sometimes. The idea popped into her head out of nowhere and surely that made her no better than the whores at the Royal Princess.

’Tis logical. You know you can ne’er choose between them, Shannon Connelly. There’s bound to be hard feelin’s if you give more attention to one than the other. And ’tis not like they’re payin’ for it. ’Tis a gift.

Aye, there was a difference in that.

Ah, you bloody well know ’tishn’t right no matter the differences.

“I don’t care,” Shannon murmured. “I can do it.”

Eli touched the top of her head, his hand caressing her hair. “No, it’s okay. We’ll handle the dishes.”

Shannon tilted her head back and met his dark blue gaze. She took his hand and twisted around in her chair. "Have I thanked you this hour for what you did for me?"

Eli smiled. "No need."

"'Tis thankin' you again I am just the same, Eli Payne. For savin' me from the Royal Princess. For helpin' me with Harold Lightner. For changin' me life." She stood and ran her hands up his chest.

Eli leaned closer. "How do you always smell so pretty?"

Shannon looped her arms around his neck, rose on tiptoes and pressed her lips to the side of his throat. "'Tis me rose-scented soap. Me one vice. Spent me hard-earned money on it at the mercantile."

"I'll buy you a case the next time we're in town."

"'Tis a sweet thought, but I think 'twould be wise for me to avoid town for a while," Shannon said. "Harvey Lightner's none too pleased with me."

Eli ran his hands from her hips to her waist. "Harvey Lightner can go to hell. While you packed, I spoke to Abe Barrows about Lightner. That son-of-a-bitch won't be a threat to you. In fact, Lightner's going to be leaving Cheyenne permanently."

Shannon cupped Eli's face and pressed a kiss on his mouth. Eli's arms tightened around her, and her body sizzled with his heat. "Ah, 'tis a true hero you are, Eli Payne."

The screen door slapped, and Josh barreled into the kitchen, carrying two buckets of water. "Jesus, Eli, you can't even keep focused long enough to clear the table. Move your ass so we can get this over with. I've got other things on my mind."

Shannon laughed and spun in Eli's arms. "We've been waitin' for you to start."

She walked toward him as Josh dropped one bucket to the floor and lifted the other. "We can't start till he cleans up the goddamn table." Josh started to pour water into the pot on the stove. She laid a hand on his arm.

“We’ve been waitin’ to start the fuckin’, Josh,” Shannon said. “Not the dishes.”

Josh’s head shot up, and the bucket tipped in his hands, splashing water all over the stove. Curls of steam swirled from the hot surface. Water poured over the edge and rained onto Josh before dripping to the floor. His pants soaked, Josh jerked backward and more water cascaded from the bucket and sloshed over Shannon’s dress. Shannon jumped when the cold water hit her, screeching like a banshee, and flailing her arms.

“Christ Almighty! ’Tis bloody cold!”

“Great going, Josh,” Eli said. “Way to kill the mood.”

“Fuck you. Make yourself useful and get a mop.” Josh clutched the bucket against his chest and glanced at the mess and her wet dress. “I’m sorry, Shannon.”

Shannon’s brow lifted. “Oh, are you now?” She plucked the fabric of the cold, wet dress away from her skin. She peered at him, and Josh backed up a step. She dodged toward him and plunged her hands in the icy water, scooping it up and tossing it into his face. Josh let out a yelp and sputtered. Shannon burst into laughter and whirled around.

As Eli came toward them with the mop, Shannon leaned down and dipped her hands into the bucket on the floor. She flung water toward Eli and he scrambled backward, but not quickly enough. She soaked the front of his pants, and Josh howled with laughter. When Shannon leaned toward the bucket again, Eli beat her there. He scooped his hand into the bucket and splashed icy water against her face and down the front of her dress.

She shivered and her nipples peaked. Eli’s gaze focused on her breasts and she took full advantage of his preoccupation. She grabbed the bucket from the floor and hurled the contents toward him. His eyes widened just as the water hit and his body stiffened for a moment before fire blazed in his dark eyes. He growled and lunged for her. She tried to duck around him, but he caught her easily and yanked her

backward against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her waist, holding tight.

“Do it, Josh,” Eli said.

Josh came toward them with his bucket. Shannon wiggled, laughing so hard she struggled to get the words out. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but I would,” Josh said.

Shannon clutched Eli’s arms and shrank backward, shaking her head, but she couldn’t stop laughing. “’Tis cold.”

“We’ll warm you up later,” Eli said.

Josh clutched the bucket. His arm dipped, then came forward. Shannon doubled over Eli’s arm and the water sailed past her and hit Eli full in the chest. It rained down her back as Eli burst into laughter. He twisted her in his arms and lifted her up. She pressed against his frozen, wet shirt and pulled herself up, wrapping her cold, damp legs around his waist. She brushed droplets of water off his face.

“You’re a handful, you know that?” Eli said.

“Two handfuls,” Shannon said.

Eli squeezed her ass. “You are indeed.”

Shannon dropped her forehead against his. “Now take off your clothes. They’re all wet and you’re not trackin’ up me clean house.” She glanced over her shoulder. Josh had already stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned his pants.

“Way ahead of you,” he said. “I never dog it.”

* * * *

Josh thought the cold water should have dampened any desire coursing through his body, but for some reason it worked the exact opposite. After the initial shock of the icy blast wore off, Josh discovered his body had a mind of its own and it had nothing to do with the goose bumps on his skin. Listening to Shannon’s laughter and the lilting cadence of her voice and watching his brother’s hands

cradle that ass spread lust directly from his brain to his groin. His cock rose eagerly and enthusiastically, not hampered by temperature in the least.

Josh yanked off his boots, carefully maneuvered the waistband of his trousers over his rigid dick and slid the pants down his legs. After he tossed the wet mess into the sink, he turned and caught the look on Eli's face. His brother's smile had faded, and he looked terrified, like the time they'd been kids and climbed to the top of the highest hill in Pittsburgh. They'd peered over the stony ledge, and for the first time, Josh realized his big brother knew fear. Josh had loved the feeling that soared through him, the sense of freedom, of being above the mundane hustle of everyday life. Eli had stood frozen, his face white and his breath stuck somewhere inside. As Josh had leaned farther over the edge, Eli had backed away in small steps until he tripped on a rock and fell on his ass.

He looked like he might fall on his ass again, only this time he'd take Shannon with him. This was no time for Eli to get an attack of the vapors. *Time to man up, big brother.*

"Take a breath, Eli."

Eli gulped instead, but he released Shannon, and she slid slowly down his body, her gaze never leaving his. She took his hand and moved it to the bodice of her dress.

"Help me take off this wet dress. 'Tis stuck to me skin."

Josh clenched his fists. Watching his brother's big hands fumbling with the little buttons made Josh want to lurch across the room and do it himself, but he also knew Eli needed the time to get his head on straight. Standing in one spot had never seemed so hard, not even close to the time he'd come across a rattler in the brush. That was just a serpent hankering for his blood. This might be the future of his sexual fulfillment, and potentially offered them both a perfect ending to each day. Josh knew how to keep his priorities straight, unlike some others he could name.

Damn it, Eli. Move faster. Don't fuck this up.

Finally Josh glimpsed a patch of bare flesh as Eli pushed the dress over one of Shannon's creamy shoulders. Naked and freezing his ass off from the cold water, his cock hard and his balls tightening into a painful ache, Josh took a step forward. He hesitated for a split second then closed the distance. He brushed his brother's hands away. Eli's head snapped up.

"Let me do it," Josh said. "You're falling behind."

Eli ran his hand over Shannon's skin. "I want to do it."

Josh rolled his eyes. "You're gonna take all god-damned night doing it like that. I'd like to fuck her as a *young* man."

Shannon laughed. She laid her hand on Eli's shirt, plucking at one of the buttons. "Get undressed, Eli."

Josh twisted Shannon around. "Get busy, big brother. You can watch, but don't get distracted." He nodded toward his brother's shirt. Eli's brow furled and he plucked at one of his shirt buttons, his stare glued to Shannon's face. "Faster, Eli. Otherwise you're going to miss all the fun."

"Stop telling me what to do," Eli murmured. He stripped off his shirt then dropped into a chair and yanked off his boots.

Josh ignored him after that, his focus confined to each tantalizing inch of skin he released from its calico prison. He tugged at the sleeves and peeled the dress down Shannon's body, letting his gaze wander over her breasts, the rosy tips of her puckered nipples, over the taut abdomen and to the gentle swell of her hips. When the dress dropped to the floor, and Shannon stood in just her petticoat, stockings and boots, he couldn't resist another moment. He leaned down and took a taste of her breast. His lips locked on her nipple and sucked hard. Shannon made a soft sound and practically fell against him.

"Your mouth is so warm," she murmured.

He could have licked her skin all night. She tasted better than dinner, and that said a lot. But he had work to do, and he also remembered he had to share.

Josh fell to his knees. He unlaced each boot, then lifted her foot to remove one. She placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned down to steady herself. Her braid swung down and caressed the side of his face as he slid the stocking down her leg.

“‘Tis like Cinderella I’m feelin’,” she whispered.

Josh glanced up and smiled. He lifted her other leg, tugged off the boot and pitched it behind him. “I don’t know her. She live in Cheyenne?”

A burst of laughter shot from her. “No, ’tis just a story me ma told me.”

He pulled down the stocking, revealing another slender, lovely calf. Every part of her seemed slender and lovely.

Her face scrunched up. “Though ’tis not quite the same thing. Cinderella had a slipper put *on* her foot, not a boot pulled off. Still, lookin’ at you on your knees, watchin’ me like I could be a princess in a fairy tale makes me feel...so pretty.” She blushed and her lashes fluttered.

“She *couldn’t* be as pretty as you.” Eli’s voice tugged Josh’s attention away from Shannon’s beautiful eyes. Eli straightened in the chair, seemingly hypnotized by the soft glow of her skin. He shook his head as if to scatter the cobwebs that had collected in his mind, then stood and unbuttoned his pants. Finally.

“I ne’er saw a drawin’ o’ her as we ne’er had the book,” Shannon said with a laugh. “’Twas a tale me ma knew by heart. I suppose all mothers tell it, meanin’ to give their daughters hope. ’Tis sometimes a hard life and dreamin’ makes it a bit more tolerable. Me ma wanted me to know I should ne’er give up wishin’ for better.”

“Mothers want the best for their kids.” Josh ran his hand up Shannon’s leg. “What did you wish for?”

A grin spread across her face like sunshine and lit her eyes with a glimmer of something that might have been a touch of embarrassment. “What all girls wish for I guess. Me own prince to love, to cherish, to live with happily e’er after.” She traced the side of

Josh's face, then glanced toward Eli. "'Tis me great luck that I've gotten more than that. Me wishin' has granted me two princes. 'Tis beyond me wildest dreams and 'tis a lucky girl I am."

Josh stood and cradled her face in his hands. "We're the lucky ones." Reluctantly he lifted his head to glance at his brother. "Right, Eli?"

His brother had vanished.

Damn it!

* * * *

The soft swells of music drifted into the kitchen. When Josh dropped his hands, Shannon tilted her head and listened as a symphony of sound swirled around her, tempting her to sway to the lyrical strands of the piano.

"What the hell is that damn fool doing?" Josh said. "I'm going to kick his cowardly ass."

He started toward the parlor, and she twined her finger through his, tugging him back. "He's attemptin' to calm his heart."

Josh shook his head in disgust. "If Eli calmed his heart much more he'd plumb up and die."

"'Tis only that way on the outside. Inside..." Shannon put her hand on Josh's chest, feeling the gentle, steady rhythm of his heart. "He's not like you, Josh. You've a need for excitement, for thrill, for new experiences and wonderment. Eli has a need for quiet, for normal pursuits, for security, for *sameness*."

Josh nodded. "Yeah, he's dull. I've warned him about that."

Shannon smiled. "Not dull, ne'er dull."

"You haven't lived with him yet."

She tugged him toward the doorway and they stood for a moment, staring at Eli's naked back. He still wore his pants. She watched his fingers glide over the keyboard, creating beauty and tranquility with each touch. The fire of his quiet passion blazed in the notes, making

her heart pound and spreading an ache through her pelvis. That a man should feel so much and bind it so tightly inside made her want to cry. She felt his need to hide what he couldn't control, and his desire to cease struggling and let go. She leaned back against Josh, and he wrapped his arms around her, tucking his chin against the top of her head. He caressed her naked breasts, letting his fingertips trail over her skin.

"He's hopeful, yet reluctant to want. He's wishin', yet unsure they will be granted. His life's about to change and 'tis a scary thing. Listen to the music, Josh. Can you not feel the disquiet in your brother's soul? It bleeds into me, mixin' into my blood until I can feel the passion stirrin' and quakin' with need. 'Tis a wondrous thing to feel so deeply. He pours his soul into the music and yet he locks his heart up tight."

Josh laughed. "What heart?"

Shannon tilted her face up. "'Tis teasin' me now you are."

Josh kissed the tip of her nose. "Yes, my little Cinderella, I'm teasing you. How did you get so wise? An old Irish tradition passed from mother to daughter?"

She winked. "No, me da played the piano."

Shannon closed her eyes and let the music of Eli's soul wash over her own, bathing her in quiet passion, but also comfort and security. Such promise existed in that man. He would never hurt someone, would never demand more than was freely given.

"'Tis the way o' certain men. Me da was scared o' dreamin' and wantin'. 'Tis why me ma did enough for both. But they were happy. 'Tis always been me hope to be as content, to live a life I could trust and enjoy, but in me dreamin', I kept me heart locked tight. So I've a bit o' both inside me."

"And you see that in Eli?"

"Oh, aye. 'Tis waitin' to be happy he is, waitin' for his dreams to be fulfilled and for his real life to start."

"Not a fairy tale life?"

“Oh, no. ’Tis no time in this life for fairy tales. ’Tis me hope to make this real.”

“It already feels real to me,” Josh said.

“I know. Your soul resides in your laughter, and ’tis ne’er hidden. ’Tis plain to hear and feel and it makes me burst with gladness.”

She leaned sideways in his arms and peered up at him. Josh lowered his head. She could almost feel his kiss on her lips.

The music stopped.

* * * *

Eli moved his hands from the keyboard to the piano bench. His fingers curled around the wood and he stared at the piece of music in front of him though he hadn’t used it. He knew Josh and Shannon stood in the parlor. He’d almost hoped to hear their footsteps on the staircase. His decision would have been made. He twisted around and there they stood. Two lovers entwined in each other’s arm. Shannon still wore her petticoat but her bare feet peeked out from beneath the hem and, though Josh’s arms crossed over her breasts, Eli caught a glimpse of a pink nipple.

Why is it so easy for them?

Shannon smiled at him then. Christ, he wanted it to be easy. He wanted her.

He stood up and slowly moved around the bench. He glanced at them through strands of hair that had fallen over his face and saw Josh’s arms drop to his sides. Shannon flew across the short distance between them, and Eli held his breath. She flung herself toward him. He caught her easily and felt the soft, smooth skin of her arms cross his bare shoulders as she wound them around his neck. He tucked his hands under her bottom, feeling the heat of her through the thin linen of her petticoat. She dropped her forehead against his and the whisper of her breath fanned his face.

“‘Twas the most beautiful song I e’er heard. ’Tis not something I know. Who wrote the piece?”

“I did.”

Her lips curled into a smile. “Oh. ’Tis not surprised I am.” She brushed the strands of hair away from his face and skimmed her fingers along his jaw. “You’ve the soul o’ a poet, Eli Payne, and truly a wondrous gift.”

“You’re a gift,” Eli murmured.

“Aye,” she whispered, “I am, and all is given freely. Though ’tis me thought acceptin’ a gift is not easy for someone such as yourself. What can I do, Eli Payne? What is it you need to hear?” She kissed him lightly on the lips. “Tell me.”

Eli glanced up and met her eyes, as green as new grass, as guileless as a child’s and oh, so serious. He could get lost in those eyes. He thought he already had.

“Tell me,” she repeated.

“I need to hear you’ll stay with us.”

She tightened her hands around his jaw and gave his head a little shake. “O’ course I’ll be stayin’. Did you think I’d be wantin’ to leave Paradise? Or my two princes?”

She was everything he’d ever wanted, whether he’d known it or not. He stared at her for a moment until Josh’s voice vied for his attention.

“Speaking of princes, I’m kind of alone over here.”

Reluctantly, Eli glanced away from the bundle in his arms. His brother leaned against the doorway, one leg crossed over the other. He watched them with his usual smartass smirk.

“Not now, Josh,” Eli growled. “I’m busy here.”

Josh pushed away from the doorway and sauntered toward them, totally oblivious to his nudity. Eli would give anything for an ounce of his brother’s arrogant confidence around women. “You’re not busy. You’re dogging it as usual.”

Eli's clenched his jaw. "You're a cocky son-of-a-bitch, you know that? Maybe we should take this outside and—"

Shannon crushed her mouth against his. Her tongue swept between his lips, and the thought of his brother evaporated. For a moment he almost forgot Josh stood right in front of him. Shannon's soft lips tore every thought from his head, removed his every reservation, and destroyed every doubt he held inside. He realized only one thing mattered. This woman wanted to be his and he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything.

He cupped the back of her head and pulled her tighter against him, relishing the cushion of her breasts against his bare chest. His cock rose beneath her, hot and eager, pushing through the gap in his pants to skim the fabric of her petticoat.

Shannon pulled away from him with a soft gasp. She reached down and yanked at the fabric, gathering it up around her legs. She lifted slightly, and her damp heat lured him closer. The scent of her desire enveloped him, winding through his mind and stirring his cock to seek an entrance. His balls ached with an unbearable need to release. He tilted his pelvis, and his cock slid against the warmth of her pussy. Shannon rocked against him, pressing kisses against his neck.

"Fuck me, Eli Payne. 'Tis the only thought in me head." She lifted her face and stared into his eyes. "Tomorrow 'tis me wish you teach me to play your song. But tonight I want to be fucked by my two princes."

"You heard the lady," Josh said.

Eli shot his brother a glare, and Josh laughed. Lifting her slightly, Eli gripped his cock and pushed the head between her pussy lips, moving it back and forth to bathe it in her juices. Shannon's head tilted back with a soft sigh, and he pulled her hips down. His cock slid all the way to the hilt, enveloping his length in hot, moist fire. Her pussy throbbed against his flesh in a rhythm that matched the beat of her heart. He held still for a moment to savor the pulse, the heat, the

moisture of his woman. Then he began to move her against him. Shannon trembled slightly as he slowly pumped her up and down. He'd never felt so consumed by anything in his life, and he intended to make her happy. This seemed like a damn good start.

Chapter 5

He feels so good, so perfect, so right. And he feels like mine.

Shannon couldn't breathe but she couldn't stop kissing him. Her lips sought Eli's again and again, loving the feel of his mouth, the slight tickling of the moustache and the slide of his tongue against hers. She cupped his jaw, her nails grazing the dark stubble. The raspy sound of the strokes stirred her heart, invoking a feeling of possessiveness. She wanted him to belong to her, and she desperately wanted to belong to him.

His cock filled her, pulsing against the walls of her pussy. She tightened her thighs, pressing her pelvis hard against him, creating friction on her clit. The heavenly sensation caused her to shiver. The tension between them seemed unbearable, and yet it continued to spiral until every fiber of her body thrummed with the need to release. His kisses had become rougher, his beard scraping her face and his lips devouring hers. Her pussy muscles gripped him tight, and he groaned each time he withdrew and slammed back into her. Her body lunged at his, forcing him deeper inside. A deep intense wave rolled through her pelvis, the sensations cresting and bubbling from her pussy to her clit and causing every muscle in her body to clench.

She tore her mouth from his and arched her back, letting the pleasure wash through her in a blissful dream of sensation until every thought in her head vanished. She angled her clit, letting his pelvis rub over the itchy, aching burn. Her flesh tingled and swelled until she thought she'd go mad. Her orgasm slammed through her, and she dropped her head to his shoulder as she came. The pleasure swamped her pores, setting her nerves on fire and twisting that heat into an

inferno. She trembled with it, her clit vibrating and her pussy clamping around his cock, then convulsing in fist-like spasms.

The sensations swelled through her, deep and hard, rolling like musical crescendos, peaking over and over. As the sensation began to wane, he angled her hips, dragging her clit against his hot body and the coarse hair of his groin. Another peak ripped through her, hard, violent, and fast, so fast. She gasped and cried out and turned her face toward his. His mouth covered hers, engulfing her lips in a blazing heat.

Eli pumped her harder, their sweat-slicked bodies sliding against each other. His cock drove in and out in a rhythm that forced her body higher until she could do nothing but cling to his shoulders. His balls slapped against the swollen, hot flesh between her legs and finally his hands clenched on her ass so hard she nearly cried out. He yanked her down, his cock thrusting deeply, almost painfully. He stiffened, then froze. His cock throbbed as he spurted streams of cum into her in rapid, pulses of warmth. Shannon shuddered and collapsed against him, the fluttering muscles of her pussy milking him until the throbbing diminished and gradually became twinges against her flesh. He loosened the grip on her ass and nuzzled his face into her neck. She raked her fingers through his hair.

“‘Twas heavenly,” she murmured.

He lifted his face and gave her a shy smile. “‘Twas indeed.”

Shannon burst out laughing and leaned back, spreading out her arms. She came up against a solid wall of warmth as Josh pressed his bare chest against her back. Rough hands enveloped her, sliding around her waist, then skimming over her breasts. His calluses dragged over her tender peaks, scraping deliciously and firing her nerve endings. She turned her face to meet Josh’s smile. His fingertips circled her nipples, drawing new sensations and fanning the heat still banked and waiting. Her pussy muscles clenched violently against Eli’s cock inside her. It stirred, hardening, lengthening, flexing against the walls of her pussy.

“My turn?” Josh said.

“Get in line,” Eli growled.

Josh’s lip poked out. “I *am* in line. And I’ve been pretty patient here. Even you can’t deny that.”

“I can deny anything I want,” Eli murmured. His gaze locked on her breast, where Josh’s finger lazily stroked her hard, tight nipple. She really wanted someone’s mouth on her. Her breasts ached to be sucked.

“Eli,” she said softly. His intense blue gaze lifted to her, peering at her beneath a shock of dark hair.

“Shannon.” His voice held a trace of awe that thrilled her to the marrow of her bones and sounded like a beautiful song. That a man should look at her the way he did, as though his heart filled and ached with the sight of her, made her own heart race with a scary beat. But it was all she’d ever wanted, and she trembled with the wonder of it. She splayed her hands through his hair, lifting his face, then brushed the hair back from his forehead.

“’Twas our agreement to share.”

“I remember.” He glanced behind her to his brother. Josh’s heart thudded against her back. She held her breath, and she knew Josh held his as well. She thought their future might hinge on the next words out of Eli’s mouth or the next glance of his dark eyes.

She drew Eli’s face toward her, cupping his jaw and taking his lips in a searing kiss that held her gratitude and offered him all the promises she could give. When she drew away, Eli watched as she licked her lips. When he nodded, her heart swelled.

She reached behind her and wrapped her hand around the back of Josh’s neck, drawing him closer. She led him to exactly where she wanted him and his tongue poked out and licked the tip of her breast. A wave of heat nearly consumed her.

“More,” she said.

Josh burrowed his face between her and Eli, his silky hair trailing over her skin and bathing her in warmth. She couldn’t resist and

tunneled her fingers into his short dark hair, dragging him closer. His mouth fastened on her nipple and began to suck. Moisture pooled between her legs, and her pussy flexed, releasing, then latching onto Eli's cock with a vengeance.

One of Eli's hands tightened on her ass, then his other slid downward. His finger trailed through the juices near her pussy lips then began to glide slowly up the narrow passage between her cheeks. He pushed the tip of his wet finger a fraction of an inch into her ass. A gasp exploded from her parted lips, and she stared at him with wide eyes as the muscles of her ass clenched in his hands. She lifted up to escape his questing finger. Her words came out in a soft rush.

"What's goin' through your mind, Eli Payne?"

He chuckled. "If I'm to share, that means finding other options."

"'Tis not an option!" She shook her head furiously. "'Tis—" She gasped again as Josh's tongue swirled over her nipple, then drew it back into his mouth.

Eli made a tscking noise. "You seemed an adventurous sort."

He tipped his hips against her, forcing his swollen cock deeper. Her pussy definitely was up for the adventure, but she wasn't sure about her ass. She'd never done anything like that in her entire life and planned to die of mortification when the evening was over. But the feelings swirling inside begged her to be open-minded. Eli's brow rose, waiting for a response.

"'Tis an adventurous sort I am, but not mad. And 'tis clear, Eli Payne, you've the urges o' a madman."

Josh lifted his face and winked at her. "You've no idea." He tucked his hands around her face, turned it toward him and covered her mouth with a deep, sensuous kiss. When he pulled away, he glanced at his brother. "Eli has...rather interesting impulses. You've opened Pandora's Box now, Shannon. No slamming the lid and walking away."

She lifted higher as Eli's finger continued its unrelenting journey into parts that had never been investigated. Her face flamed with heat

and the tendrils of hair around her face felt like fire licking at her skin. “I’ve no intention o’ walkin’ away. ’Tis just...just...”

“Just what?” Eli asked.

As she struggled for an answer, his finger pushed deeper and began to thrust gently in and out. The movement stole her words. Her head felt like it should explode and yet she wondered why when every thought in her head had dissolved. She tried to concentrate, but the combination of his finger’s movement and his hard cock gliding in and out of her pussy lips made her want to melt. His cock touched that excruciating spot on the wall of her pussy that drove her crazy. She would come again soon. Already her lower body ached with the wanting of it. Her head dropped back against Josh’s shoulder. Her words fell from her lips before she could stop them.

“By the holy saints, I’ll be goin’ to hell. ’Tis a wondrous feeling. I love it. If I must become mad to enjoy all you offer, then mad I’ll be and be glad for it.”

“That’s our girl,” Josh said.

* * * *

Josh needed to be inside her, now. The scent of her pussy just about forced him to his knees. The rosy smell of her skin drove him past insanity. Her kisses set him on fire. He’d never felt this hot in his life, not even in the blistering heat of the open range. His cock throbbed, and his balls ached like a bitch. He was as giving-sharing-caring as the next man, but hell’s bells, it was his fucking turn. Or his turn to fuck. He’d waited enough time for her and Eli to bond, to make sure all was right with Eli’s world. How much more could he coddle the son-of-a-bitch? Now his brother was just being his usual grabby, greedy self and keeping all the good stuff to himself. Damn him.

Josh stole another kiss. Shannon's lips opened beneath his, and her tongue swept into his mouth. Now or never. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and tugged.

"Give her to me, Eli."

Eli reluctantly let him take her, and Shannon came into his arms like she'd always been there. She felt as though she had. He never felt so much in any woman's arms. Her green gaze locked on his and everything he ever wanted seemed like a possibility—he'd be happy, Eli would be happy, the ranch would prosper, the rain would fall, the cattle would fatten up, and the prices would soar. He'd never wanted much, but all his heart's desires rested in this woman's eyes.

He swung her around in a circle, and she giggled. When he stopped, her face glowed with color and her eyes shone with delight. Shannon slid down his body but kept her arms locked around his neck. "And what kinds o' impulses are residin' in your thoughts, Josh Payne? Are they as wicked as your brother's?"

"Maybe more so," he whispered.

Her glance darted to Eli as he pushed his pants off his legs. "'Tis hard to believe." She lowered her voice. "His ideas seem very wicked."

"Wicked is as wicked does," Josh said.

Eli frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

Josh laughed. "No idea, but you can shut the hell up 'cause we're busy here. Go find some cream or something so you can follow through with your wicked ideas. You don't want to hurt her or she'll be reluctant to try anything else. I'll keep her warm for you." He herded her backward until she bumped into the settee. "I want to fuck you, Shannon. I think I've been pretty patient."

Shannon blushed, but she ran her hand down his chest and over the muscles of his abdomen. "You have, and you can. In fact, 'tis me greatest wish that you do."

She wrapped her hand around his cock and squeezed.

"Jesus, darlin'."

She gave him a saucy smile. “Wicked is as wicked does. ’Tis something I heard from a most wicked man.”

Josh grabbed her by the waist and steered her around the settee. He plopped onto the cushion and yanked her down. She straddled his lap and clutched her petticoat, gathering it up around her waist. She reached back and planted her hands on his thighs. Her perky breasts bounced with her movements and her dusky rose nipples tightened in anticipation of his touch. He couldn’t resist them. He cupped them in his palms, squeezing, then tracing his thumbs over her nipples. His hand grazed her belly and dipped farther.

He slid his finger between her pussy lips. The warmth of her skin shocked him. “I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“No need for dyin’. We’re already in paradise.”

His cock lurched toward the fire of her pussy, wanting to bury inside but first he wanted to look at her, revel in the beads of moisture he saw glistening on her folds of pink skin and the soft down that covered her mound. He trailed his finger over her slick, creamy folds. Her plump clit seemed to swell beneath his finger. She sucked in a breath when he drove two fingers into her, and her body arched back. His thumb pressed against her clit, moving in small, tight circles. With his other hand, he tortured her nipple, rolling it between his fingers and squeezing it until her breath came out in little pants.

Her body trembled. “Oh, lord in heaven,” she whispered.

“I love touching your pussy. It’s so hot, so tight.”

She bit her lip, then struggled for a breath. “And ’tis beggin’ I am you keep goin’.”

“No begging necessary. I could do this all night.”

She leaned toward him, and her hips lifted off his lap. She gripped his cock tightly in her fist and desire flared deep and hot inside him. In another minute his balls would explode. He enjoyed the play, loved the watching, but damn, he needed release.

“Fuck me, Josh. Now.”

He withdrew his fingers, grabbed her hips, lifted, and slammed her down on his dick. He groaned with the feel of the tight fist that clenched around his flesh. Paradise. Sheer paradise. He could sit all night and let her pump up and down on his cock, watching those plump lips envelop him into her juicy folds.

“Don’t come yet.”

Eli’s voice tore his attention away, and Shannon’s hands tightened on Josh’s shoulders.

Josh inhaled enough air to bark out his reply. “Damn, you’re bossy.”

* * * *

The sight of Shannon’s rounded ass peeking out from beneath her petticoat made Eli’s dick throb in agony. But he had the answer to that. He unscrewed the cap on the jar of cream and knelt on the floor between his brother’s legs.

“Let’s get rid of that petticoat, darlin’.”

Shannon untied the waistband and swept it up. Josh helped her tug it over her head. The unencumbered sight of her bobbing on his brother’s cock was almost more than Eli could take. He wanted to taste that pussy but that might be best left till tomorrow.

“Lift that pretty ass toward me,” Eli said.

Shannon put her hands on Josh’s chest and lifted slightly. He saw his brother’s cock slip a little from its haven. Josh’s skin glistened with pussy juice, and Eli licked his lips. He glanced up and gave Josh a nod. Josh went back to work, fingering her clit, and Eli figured the distraction would last till the last possible moment. Trembling, Shannon slumped forward a little, and Eli knew he didn’t have much time.

He smeared his fingers with cream, then spread it between her ass cheeks. Shannon lurched slightly at the cold sensation, then lifted that beautiful, round ass higher. Eli gently pushed two fingers in her small

hole, struggling at first as Shannon gasped and quivered, but then her body seemed to open to him. He pressed all the way in, then tried three. He had no desire to hurt her, but she seemed lost in the waves of desire that coursed through her and eager to feel more. He coated his dick with lubricant, then swept it between her cheeks. She shivered and pressed backward, making soft sounds in her throat and rocking in small, measured movements on his brother's cock.

Josh's jaw clenched and Eli wanted all of Shannon's attention on the cock inside her and the finger on her clit. Eli pumped his cock in his hand, wanting it hard and smooth to glide in as easy as possible. He lined up his cock head between her cheeks and grabbed her hips, pushing and tugging in tiny movements to let her feel it. When his cock slipped inside, she drew in a sharp breath, clenched for a moment, and her hands tightened into fists against Josh's chest.

"Give me that pretty ass, darlin'," Eli said. "Push back."

She shifted, and he slid deeper, sinking halfway in with a groan. Nothing had ever felt so warm or so tight. Her muscles clenched around him and threatened to steal all his control. Shannon leaned back against him. Josh reached up to play with her breasts, twisting and tugging her nipples. Her chest rose and fell with quick, uneven breaths and then she sat up and began to move.

She rocked between them, tugging against Eli's cock as she plunged onto Josh's. Eli pushed his hand between her legs and slid his finger between her pussy lips. She spasmed, lurching toward Josh as she angled his cock deeper inside. Eli circled her clit with slow, steady strokes until she rocked with more purpose. His strokes on her clit became harder and faster, rubbing her nub with a tight friction.

His cock swelled, lengthened, and drove deeper into her. Her muscles clenched him tight, squeezing like a vise, and his balls drew up and pounded, aching with the pressure.

Shannon trembled violently. She hooked her hands around Josh's shoulders and pushed down hard, driving Josh's cock deeper into her and then lifted her ass and slammed back against Eli. Eli burst with

the sudden movement. He came with a shudder, and his cock released, pulsing in pounding rhythm as warm jets of cum flooded into her. Josh's head dropped back against the settee, and he tucked his hands around Shannon's waist, trying to hold her up.

Eli's forehead fell against her shoulder, and he inhaled deeply, smelling the alluring scent of a well-satisfied woman and the rosy scent that permeated her skin. He'd never felt so relaxed in his entire life.

"Damn, Eli," Josh said. "I'm dying here."

Startled, Eli lifted his head. He saw that Shannon had collapsed against Josh and Eli had collapsed against Shannon. Josh had practically disappeared into the settee. Eli roused himself and managed to straighten up. He ran his hands over the soft skin of Shannon's ass, and she snuggled deeper into Josh's chest.

"'Tis temptin' to sleep right here," she murmured.

Eli kissed her bare shoulder, tasting the salty sweetness of her skin.

"Might be more tempting to sleep on a soft mattress, with a feather comforter and pillows."

"Like hell she's sleeping with you," Josh said.

"I'm willing to share, brother. Just be sure you stay on your own side of the bed."

Josh smiled. "Believe me, not a problem. But I'm building a bigger bed tomorrow, then digging out the catalogues. Shannon can pick out whatever she needs, and we'll get it ordered."

Shannon sighed. "A girl could need no more than this. I've got the prettiest spread in Wyomin' and the two best cowboys a girl could want."

"Doesn't matter," Josh said. "I aim to make our princess happy."

"The princess is happy as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow." Shannon peeked out between strands of fiery hair and stared at Eli. A soft smile skimmed her lips. "'Tis me blessin' to finally get the luck of the Irish. I've been waitin' for that all me life."

Eli smiled. "And I've been waiting all my life for you."

* * * *

The sun had just begun to rise on the horizon, spreading over the expanse of prairie grass in shimmering rays of golden light. It seemed like a glimpse of heaven, and the view was hers to enjoy every morning now. Shannon turned from the window and got back to work. She scraped the scrambled eggs onto a platter just as she heard the sound of boots on the stairs. Both men ambled into the kitchen. Eli came toward her immediately and gave her a deep, soul-searching kiss that curled her toes and made her wish the sun were retreating instead of rising. Josh waited patiently, nibbling from the platter of bacon. Eventually she heard the tap of his foot. She drew away from Eli and wrapped her arms around Josh's neck, giving him a smile.

Josh shot a dirty glance toward his brother. "It seems I'm going to have to get up earlier."

"I have to pry you out of bed as it is," Eli growled.

"Not any more. I have something worth getting up for." Josh snatched another bite of bacon from the platter. "Breakfast."

Shannon's brow furrowed, until she caught the wink Josh directed at his brother. She smacked Josh's arm, then giggled.

"Give me a kiss, you big tease."

He grabbed a piece of bread. "I wasn't kidding about the breakfast. I'm starving."

"Dig in then. What's holdin' you back? 'Tis surely not me since you can't be bothered to even give me a kiss."

Josh grabbed her, bent her over his arm and gave her a hearty smack on the lips. When he swung her back up, she reeled with dizziness.

"She's a bossy little bratches," Josh said.

"Exactly what you need," Eli said.

Shannon went toward the coffee pot. “Bossy I may be, but still I’ll be needin’ a task. Cleanin’, cookin’, and sewin’ are fine, but ’tis in me mind to do somethin’ more—”

“Don’t forget the fucking,” Josh said.

“As if I could.” Shannon’s face flamed with heat, and her voice lowered to a whisper. “Or want to.”

Eli held up his cup and Shannon poured him some coffee. “There’s plenty to do around here. Take a few days to explore, get to know the spread and I’m sure—”

Shannon held up her finger as a scratching noise filled her ears. “What in the devil is makin’ that noise?”

“It’s Lucy,” Josh said. “She got a whiff of the bacon.”

Shannon frowned. She glanced between the men. “Who’s Lucy?”

“Our dog,” Eli said. “She generally stays inside, but since we’d gone to Cheyenne, we’d—”

“A dog? You have a dog and thought to keep that from me?”

Shannon spun around and ran to the door, yanked it open and fell to her knees. A black and white dog lunged toward her, knocking her on her ass and licking her face until her skin oozed with dog spit. She dug her fingers into its coat, feeling the silky warmth and fell back, letting the dog crawl all over.

“I love dogs! I’ve had dogs all me life.” She cupped Lucy’s face in her hands and gave it a little shake. “You are just the prettiest dog I’ve e’er seen. And so smart. I can see it in your eyes.”

Josh laughed. “If you like dogs, you’ll love the puppies.”

“Puppies!” Shannon bolted upright, and the dog tumbled from her lap. Not to be deterred, Lucy climbed back up and settled into the folds of Shannon’s skirts.

“Six puppies,” Eli said. “They’re in the barn right now. And they all look like Lucy.”

Shannon struggled to her feet, then gave the dog a vigorous pet. “She’s a beauty. And she’s exactly the type o’ dog easy to train.”

Shannon smiled and rubbed her hands together. “Smart. Energetic. Happy.”

She slapped some bacon and eggs onto some bread, ignoring their raised brows. She tossed Lucy a piece of bacon and started toward the door. Eli caught her arm.

“Easy to train? Smart? Happy? What the hell are you talking about and where are you going?”

Shannon laughed. “To the barn. I’ve found me callin’ and have work to do.”

Josh shook his head. “What kind of work?”

“Trainin’ our dogs o’ course!”

“Training them to do what?” Eli asked.

“Herdin’, silly cowboy. There’s little difference between sheep and cows. I spent o’er half me life on a sheep farm, and if there’s one thing I know how to do besides cleanin’, ’tis herdin’.”

Josh leaned toward his brother. “That explains the outstanding whistle.”

Shannon patted her skirt. “Come on, Lucy girl. I’ve caught me some more Irish luck. ’Tis a wondrous place this Wyomin’.”

Lucy flanked her as Shannon raced toward the barn. She’d heard stories of Paradise all her life, but never dreamed it would be this perfect.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Carlton's love of romance began when she read *The Passionate Adventures of Angelique*. Amber is entranced by all things historical, but has a special fascination with English and American history. She lives in the present but loves to write about being "elsewhere."

Her obsessions include the writing of Stephen King, Philip J. Fry and his friends on *Futurama*, the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and watching cheesy movies on Syfy.

Amber has two sons and currently lives in Ohio with her boyfriend and dog.

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