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Three
Kinds
of
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Hard Harvest

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Hard Harvest

Selah March

TO MY READER:

This story is an experiment for me. I enjoyed the challenge of writing a romantic love story against the background of a bleak future. The “threesome” aspect added another layer of intricacy in creating believable characters and plot. I can’t wait to see if my readers love the end result as much as I do!

Hard Harvest: Chapter One

Earth

Midwest Sector, Republic of the Americas

Time Line 10,482

Early August 2154

Hannah Jenkins liked to think of herself as a smart woman. It took brains as well as guts to run a farm with only the help of two kid brothers, especially out here in the Midwest Sector, where war and sickness had left people scarce and trouble aplenty.

But a smart woman knew better than to leave her farm without a loaded weapon. What was more, a smart woman paid attention to her surroundings and didn't let anything or anyone creep up on her, not even in the dim, gray light an hour before sunrise. So maybe Hannah didn't have the sense God gave a cowpat, after all.

"Stay where you are, or I'll blow you full of holes." She kept her hands low, trying to give the impression she had a rifle locked and loaded behind rise of the tractor's rear tire.

The Boscott boys weren't buying it. They gunned their ancient motorcycles and fouled the morning air with exhaust.

"Aw, c'mon, Hannah. Just give over the tractor and we'll let you alone."

Larry Boscott grinned at her, his thin red hair, blackened teeth and dead left eye making her stomach turn. Larry was a sick man, no doubt about it, and the hand in which he held his pistol looked none too steady, even in bad light and from thirty feet away. But both the younger men behind him—Jimmy, a beefy blond, and Carl, another carrot-top—appeared healthy and well-armed enough to make Larry's shaky aim a lot less comforting from Hannah's point of view.

Hard Harvest

It was her own fault. She should've been enjoying a last few minutes of blissful rest beneath her mother's hand-me-down wedding ring quilt instead of wandering over creation trying to cool her head and calm her heart. All this useless emotion was nothing more than a distraction from her purpose, which was survival. She couldn't afford to think about anything else.

Including Dr. David Cabot, or the square angle of his jaw, or the curve of his lips when he spoke to her in that stuck-up, superior way of his.

Especially Dr. David Cabot, if thinking about him made her this stupid. Still, her carelessness didn't give the Boscott boys the right to steal her farm equipment, damn their thieving hides anyway. A surge of righteous anger straightened her spine.

"If you want the tractor so bad, why don't you come on over here and take it?" Hannah inclined her head, making a show of looking Larry up and down. "But maybe you don't have the balls."

She meant it literally. If Larry's sickness had progressed far enough to give him the end-stage shakes, his gonads had probably shriveled weeks ago. Damn those mutating viruses, and damn the stubborn fools who refused the vaccines administered by the Commission's squadron of traveling nurses.

Larry's grin dropped away and he lifted the pistol. "Ain't no call to be nasty, Hannah. We're kin, after all."

She shook her head. "We might be cousins, but I'm no kin to thieves."

This last comment seemed to shatter the brittle veneer of Larry's sanity. He let his bike fall in the dust and charged her, waving the pistol as Jimmy and Carl yelled encouragement.

Hannah scrambled down off the tractor's high seat and rounded the front, putting the cab and the heavy engine block between her and Larry. She crouched in the road and waited. If she could surprise Larry when he came around the corner, and if his illness was far enough advanced that she could overpower him and take his gun, and if his brothers let her get

Hard Harvest

off a shot or two before they came at her on their bikes—

Too many “ifs” in that equation. She closed her eyes and braced herself. Over the pounding of her heart, she heard more raised voices, then the thud of a body hitting dirt. She peered around the front of the tractor.

A tall stranger stood over Larry’s prone body. A canvas duffel bag lay at his feet, and the hem of his gray duster flapped in the breeze like the wings of a mourning dove. He wore no hat, and his black hair was caught in a short tail at the nape of his neck. In his hands he held two pistols, with a third tucked in his belt. Down the road a piece, Jimmy and Carl straddled their bikes with their arms in the air, looking equal parts stunned and scared out of their meager wits.

Whoever he was, the stranger had shown up out of nowhere and disarmed three hostile men in ten seconds flat. That alone would’ve made him a sight for Hannah’s sore eyes. His dark good looks were just a bonus.

Instinctively, she compared him to David. They were much the same height, but where David was whip-lean and elegant from his beautiful head to his handsome feet, this man sported the well-muscled build of one who worked hard for his living.

Hannah came out of her crouch and stepped into the road. “I don’t know who you are, mister, but I sure like your timing.”

“Glad to be of service, miss,” the stranger said without taking his eyes off Larry and his brothers for an instant, which only proved he had sense in addition to stealth and strength, a combination Hannah appreciated to her marrow.

She glanced behind her to where the road stretched for miles between flat fields of scrub grass like a faded hair-ribbon wound through locks of gray. She saw no horse or other vehicle. The stranger had either arrived on foot or materialized out of the thin, dry air.

No matter. She could ponder the weirdness of his sudden appearance once she’d put a few safe miles between herself and the Boscott boys.

Hard Harvest

“You need a lift, mister?”

The man stepped away from Larry, who’d begun to stir. “I wouldn’t say no to a ride.”

“Hey, asshole!” Jimmy called. “You can’t walk away with our guns!”

The stranger paused and seemed to consider the statement. “You know, you’re right. That would be stealing.”

Moving with obvious care, he emptied the three guns of their bullets in turn, pocketing the ammunition as he went. All the while, the younger pair of Boscott boys grumbled between themselves. Larry lay moaning and twitching on the road. Hannah could see where the stranger had blackened Larry’s eye, and she tried to feel sorry for him, like her mama would’ve wanted.

When the stranger was done unloading the weapons, he left them in the dust by Larry’s feet and backed toward Hannah and the tractor. “You boys come get your pistols and your friend. Then you turn your bikes around and head back the way you came, and we’ll call it even.”

The Boscott boys stared at him, indecision plain on their faces. He’d already bested them once, and they’d been armed. After a few tense seconds, they let their bikes drop in the dirt and came forward, their hands held out in front of them like a man might approach a growling dog.

“We don’t want no trouble,” Carl said as he helped Larry to his feet. Next to him, Jimmy collected the guns and backed toward the bikes. He glared at Hannah with sullen eyes, and she knew better than to think the Boscott boys were beat. This little incident would come back to bite her, like as not.

When her cousins had stumbled back to their bikes and roared off down the road, Hannah turned her attention to the stranger. She was no better armed than she’d been ten minutes ago, and now she was alone with a man whose motives she couldn’t guess, no matter how friendly and accommodating he seemed. “Where’re you headed?”

“That depends.” The man brushed the dust from his palms. “I’m

Hard Harvest

looking for some short-term work. Any chance you're hiring?"

Up close, the stranger had an unusual air about him, sort of soothing and gentle, his voice pitched deep and soft, as if he knew Hannah was skittish around folks she hadn't known all her life.

She ran a hand through her hair, her fingers catching on the short, snarled curls. "We could always use help getting the last load of hay in, but I can't pay much."

"Room and board?"

Hannah nodded. "And five dollars a day for as long as you stay."

"Done." The stranger smiled and held out his hand. At that moment, the leading edge of the sun slipped above the horizon and bathed the world in shades of rose and gold. "You can call me Trey. It's good to meet you, Hannah."

She started in surprise. "How d'you know my name?"

"I was waiting for the right moment to step in and help," he said with a vague gesture of his outstretched hand, never once taking his eyes off hers, "and I overheard your conversation with Larry."

She frowned and glanced to the right and left, looking for a tree or a rock, anything large enough to hide a full-grown man. There was nothing. Not even a broken fence post. A shiver crawled down her neck to settle between her shoulder blades.

A second later, she shook it off. No reason to give into silly megrims just because she'd been too busy dealing with Larry and his brothers to notice another man standing in the shadows. She forced a smile and reached out to grasp his hand. It felt warm and dry, and the touch sent a pleasant tingle up the length of her arm.

"Climb aboard, Trey. If we don't get a move on, we'll be late for breakfast."

David stepped into the sunlight beyond the barn door and stretched, grimacing at the way his back creaked. He suspected another few months on that lumpy old cot might be the death of him, always assuming his

Hard Harvest

current burden of guilt, exasperation and sexual frustration didn't end him first.

But he could hardly complain when it was his idea to sleep in the hayloft, after all. Quick access to the lab he'd set up in the barn's unused basement—which Hannah insisted on calling a cellar—trumped comfortable accommodations.

He sniffed the air, but the usual scent of frying bacon didn't reach out to tickle his nose. He glanced toward the ramshackle two-story farmhouse. Hannah was nowhere in sight, which was something of a relief. After last night's disastrous attempt at simple conversation, he'd just as soon—

“Doc! Hey, Doc!”

The screen door slammed and Hannah's brother, Isaac, bounded across the back porch and down the steps, heading for the barn at a dead run.

David met him halfway. “Slow down. Where's the fire?”

Isaac skidded to a halt. Beneath his freckles, his usually ruddy face looked pale. “It's Abe. He's sick.”

David ignored the jolt of dread he felt at Isaac's words. “Sick” could mean anything from the sniffles to the latest viral mutation—maybe even some new strain for which there was no cure—but getting emotional about it wouldn't help anything.

“Where's your sister?”

Isaac shrugged. “She took off before sunrise. Said she needed some time by herself.” The kid bit his lip, suddenly looking a lot younger than his seventeen years. “She should've been back by now.”

David closed his eyes and swallowed thickly. Did Hannah go wandering because of him? Because they could barely manage to be in the same room together without irritating each other? Was that why she was out there alone, prey to whatever lurked in the ruined countryside?

How he hated this place, the whole damned Sector. Just when he thought he'd grown used to the endless onslaught of trouble, some new

Hard Harvest

threat showed up to catch him unprepared and useless.

David scrubbed a hand through his hair and sighed. One crisis at a time.

“Grab my bag,” he told Isaac. “It’s next to my cot in the back of the hayloft.”

He started toward the house.

They were still a good three miles from the farm when Trey shifted a bit on the edge of the wheel-well. “This land seems troubled.”

His voice, still so low and quiet, undercut the rumble of the tractor’s engine. Hannah could hear him perfectly, right down to his curious, almost puzzled tone, as if he didn’t know why this land might be troubled. As if he’d never set foot on it before.

Hannah’s senses jumped to high alert. She pulled off the road, cut the tractor’s engine and turned to face him. “Where’re you from, Trey?”

She had a pretty good idea where he *wasn’t* from. Visitors from the Eastern Sector, where everybody dwelt in cities under vast domes to protect them from the poisoned air, didn’t wander the dirt roads of the Midwest in jeans and dusters, saving farm-girls in distress. In fact, people from the east didn’t visit the blighted middle of the continent at all unless they worked for some arm of the government. Those folks tended to travel in packs, locked away in armored vehicles with tinted windows and weapons mounted on the fenders.

There were no visitors from the Western Sector. Not anymore. They said not a living soul remained on the far side of the Rocky Mountains, and damned few in the mountains themselves. Hannah had no cause to disbelieve it.

Trey opened his mouth to answer, but she stopped him another question.

“Are you an outlander?” It was a good guess. They showed up occasionally, wandering down from the northernmost reaches of the continent. Too often they were fugitives from the snow-bound prison

Hard Harvest

camp, where a sentence of five years equaled life imprisonment. Sometimes they were deserters from one outlawed militia or another. Trey might be one of those, or he might be nothing more than a survivor from some nomadic tribe that called no nation home. Either way, he'd be considered a criminal—a man without the proper papers, only fit to be jailed and set to hard labor.

Jail and hard labor might be the fate of anyone fool enough to harbor him, as well. Not to mention the forfeit of all property.

“Yes.” He nodded his head to underline it. “I’m definitely what you’d call an outlander. Is that a problem?”

Hannah drew a long breath. He'd saved the tractor. For all she knew, he'd saved her, too. The Boscott boys weren't known for their gentlemanly treatment of women, no matter if those women happened to be second cousins on their mama's side.

“I guess that depends on what you want.”

Trey spread his hands before him. “You know what I want. A job.”

“So you say.”

He smiled at her again, another blinding grin to rival the risen sun. “I say what I mean, Hannah. I'm not here to harm you, or to take anything that's yours.”

A smart woman would've shoved him off the wheel-well and hightailed it back to the farm, and Hannah almost did just that. But she took a moment to look into his eyes, which were as deep and dark as the well at the far corner of the north forty. Sad eyes, filled to the brim with secrets, but empty of threats. As she stared, she heard the echo of some faraway wind and on it, a woman's voice, calling Trey's name.

She shook herself. Nonsense like that was for folks who could afford the time to daydream. Bottom line, did she trust him? Her gut came back with a resounding “yes.”

With a resigned sigh she said, “There's a few things you need to know. First off, don't tell anybody you're an outlander. If anyone asks, you're from three counties over and you're looking for work to pay off a

Hard Harvest

debt. Everybody owes somebody these days, so that's believable."

"Why should I lie?"

"Because if you don't, you'll end up in a camp somewhere, and I'll lose my farm."

He looked at her for a long moment. "You're taking a risk even giving me a ride, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "My mama would say it's a bigger risk to care more for yourself than your fellow man."

"I think I'm going to like your mother."

"She's been dead ten years, since I was sixteen." Hannah looked away. "But you would've liked her. Everybody did."

She waited for Trey to offer cheap sympathy. Instead, he said, "Tell me what else I need to know."

Hannah closed her eyes and was surprised by the face that instantly appeared in her mind—David Cabot, his green eyes sharp behind his little round glasses, and his sandy hair sticking up in spikes where he'd run his fingers through it while pondering the depths of some murky test tube. Not that she'd ever seen him handle a test tube, since he'd never invited her into his lab, but her imagination was far too good at filling in the blanks.

Yes, Dr. David Cabot was as good a place to start as any.

"We have a visitor at the farm." She halted, uncertain of how to explain to one stranger the misery of spending four endless months married to another stranger. Or the agony of knowing your so-called husband might desert you and destroy all your dreams at any time.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Two

“Let’s see if I’ve got this straight,” Trey said. “This Commission of yours sent you a husband from back east so the two of you could make babies together?”

The hot wind that ruffled Hannah’s hair and lifted eddies of dust into the air didn’t seem to bother Trey. Hannah used the corner of her blue bandana to wipe grit from her eyes. “It’s not *my* Commission. Believe me, none of this is my idea.”

“But you agreed to marry this Dr. Cabot?”

Hannah shrugged. “They didn’t give me much of a choice. He was the only one on the list of candidates who was willing to resettle in this Sector.”

Trey frowned. “List of candidates?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Between the plagues and the wars, the Republic’s population is pretty much depleted. So when a girl gets to be a certain age, she’s tested for fertility. If it turns out she can bear children—which only one out of every fifty girls can do—she registers with the Commission and gives a DNA sample.”

“And then what?”

“If she wants to get married, they provide her with what they call a ‘genetically appropriate match’.”

“Sight unseen?” Trey’s mouth twisted as if he’d tasted something sour.

“It’s better than those awful baby farms they’ve got outside the cities. At least this way, a kid has a shot at growing up in a real family, like I did.”

“Your parents weren’t part of this project?”

Hard Harvest

Hannah shook her head. “They got together before the Commission started passing their procreation laws. If I were to try to choose my own husband now...” She paused, thinking about the penalties for breeding without a license. “The Commission says a fertile woman like me is a precious national resource, and it’s my duty not to waste myself on a man who isn’t the best genetic specimen.”

“Are there others like you out here?”

Hannah looked across the dry fields, fields that should’ve been planted with sorghum and corn and sweet timothy, but had been left to lie fallow for a decade or more and now were blighted with drought. “Most all the other girls jump at the chance to move east and raise their kids in the cities. They say life is easier there, but I think life is what you make it. Leastways, that’s what my dad always said.”

Trey looked off into the distance as he listened, as if to give her some privacy while she discussed such intimate matters. He was easy to talk to, easier than David, who never failed to rile her even when he wasn’t trying. And it was getting worse. The last few days, she and David had been playing tug-of-war with an awkward silence, yanking it back and forth between them like a blanket too narrow and threadbare to cover them both.

“This land isn’t the only thing that’s troubled, is it? You and your husband don’t get along.”

Hannah’s shock must’ve shown on her face, because Trey held up his hands, palms outward. “Sorry. It was just a guess.”

She sighed and squinted into the cloudless sky. “No, we don’t get along. And worse than that, it’s been almost a whole summer and I’m still not pregnant.”

“You’ve been trying?”

“Once a month, like clockwork. But first I have to pee in a cup to prove I’m ovulating.”

“How romantic.”

“The good doctor insists we follow the Commission’s protocols to the

Hard Harvest

letter.” Hannah flinched at the bitter sound of her own words.

Trey frowned. “Do you like sex, Hannah?”

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I think I’d like it just fine, if David would only—if we could just—”

“Make a connection?”

She didn’t bother being surprised this time. Her mama used to say that everybody had a special talent. It seemed Trey’s was for plucking stray thoughts out of silly girls’ heads, though why he’d waste his time, Hannah surely didn’t know.

“Maybe if we had more in common or if he’d show some interest in the farm.”

“Have you shown any interest in his work?”

She scowled, suddenly defensive. “He doesn’t like to talk about his work. Says it would only bore me anyway. He’s probably right.”

“But he came all the way out here, didn’t he? Left his whole life behind to be with you?”

Now her defensiveness dissolved into guilt. Trey wasn’t wrong. She should be more grateful to David for all he’d sacrificed so she and her brothers could keep their farm. But David seemed to do his level best to ruin any warm, fuzzy feelings she might have in his direction.

She checked her watch. “It’s nearly eight o’clock. If we don’t get back soon, the boys’ll come looking for me.”

Trey shrugged. “You’re the boss.”

“You keep that in mind and we’ll get along fine.” She fired up the tractor one more time and headed for home.

David sat in the chair by the bed and watched Abe sleep. The boy looked so similar to Hannah, with the same wide mouth and snub nose. Though, like Isaac, Abe sported violently red hair and freckles to match, while Hannah’s curls were a pale strawberry blond and her skin was unmarked, unless he counted the few stray freckles that dotted her shoulders and the smooth curves of her breasts.

Hard Harvest

Not that David had ever examined her breasts with anything but the most clinical interest. The ability to successfully suckle an infant was of utmost importance to the offspring's health, after all. He certainly had no other reason to consider Hannah's breasts. Not the way they bounced beneath her thin shirt when she played catch with Abe in the front yard, or the dusky rose of her nipples on the few occasions she'd undressed completely for their monthly encounters—

The screen door slammed, breaking his reverie. A moment later, Hannah charged into the small bedroom off the kitchen. With her came Isaac and a dark-haired man David didn't recognize.

"Abe?" Hannah sounded panicked. Her face, white shirt and jeans were streaked with dust, and her hair was a wild, rose-gold halo around her head.

"Shh." David lifted a finger to his lips to quiet her.

She spared him barely a glance before crossing to the bed and easing herself down on the edge. "What is it?"

"Just a chest cold. He'll be fine in a few days."

"You're sure?"

A thread of irritation stiffened David's spine. He might be useless as a farmer, but he did know his business as a doctor. "I could radio the traveling nurse for a second opinion if you'd like."

Hannah lifted her sky-blue eyes to David's face. Something combustible passed between them, a chemical reaction he could almost taste. At other times, it felt like an arc of pure energy attracting and repelling them in the same instant. None of it made any sense on a scientific level, and therefore it must've been the product of David's imagination, which was entirely too active when it came to Hannah.

"Don't bother." She bit off the words as if she begrudged him every syllable and rose from the edge of the bed. "Does he need anything?"

"Rest and fluids. But I'll stay with him just in case."

Hannah sighed and pressed the heel of her hand to her eye. Her shoulders slumped with obvious weariness. David wished he could think

Hard Harvest

of something to say to ease her fears. Nothing came to mind, so he straightened his glasses and kept his mouth shut.

Hannah gestured toward the stranger in the doorway. “David, this is Trey. He’ll be staying on for a while to help with the farm.”

David glanced at the man. He was good-looking in an exotic kind of way, and plainly capable of taking on the backbreaking work.

Without another word, Hannah left the room. The dark stranger made way for her at the door, and then inclined his head in David’s direction. David nodded a greeting. He wondered where Hannah had picked up this stray, but not enough to ask out loud. It wasn’t his farm, after all. Not his farm, not his home, not his family—only the place he was expected to live and try to conceive a child with a woman who could barely stand the sight of him.

His legally wedded wife.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Three

Saturday night was Hannah's favorite time of the week. The heavy work was done and Sunday was a so-called day of rest, not that any day could be restful on a farm. Still, Hannah made a point of staying up past ten on Saturday nights. Sometimes she treated herself to a drink from her late grandfather's pre-Commission stash of moonshine and a long, hot bath, if drought conditions allowed it, of course.

This particular evening found her sitting alone at the kitchen table with her chin pillowed on her folded arms. Propped against the almost empty glass of hooch was her most cherished and carefully protected possession, her late mother's antique digital photo frame. Its glow provided the only source of light in the room.

As the images flickered past in the frame, sometimes blinking out entirely when its ancient rechargeable battery hiccupped, Hannah listened to the hum of the generator on the back porch and traced her finger over the blue and white checked tablecloth. The combined aromas of pot roast and dish soap hung heavy in the air. Through the screen door, the breeze brought the cry of a coyote and the lonesome wail of a train whistle from a hundred miles away.

She didn't move when Trey entered the room. Weariness and whiskey had made her too mellow to care if a stranger caught her feeling nostalgic. Especially if that stranger was Trey, whose easy manner made his company a pleasure under any circumstances.

"Mind if I join you?" He kept his voice low, plainly mindful of her brothers sleeping in the next room.

"Nope." She gestured toward an empty chair and turned her attention to the current image in the frame, her parents on their wedding day, gazing at each other as if no one else in the world existed. She closed her eyes and waited for the picture to pass.

Hard Harvest

Trey yanked the chair from under the table, flipped it around with one big hand, and straddled it. “Isaac’s a hell of a cook. I haven’t eaten this well in long time.”

“He takes after our father that way. Dad was the cook in the family. Mama was the baker.” Hannah reached up and knocked the curls out of her eyes. “I’m thinking of making pies tomorrow with the last of the apples.”

Trey’s groan of appreciation made Hannah glance in his direction. He looked freshly scrubbed, his hair lying damp on his shoulders and his handsome features unmarked by sweat or grime. The white t-shirt he wore revealed a tattoo of chain links that snaked from beneath the sleeve and down his arm toward his wrist. Intrigued, Hannah leaned in for a better look. She drew a breath and enjoyed the scent of clean male. For a scant second, she let herself wonder what his hands would feel like on her skin. Harder than David’s, probably rough from the work, but not ungentle.

She cleared her throat. The silence that followed seemed to crackle and hiss with something unspoken. Finally, Hannah sighed. “Spit it out, already.”

Trey’s eyes widened. “What’re you suggesting?”

“I don’t have patience for games. Say what you need to say.”

Trey nodded. “All right, I will. You’re right about David Cabot. He’s a waste of your time.”

Hannah blinked at him. She’d thought he was going to try to renegotiate his pay. “What?”

“I’ve been watching him. He’s spent the past three days sitting on his ass in that back bedroom, reading. With all the work on this farm—”

“He’s been taking care of Abe.”

“Abe’s feeling better. Has been since this morning, but did Cabot pitch in and bale hay with me and Isaac? Did he offer to feed the stock or help you bring in the beets? No, he did not. He wandered back into that lab of his and played with his microscope. What kind of work is that for

Hard Harvest

a man?"

Hannah sat up straight, all her mellow sleepiness dissolved by the harshness of his words. "David's a doctor and a scientist, not a farmer."

"Does that mean he shouldn't have to get his hands dirty once in a while?"

"Stop it," Hannah burst out, her tone sharp. Later she'd be amazed by her urge to protect David. Now she was riled. "David's work is important. He's looking for a cure for the virus that causes infertility in women. He's trying to save the human race."

Trey snorted. "Too bad he can't manage to get you pregnant while he's at it. If he were a real man—"

"I mean it, Trey. Insult him one more time and you can hit the road come sunrise."

Trey smiled, mischief bright in his face, and Hannah knew she'd been had. Damn him. She'd never seen it coming.

"Forgive me," he said. "I needed to see if you'd defend him."

"Why?" she asked, more genuinely puzzled than annoyed. "Why do you care so much about me and David?"

Trey leaned forward, resting his forearms on the top rung of the chair. "The real question is why do *you* care so much? This arrangement is a disaster. Even your blasted Commission would agree. There must be another way."

She nodded. "I could hop a train to some city back east where there's a Commission-managed *in vitro* station on every corner. Fertile girls from these parts do it all the time. Mostly, their families never see them again. And the boys would lose the farm for sure."

"But how can you hope to build a life with a man you don't like?"

Hannah's throat tightened. Tears burned behind her eyes. The whiskey was getting to her, making her weak. "I like David."

"You barely look at him."

"It *hurts* to look at him," she blurted. "Because all he sees when he looks at me is a walking incubator."

Hard Harvest

Trey leaned in closer. The sympathy in his dark eyes made her want to spill every secret she'd ever had. "What do you want, Hannah?"

She swallowed and glanced at the picture frame in time to see her parents' laughing faces once again. "I want what my folks had."

"What does that mean?"

She closed her eyes and let the words rush out of her on a flood. "It means laughing in the dark. Waking up together tangled in the sheets. Knowing how my husband takes his coffee, how he likes his eggs, his favorite color, if he wears socks to bed in January or sleeps with the window open." She dropped her head into her open palm. "It means everything, all the time, forever."

"And you want this with David? You're sure?"

"Yes." She whispered it, as if she were afraid she might overhear herself admitting to desiring a lifetime of David Cabot. "But it doesn't matter. He doesn't want me. He's just biding his time."

"What if you're wrong about that?"

She looked at Trey from the corner of her eye. "You know something I don't?"

"Maybe."

Hope raised its pesky head, and she squashed it like a bug under the heel of her boot. "We can't even have a conversation without me getting my feelings hurt, or him getting his back up, or the other way 'round."

"You have the rest of your lives to work that out."

Hannah shook her head. "He agreed to a trial of half a year. If I don't get pregnant in another two months, the marriage is annulled and he's free to go."

"What if he doesn't want to go?"

"The Commission won't give him a choice. I'm a precious national resource, remember? I need to start breeding as soon as possible. If David can't close the deal, they'll send someone else."

Irritated by the evidence of her out-of-control emotions, she wiped her eyes with the hem of her shirt. "Do you know we didn't even have a

Hard Harvest

ceremony? Just a piece of paper signed and notarized by the Deputy Commissioner over in Custer County. It didn't feel like a wedding then, and it sure doesn't feel like a marriage now."

Trey reached out and drew the tip of his finger along the curve of her jaw. The tenderness in this unexpected caress made something inside Hannah's chest crack open and bleed. She choked back a sob.

Before she realized what he meant to do, Trey was on his feet and dragging her from her chair. She settled her fists against his shoulders and held herself stiff in the circle of his arms, every instinct telling her to fight for control of herself and the situation.

"Relax," he murmured and pressed his face into the tangled mess of her hair. "You don't have to be in charge all the time, you know."

He sounded amused, which should've made her want to fight harder, but all at once the novelty of allowing somebody else to take the lead got the better of her instincts. She let herself melt against his chest. "I must stink like a farmhand."

"I've smelled worse."

"You have to say that 'cause I'm your boss."

"No, I really don't."

The kiss he offered her was chaste at first, no more than a dry peck on her lower lip. Maybe it was the whiskey that made her press upward and deepen it, or maybe it was pure, ornery pride. David Cabot had never once kissed her, not even on their so-called wedding day. His idea of foreplay seemed to be asking her how the crops were growing and if the weather report had mentioned rain. But if Trey wanted to kiss her, maybe she wasn't such a hopeless failure as a woman after all. Maybe she was even lovable?

She would've given almost anything to believe it.

"So soft." He cupped her face like she was made of bone china. He took her mouth with a slow, gentle thoroughness that made the muscles in her limbs go warm and liquid-lazy. The proof of his arousal pressed into her belly, and she broke the kiss to bury her face in his shoulder,

Hard Harvest

ashamed at her overpowering, brazen desire.

Trey went still. “David’s watching.”

Hannah tried to jerk away. “Let me go.”

“He needs to see this.” Trey slid his hands down to cup her denim-covered backside. “Let’s give him something to think about.”

He kissed her again, this time with a focused intensity that forced her to clutch at him just to keep herself upright. Trey gripped her butt and hoisted her up, sliding his denim-covered thigh between hers and placing pressure where she needed it most.

She shuddered and dug her short nails into his shoulders. His teeth grazing her neck made her breasts go tight and achy. Or was it the thought of David’s eyes on them, tracking their every move? Trey rocked her against his thigh, relentless and carefully considerate at the same time. When he slid one hand up to pinch her nipple through her shirt and bra, she stifled a moan and began to move with him.

She’d explored her own body. She knew what was about to happen, the natural, inevitable response to this kind of stimulation. That didn’t make it right, but she couldn’t seem to stop, lost somewhere on the dark road that stretched between desire and desperation.

“Like that,” she whispered against Trey’s mouth, panting and striving, working for what she wanted. “Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.”

He didn’t. Instead, he gripped her ass again and shifted her higher, bringing her hard against him once. Twice. Three times....

Hannah’s head fell back and her eyes shut, her whole body engaged in the grinding, pulsing pleasure of release. Through it all her mind flashed pictures, not unlike her antique digital frame, images of David’s eyes, the cut of his cheekbones, his long-fingered hands that seemed crafted to fit every fantasy she’d ever harbored.

She felt her mouth shape his name.

Then she knew nothing but Trey’s solid form against her, absorbing the tingling aftershocks. He ran a hand through her hair and down her back as if to soothe her.

Hard Harvest

Footsteps sounded on the porch, fading as they proceeded down the steps and away toward the barn. Trey's grip on her loosened and she pulled away.

"I should go to him and—" *And what? Explain?* How could she possibly make David understand what she barely comprehended herself?

"Let me do it." Before she could protest, Trey slipped away and crossed to the door. Once there, he turned. "Hannah, I don't want to come between you and your husband. That's not my intention."

"What *do* you want, Trey?"

"I want to help you. Do you believe that?"

Hannah drew a long breath and let it out on a sigh. All at once, she felt bone-weary and a thousand years old. "Yes, I believe it."

"What if I told you it might take something..." He paused, seeming to search for the right word. "Something *unconventional* to help your marriage."

She shook her head. "I'm not following you."

He smiled and his gaze traveled over her, making her feel wanton and next-to-naked in the middle of her own damned kitchen. "What would a woman like you consider unconventional?"

His eyes held hers from across the room, plainly trying to communicate his meaning without resorting to clumsy words. Again she heard the echo of that faraway wind and the brokenhearted woman who called his name for long years, waiting for the return of the man she loved more than life, the man she trusted with the fate of her soul.

Hannah scrubbed a hand over her face. "I'm too tired for riddles, Trey."

"Fair enough. But will you think about it?"

As if she had any choice now that he'd put the idea in her head. She nodded, looking away from those sad, dangerous eyes to the cracked tile beneath her feet.

"Good." He let the screen door close quietly behind him on his way out.

Hard Harvest

When he was gone, Hannah climbed the stairs and headed for the bathroom. The house was quiet. Her brothers had proven yet again how soundly they slept, so she let the door stand open to catch the breeze from the window in the hall.

From the top shelf of the linen closet she took three beeswax candles, lit them and set them on the floor near the ancient, claw-footed tub. Then she opened the tap and let it run for a scant minute. She filled the tub only a quarter of the way, her concession to the recent lack of rain. Her body felt lazy and stupid as she stripped out of her clothes and slid into the water.

Unconventional. It could've meant a few different things, but when she closed her eyes, all that came to mind was the three of them—Trey, David and herself—lying together in a shameless sprawl.

Both men, at the same time. Their hands, their mouths, their manly parts, touching her, inside and out. Using her for their own pleasure, and letting her make use of them.

She shouldn't have wanted it. Even if he didn't act like it, David was her husband. It was her duty to want only him. But like as not, both he and Trey would be gone by the time the wind blew snow like a tattered bridal veil over the landscape. Then she'd be left with only memories until the next candidate showed up, assuming he ever did.

Of course, Trey might've meant something entirely different. She couldn't be sure without asking, which she intended to do first chance she got.

But if she was right? And if Trey somehow managed to talk the supremely stubborn Dr. Cabot into allowing such a huge breach of his precious Commission protocols?

Hannah wouldn't say no.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Four

David sat on the edge of his cot and fought for control. Some toxic, unnamable emotion dug at him, lodged between his lungs like a poisoned thorn. His stomach churned, threatening to introduce Isaac's excellent pot roast to the floor of the loft. He snatched his smeared glasses from his face, pinched the bridge of his nose and told himself he felt nothing, nothing at all.

His mantra didn't work, but he hardly deserved better. Because he hadn't stumbled on the scene between Hannah and her new hired hand by accident, had he? No, he'd made the choice to spy on them. Planned it carefully, in fact, waiting in the shadows like the sneaky bastard he was. It was a lesson he'd learned well while growing up in the confines of a Commission breeding facility—how to hide and watch and listen. You got your information where you could find it, ethical considerations be damned.

“Don't stop. Please, don't stop.”

The note of desperation in Hannah's muffled cries of pleasure had branded themselves on David's memory. He'd never inspired that response in her. Now she'd found another man to fulfill her needs in that department, and it looked as though David never would.

Enough. He returned his glasses to his face and balled his hands into fists, digging his nails into his palms to refocus his attention on the here and now. These negative feelings, what purpose did they serve? And the positive emotions, like affection and hope, were even worse, nothing more than birds of prey painted to look like doves. When you let down your guard, they went for your entrails and left you hollowed out and useless.

All that mattered was duty, and David knew his.

From beneath the loft came the sounds of the other residents of the

Hard Harvest

barn settling in for the night, two Guernsey milk cows called Beatrice and Odaline, and a sow with a litter of piglets no more than a month old. David took a few deep breaths to clear his head and let the quiet, homely noises soothe him. It might be too late to work in the lab, but he could read by the glow of the lantern that burned next to his cot.

He reached for the book he'd left on his pillow. As he did, he caught a flicker of light through the wide open doors of the loft.

Saturday night, Hannah's night to swap her three-minute shower for a bath. When had David come to know her schedule as well as his own? Maybe when he'd realized the window at the end of the second-floor hall gave a fair, if frustratingly distant, view of the upstairs bathroom.

Without making a conscious decision to move, he rose from the cot and crossed the creaking floorboards. He kept his eyes fixed on the house. Less than a hundred feet away, Hannah bent to fill the bathtub, stripped out of her clothes and slipped into the water.

It was wrong to watch. Hannah was doing a service for her country. For humankind, in fact. She'd taken him into her home and her bed with no other aim than to propagate the species, asking nothing for herself in return. And here he was, taking advantage of her, peeping at her like some perverted—

“Cabot? You up there?”

Beneath David, footsteps sounded on the barn floor. He'd thought Trey would be sleeping with Hannah instead of spreading his makeshift bedroll next to the tractor, as he'd done every night since his arrival. Apparently, David had thought wrong. Maybe if he stayed quiet, the other man would think he was asleep.

“Cabot?”

Too late. Trey was already climbing the ladder.

“Yes, I'm here.” David returned to his cot and waited. He told himself he felt nothing. So when Trey's head and shoulders appeared through the rectangular opening in the loft floor, David was shocked to discover how much he wanted to plant the sole of his boot in the other man's face and

Hard Harvest

send him down again, backwards and headfirst.

Trey paused at the top of the ladder and cleared his throat. “We should talk.”

“Should we?”

“Definitely.” The shadows cast by the lantern outlined the corded muscles in Trey’s forearm, accented by an unusual tattoo David hadn’t noticed before. The man was an excellent physical specimen. He’d make a good match for Hannah in that department.

David schooled his face into its default expression of blank disinterest. “I don’t think there’s much to discuss.”

“I know what you saw, Cabot.”

David turned away to look across the haymow at the flickering light in the second floor window of the house. “And?”

“I held your wife in my arms tonight. I kissed her.”

“Yes.”

“I touched her. I made her come.”

As if observing from a distance, David noted his own desire to wrap his hands around the other man’s neck and strangle the life out of him. Still, he felt rage, frustration—no, nothing.

The floorboards creaked as Trey moved. He laid a hand on David’s shoulder. “Doesn’t that make you angry?”

David turned. Trey’s hand fell away and they faced each other with less than three feet between them. Trey’s eyes were the blackest David had ever seen. In their shadows he caught a glimpse of his own despair.

“You *should* be angry,” Trey whispered. “You should want to kill me.”

“Maybe I do,” David said, envisioning his hands around Trey’s throat again. “But then I’d have the problem of where to hide your body, and none of it would solve my troubles with Hannah. I’m not a fan of wasted effort.”

Trey snorted. “What a cold, closed off son-of-a-bitch you are, Dr. Cabot.” He inclined his head, plainly taking David’s measure. “Tell me,

Hard Harvest

have you *tried* to solve your troubles with Hannah?”

David reached up and removed his glasses. Keeping his movements slow and precise, he cleaned them on the hem of his shirt and returned them to his face, buying time as he considered his next words. In the end, he decided to answer Trey with another question. “Why is that your business?”

Trey’s face darkened. “Trust me when I tell you it’s very much my business. You and Hannah may be a pair of blind, stubborn fools, but you belong together. You’d make my job a lot easier if you’d just—”

“Your job?” A singeing spark of panic made David’s fists clench at his sides. “Who are you, exactly? A Commission operative? Did they send you because Hannah’s not pregnant yet? It hasn’t been six months. You can’t take me back yet. I won’t go.”

“Take it easy, David. Nobody’s making you go anywhere.”

Trey lifted his hands in a defensive gesture, and David realized with a shock that he’d advanced on the other man, backing him against the unfinished wall of the loft. He moved away and shoved his fists into the pockets of his thin canvas trousers. “But you don’t deny you work for the Commission?”

Trey mouth’s curled into a smirk. “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help you.”

David got the impression he’d missed a joke somewhere. “Help me how?”

“However I can. But you’ll have to let me.” Trey stepped forward. “I’ll ask you again. Have you tried with Hannah? Really tried?”

“Yes, but it’s obviously not working.”

“Because she’s not pregnant yet?”

“I achieve erection, penetration and ejaculation,” David said, the clinical terms tasting antiseptic on his tongue. “All the necessary components for successful coitus and conception.”

Trey squinted at him as if he were some new species of insect. “What about Hannah? Do you think she enjoys having sex with you?”

Hard Harvest

David flinched. He'd never discussed such intimate matters with another living soul, but Trey was from the Commission. Maybe—just maybe—he could help. “I think she tolerates it because she wants a child.”

“And you? Do you enjoy it?”

David shrugged and looked away. It was one thing to talk about the mechanics of sex, but another to share the agony he endured at every encounter with Hannah—how he felt as if he might choke on all that raw emotion, or his fear of losing control and scaring Hannah, or even hurting her. “I have nothing to compare it to.”

Trey's eyebrows shot upward. “Are you saying you've never been with anyone else?”

“I graduated from the Commission's fast-track program with a double degree in medicine and genetics when I was seventeen,” David said, hearing the defensive edge in his own words. “Since then I've been too busy trying to save the world to worry about my sex life, which you already know, since you've undoubtedly read my file.”

“Right,” Trey said. “Sorry.”

David sighed. “No, *I'm* sorry. You're only doing your job.” He shook his head. “I don't know what's wrong with me lately. I can't seem to stay focused on what's important.”

Trey's expression softened into something a little too close to pity. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, but sure. “I think I see the problem.”

“I hope you see the solution, too.”

“You won't like it.”

“Try me.”

Trey smiled. It wasn't a friendly expression. “You, Dr. Cabot, need to learn to lose control.”

David blinked at him. “That's ridiculous.”

“You're wrong. If you can't learn to let go and experience your own emotions, you'll never get anywhere with Hannah or any other woman.”

Hard Harvest

“First of all, I don’t want any other woman. Second, I don’t have emotions—at least, not the kind you mean.”

“Now who’s being ridiculous?”

“It’s true. I feel anger.” David paused and wiped away the beads of sweat that had formed on his upper lip. “Sometimes I get frustrated. I use those feelings to motivate my work.”

Trey looked skeptical. “So you never experience passion, or affection, or love?”

“Those don’t accomplish anything. They’re counter-productive.” David was aware he sounded hostile, another emotion never far from the surface, always handy to grasp when he’d been knocked off-balance. *Like now, for instance.*

He turned and looked past the neatly stacked bales of hay toward the house, forgetting Hannah and her Saturday night bathing ritual in the midst of his inner battle. Only when he heard the floorboards creak behind him did he recall the clear view through the hall window, and then it was too late to keep Trey from catching sight of his little secret.

“Well, well, well,” Trey said. “What have we here?”

“Stop,” David croaked. “Don’t—”

“Don’t what?” Trey laid a big, warm hand on David’s upper arm, preventing him from turning away from the spectacle of Hannah rising from the tub. Even at this distance, the droplets of water gleamed and winked in the candlelight as they rolled down her body. She stretched, reaching for the dark-hued towel slung over a nearby chair. The contrast between the towel and the whiteness of her skin was startling.

When Trey spoke again, his voice dipped into a low, filthy register. “Look at her. So soft and smooth and perfect—but you know that, don’t you? Tell me, what does it feel like to have her under you?”

David shook his head, but couldn’t bring himself to look away as Hannah dried herself.

“See how she glows, David? You’d want to take her on coal-black sheets and watch her skin pink up from the effort. Make her work for it.

Hard Harvest

Make her arch and squirm. She needs someone else to take charge once in a while.”

The air around them thickened, and David’s mouth went dry. When Hannah pulled a cotton nightgown over her head, thereby signaling the end of the Saturday night show, Trey grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled backward.

David stumbled, and Trey used the momentum to pivot them both till David’s back connected with southern wall of the loft. Beneath them, one of the cows lowed in protest at the commotion.

David echoed the complaint. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Call it a test. I gave the same one to Hannah, and she passed with flying colors.” Trey leaned in close and pressed his tattooed forearm across David’s shoulders, just under his throat. “I wonder if you’re as good a student.”

A test? Was that what David had witnessed in the kitchen less than an hour ago? It didn’t make sense, but he couldn’t think, not with Trey so close and his breath so hot on his face. He worked his hands between them and shoved at Trey’s chest. It wasn’t enough to dislodge the other man, but it gave him an inch or two of space to take a badly needed breath.

Trey only smiled in response and moved his other hand to grip David’s hip through the thin fabric of his trousers. “Scared?”

“Of you? Don’t be an idiot.”

“One of us is an idiot, but I don’t think it’s me.” Trey pressed in closer, using his extra ten pounds of muscle to keep David pinned against the wall. His hand tightened on David’s hip. The tips of his fingers dug into the curve of David’s ass, and his thumb lodged in the crease where David’s thigh met his groin. “You know what I think? I think you have plenty of those good feelings. Like desire, for instance.”

“Desire is a simple, physiological reaction to stimulus.”

“No, David. You’re talking about lust. Desire is something different.”

Hard Harvest

Trey eased his thigh between David's, barely grazing his crotch. David's body gave an involuntary jerk. He squeezed his eyes shut at the realization that he was aroused, as hard as the granite boulders embedded in Hannah's wheat fields.

Trey pressed his thigh more firmly against David's erection. He released David's hip and slid his hand around to palm his ass. "What you're feeling right now, David? That's lust."

David wanted to deny it. He'd never had any interest in other men, but Trey was different. In too many ways to name.

Trey kept on talking. "And lust is great, don't get me wrong. But desire is in a higher category altogether. Desire taps the emotions. Desire is the foundation for love, and desire is what's between you and Hannah."

David forced his eyes open at the sound of her name, only to find the lenses of his glasses fogged by the thick wall of heat between himself and the other man. "I want you to stop. Do you hear me? Or do I need to hit you?"

Trey laughed and gave his ass a squeeze. "It could be so good. If you'd let go, it could take you out of your body and away from yourself, like flying."

Trey's groping had managed to reduce David to a disgusting, disorderly mess. David tried to imagine ceding even more control to the other man. No, he couldn't afford it. He closed his eyes again and shook his head.

"Don't say no," Trey whispered. "Hannah and I, we could teach you how to let go. Think about it—you and me, with Hannah wedged between us, tight and hot and wet."

The words painted a vivid image across David's mind. The three of them moving together, abandoning protocol and rules and the fear of consequences. The idea of it, the mere glimpse of it behind his clenched-shut lids, was enough to twist his iron will into a pulsing tangle of need.

Hard Harvest

Trey groaned and pressed in closer, till David felt the other man's erection poking at his hip. He bent and sniffed along the length of David's neck, like an animal scenting prey. The hand on David's ass shifted, sliding between them to palm David's cock. Without thinking, David arched into the pressure.

"You're responding," Trey murmured. "You enjoy being touched like any other man. You only need the right motivation. And when we add Hannah to the mix—"

"Enough." David opened his eyes and caught a new expression on Trey's face. Yearning? Desperation? A little of both, plus something too familiar to miss: soul-deep loneliness.

He shoved at Trey again, forcing him back several inches. "This isn't just a job to you. Not just another mission. You're playing for higher stakes. What are they?"

Trey's mouth tightened into a thin line. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were empty of emotion. "That's not your concern."

"The Commission might see it differently."

Trey ignored the remark and let his hand drop away from David's cock. He backed off another few inches. "I'll ask one more question, the same question I asked Hannah. What do you want, Dr. Cabot?"

David exhaled, long and slow. He wanted to press his advantage. Words were his only weapon in this battle. But what was the prize, and was it worth the fight? If he could do this, answer this simple question, maybe Trey would leave him in peace.

Right now, David suspected peace was the best he could hope to win.

"It's my duty to make this marriage work. It's vital that Hannah and I stay together and produce offspring."

Trey smiled. "You have no idea how vital."

All at once, frustration got the better of David and he snarled, "For the love of all that's holy, will you knock off the cryptic bullshit?"

Trey laughed. The vibration saturated the air between them, buzzing

Hard Harvest

through David's flesh right down to his bones. "Sorry. But I don't need to hear about your duty. I need to know what you want."

"You know what I want. I want Hannah."

"You already have her body."

"I want more." David's despair welled up, as if drawn to the surface by the sympathy in Trey's eyes. "I want it all."

Trey nodded. "I can help you. Will you let me?"

David felt as if he were standing on the edge of a crumbling cliff with a tornado at his back. How had this stranger crawled under his skin and coaxed out his long-buried ability to trust? How had he made David want to believe?

"Yes," he said. "I'll let you help me."

Trey gazed at him another long moment. Then he turned away and headed in the direction of the ladder.

David licked his parched lips, painfully aware of how his erection still tented the front of his trousers. "Wait."

Trey paused and looked back at him expectantly.

A hundred questions, at least. David went with, "Does Hannah know you're from the Commission?"

Trey shook his head. "She called me an outlander. I didn't bother to correct her."

"If she finds out you lied—"

"I didn't lie," Trey said with a straight face. "I omitted the truth."

David tensed, all at once assaulted with every old doubt and suspicion. "And you expect me to keep your secret?"

"You keep mine, and I'll keep yours." Trey grinned and gestured toward house and the hall window, which had gone dark while they'd been grappling on the other side of the loft.

"That's blackmail."

"I prefer to call it a hard bargain." With a deep, dirty chuckle, Trey lowered himself into the darkness of the barn below, leaving David to wonder if he'd just struck a deal with the devil.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Five

“Not too much sugar, Abe. That fruit is plenty sweet on its own.”

Abe rolled his eyes in Hannah’s general direction and kept on with his measuring and stirring. Hannah watched him for a moment and wondered when he’d grown so big, twelve years old and nearly as tall as her now. She shook her head and went back to rolling out the piecrust. Behind her, the screen door slammed.

“Smells like heaven in here.” A smile warmed Trey’s voice.

Hannah’s face flushed with heat, and a funny kind of bittersweet longing twisted her insides. Last night, the memory of Trey’s touch had followed her into sleep. Along with it came Trey’s suggestion of an “unconventional” fix to her problems with David, coloring her dreams with images of strong arms, broad chests and muscled thighs wherever she turned. She’d awakened before dawn with an empty ache in the pit of her belly and a yearning to creep out to the barn and beg the first man she found to bend her over the nearest bale of hay.

Now, in the fresh mid-morning sunshine, she didn’t want to face the memory of her own wanton neediness. Whatever Trey might think about the answer to her troubles with David, she had more sense than to tangle with two men at once. Didn’t she?

“Hannah? Can we talk privately?”

The rolling pin fell from her hand and clattered on the floor. Flustered, she bent to retrieve it, only to drop it again.

“Hannah?”

“I’m awful busy today, Trey.” She straightened and swiped at her face, certain she’d left behind streaks of flour. She found she couldn’t quite look at him, much less return his smile. “I’ve got to finish these pies, and then ride out to the north forty and check the irrigation in the cornfields. If we don’t get rain soon, I don’t know—”

Hard Harvest

“This will only take a minute,” Trey said, in that low, steady way of his.

She sighed and glanced at Abe, who was industriously applying the blade of a paring knife to a fat Granny Smith. “Let’s go to my room.”

As she climbed the stairs, she felt Trey’s gaze on her backside and wished she’d suggested the porch for this private conversation. But the porch faced the barn, and she’d already lucked out when David skipped breakfast. The longer she could put off looking her husband in the eye, the better.

The breadth of Trey’s shoulders made her tiny bedroom seem even smaller. Hannah turned from him to watch the curtains flutter in the dry breeze. “Okay, let’s have it. Those pies won’t bake themselves.”

“David agreed to my suggestion.

She swallowed, still looking anywhere but at Trey. “The unconventional one?”

“That would be the one, yes.”

The amused edge on his voice snapped her gaze to his face. “Don’t you laugh at me. Don’t you *dare*.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he countered. “Do you own a dress?”

The sudden change in subject was enough to give her mental whiplash. She blinked at him, feeling slow and stupid. “There might be something in my mother’s closet—”

“That’ll do. Tonight, after the boys have gone to bed, put it on and come out to the barn.”

“And then what?”

Trey stared at her with those dark eyes of his, reminding Hannah of an expression her mother had used, as black as two midnights at the bottom of a bucket. He kept on staring till Hannah looked away.

She cleared her throat. “I’m not ovulating.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Maybe not to you. I’m in this for a baby, remember?”

“I remember,” Trey said. “The way I figure it, that’s most of your

Hard Harvest

problem.”

Time to do a little subject changing of her own. “Why does it have to be the barn? Can’t David come here, like he usually does?”

Trey glanced around the room. Hannah did the same and all at once saw the place she’d called her own since she was in diapers through the eyes of another. The white eyelet curtains, matching spread on the bed, whitewashed dresser and pink-and-white rag rug looked virginal. Girlish and sweet, but hardly the bedroom of a woman grown, and certainly not of a wife and potential mother.

She sighed. “I’ve thought about moving into my folks’ room.” She didn’t want to explain how wrong the idea felt, to sleep in her parents’ bed with a man she barely knew. A man whom she called her husband, but who was truly no more than a stranger.

When he spoke again, Trey’s voice was kind. “I think you both need a change of atmosphere. You’ll come to the barn?”

Hannah nodded, ignoring the mingled emotions of fear and anticipation that made her tummy twist. “I’ll be there.”

Trey smiled, wide and bright, like a reward for her bravery. This time, Hannah couldn’t help but smile back.

She spent most of the day in the fields and came home hot and worried about the lack of rain. Thoughts of lost crops and the coming winter with no money to buy feed for the livestock or food for the table kept her occupied till after supper, when she looked out the window over the kitchen sink and saw that dusk had crept up and caught her unaware.

The boys had already said good night, turning in early in order to be up before the sun for milking and other chores. David hadn’t appeared at the supper table. Was he skipping meals and starving himself on purpose? Trying to make a point or punish her somehow? She didn’t know him well, but that seemed outside the shape of his character.

Maybe he dreaded their next encounter as much as she did. Either way, she had no desire to keep her promise to Trey. But keep it she

Hard Harvest

would, damn her own stubborn pride to hell and back again.

Forty-five minutes later, with the dust and grime of the day washed from her skin and a few gulps of her grandpa's hooch sloshing in her belly, she stepped barefoot into the barn. The full skirt of mother's blue linen dress swished about her knees, and the evening breeze touched her in new and ticklish places. Was it the liquor's influence that made her ditch her underwear at the last second? Probably. She tried not to regret it now, as she stood at the bottom of the ladder and stared up into the dimly lit loft. When she licked her lips, she tasted whiskey and the cherry-flavored lip balm she'd dug from the pocket of an old denim jacket.

"Hannah?"

At the sound of Trey's voice, she gripped the ladder's rungs and hauled herself up. Her heart pounded to the beat of the butterfly wings in her stomach, but she kept climbing till she could poke her head and shoulders through the hole in the loft floor.

David sat on the edge of his cot with his hands clasped between his knees and his face averted. Trey stood just outside the lantern's glow, watching them both. Neither man smiled, or greeted her, or offered her a hand. The eerie quiet dropped like a weight on her shoulders.

She took a breath. The liquid heat of the whiskey had worked its way into the muscles of her legs and back, loosening and warming her even as it gave her the courage to push herself up and into the loft.

She faced down the men with her hands on her hips and the scent of ripe hay in her head. "Well, you've got me here. I hope it was worth the trouble."

Now Trey smiled, but Hannah was more interested in the way David's gaze traveled from her dust-covered toes to the hem of her dress, then to the tops of her breasts curving above the square neckline. When his eyes finally made it to her face, she blurted the first thing that came to mind: "Are you sure about this, David? No second thoughts?"

His eyes widened behind his glasses, and his throat made a dry,

Hard Harvest

clicking sound when he swallowed. He looked away before he spoke. "Yes, I'm sure."

"All right, then." Trey stepped out of the shadows. He gestured toward the straight-backed chair that stood a few feet from David's cot. "Have a seat, Hannah."

Hannah hesitated, ready to argue. Part of her enjoyed Trey's highhanded ways, the part that had thrilled at giving up momentary control to his hands and mouth. But she was still the boss in her own barn, on her own land.

"Hannah?"

"I'm thinking about it."

Trey crossed his arms over his chest, the threat of a smirk twitching in the corners of his mouth. A few seconds passed. In the end, curiosity won out over pigheaded pride. She crossed the creaking floorboards to the chair and sat.

Trey turned toward David. "Last night, we gave you a free show in the kitchen. Now it's Hannah's turn to watch."

David blinked at him, but didn't answer.

"Stand up." Trey's tone was kind, but he looked at David with an expression of patient, practiced determination on his face that made Hannah wonder if this wasn't his first rodeo. How many other couples had Trey "helped" this way?

The cot's rusty springs creaked as David got to his feet. Trey approached him, and David held his ground. Hannah watched as emotions flickered across his face like light playing over still water. When the two men were mere inches apart, she compared them, Trey's compacted muscles of a prizefighter and David's sleek form of a long-distance swimmer.

"Remember what I told you last night?" Trey asked, his voice pitched just loud enough for Hannah to hear. "Remember when I said you're a man like any other, with a man's heart, mind and body?"

David jerked his head in something like a nod.

Hard Harvest

Trey smiled and used the tip of his finger to touch David's forehead. "You just need to find the connection between here," he said and used the same finger to poke at David's chest, "and here. Not to mention here." He let his hand drop so it brushed the region below David's belt for a bare instant. "Take off your clothes."

"What? No!" David looked horrified.

"You agreed to let me help you."

David cleared his throat. "Yes, but you didn't say anything about nudity."

"I think it was implied." Trey leaned in closer, trapping David between himself and the cot. The silence stretched taut, broken only by the restless shift of the cows abiding beneath them. This was the critical moment, the make-or-break instant.

Hannah gripped the seat of the chair. "David, please."

David flinched. His eyes flashed to hers. Whatever he saw in her face made his own expression harden to a grim, pained resolve. When he spoke, he addressed only Trey. "Would you step back and give me some room, please?"

It took him nearly a minute to fumble out of his shirt, boots, socks and trousers. At the end of it, he stood in nothing but his shorts and glasses.

"Those, too." Trey indicated both underwear and eyewear.

David glared, but removed the glasses and shorts and tossed them onto the cot. All at once, Hannah found it impossible to look at her own husband. How stupid was that? Instead she stared at Trey, watching as his gaze wandered over David's body.

"See how beautiful he is, Hannah? All man. Every inch of him."

Hannah let herself glance at David in time to see him lift his chin and square his shoulders in defiance, like a stag brought to bay. Her breath caught in her throat. Trey was right. He was beautiful, his skin the color of winter-pale wheat, his hair like autumn corn, and his eyes the perfect shade of summer grass.

Still, she found she couldn't make her eyes travel lower than the firm

Hard Harvest

muscles bracketing David's navel, which was even more ridiculous. She'd seen his privates before, sort of. In silhouette, as he unbuttoned his trousers before she lifted her nightgown.

This was different, yes, but she was hardly an ignorant, blushing virgin. She'd grown up on a farm, for gravy's sake, where sex was an everyday event. And he was her *husband*.

On the other hand, David had barely managed to look her in the face since she'd climbed up to the loft.

What a pair they made. Whatever kind of help Trey was offering, they were in no shape to turn it down.

Trey reached out and pressed a hand against David's chest. "His heart is pounding, fast and strong. He's strong all over—his body, his mind and his will. There's a resilience in him, like a tree that bends but doesn't break."

David scowled. "You know I can hear you, right? I'm standing right here. Kind of hard to miss, what with all the *nudity*."

Hannah bit her lip to repress a grin. The good doctor had a sense of humor. How had she missed it? Biting and sarcastic, true, but she could live with that.

She watched as Trey slid his hand from to David's chest to his shoulder and pulled him forward a shuffling step or two. Then Trey moved to stand between David and the cot. David shuddered, his muscles jerking like the pelt of a startled animal, and Hannah knew Trey had pressed himself all along the length of David's naked body.

David kept on avoiding her gaze, as if he were ashamed. It made her want to slap the stupid right out of his handsome head. They *needed* this. Without it, their marriage would fail, disappear, be made null and void by some faceless Commission drone who didn't know and didn't care what they might mean to each other if only David would loosen up and give them half a chance.

Trey ran his large, tanned hands over David's shoulders and down his arms. "Now I'm going to touch you, and Hannah's going to watch."

Hard Harvest

Hannah felt the words like a punch to her gut. She made a soft sound, something between a moan and a whimper, and David's eyes locked on her face as if he'd only just noticed her sitting there. She stared at him and licked her lips.

Trey's hands moved again, and she followed their progress as they drifted down to David's hips. The circle of light cast by lantern threw everything into sharp relief, and she beheld her husband in all his glory for the first time. A remnant from the biblical Song of Solomon wandered through her head. *As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.*

For all his obvious agitation, David was aroused. The sight of him made Hannah press her knees together and shift on the hard surface of the chair.

"Do you touch yourself when you're alone, David?" Trey's question was almost clinical. Except for the gritty pitch of his voice, he might've been another scientist taking notes on a laboratory subject.

David cleared his throat again, never looking away from Hannah's face. "That's a stupid question. Everybody does."

"Yes," Trey agreed, "everybody does. But I want to know how *you* touch yourself." He wrapped his big hand around David's erection, fisting him tight. David's body stiffened as if in protest, and he made a choked noise, but he didn't fight Trey's grip. Hannah watched, fascinated, as another man caressed her husband in the way she'd never had the courage to try.

"Hannah likes this," Trey whispered down the tight column of David's neck. "Her breaths are shallow. Her cheeks are pink and her eyes are dilated, all the fully documented signs of arousal." He directed his dark gaze at Hannah. "Show him. He needs to see how much you want him."

To Hannah, it seemed as if her hands moved to the hem of her skirt without her knowledge or permission. All she knew was weight of David's gaze on her and the sound of Trey's voice coaxing her to give up

Hard Harvest

her inhibitions. The breeze from the open haymow was cool on her thighs and belly as she lifted her skirt.

Trey laughed, a deep, rough sound that buzzed to her marrow. “You two are full of surprises.”

Hannah could only imagine he meant her lack of underwear. She was too busy watching David’s reaction, the flush that traveled from his face to redden his neck and chest, and the way his breathing quickened. The weight of his attention felt heavy on her skin and molten in that empty place between her legs.

Her eyes locked on David’s, she let her fingertips trail over the flesh of her inner thigh. The sensation made her tremble. David gave an answering shudder she could see from six feet away.

“Not yet,” Trey murmured and released David from his grip. “We’re just getting started.”

Hard Harvest: Chapter Six

David ached. The strain of maintaining his composure had tied the muscles of his neck and back into knots. His chest had grown too tight to contain the quick heave of his lungs, and his cock hung heavy and hard between his braced legs, bobbing with every tortured breath. Trey's grip had burned like a brand, but the lack of his touch was almost worse, leaving David exposed to Hannah's frank stare.

When she lifted her skirt, his mouth went dry. Even without his glasses, he found the curves of her thighs and abdomen and the shadowed vee between her legs mesmerizing. When she dragged her fingers along the inside of her thigh, his hands began to shake. He closed them into fists.

Something was about to change. He felt it coming, sensed it looming over him, casting a shadow that stretched the whole length of his life. He wouldn't be the same afterwards. *Nothing* would be the same.

"Come over here and touch him, Hannah." Trey's voice vibrated the air around David's face. His body felt warm and solid against David's back, like he belonged there, directing them like living pieces on a chessboard. What special training had the Commission provided to make this stranger so good at his job?

Hannah let the hem of her dress drop, rose from the chair and approached them. As she came into sharper focus, David could see how the blue linen matched her eyes, and the glow from the lantern lit the ends of her curls till they sparked in the shadows. The expression on her face, so open and hungry, with a flush darkening her cheeks like a storm-front moving over the plains. He couldn't look away. Couldn't even blink.

"Close your eyes," Trey murmured, as if he'd read David's mind and felt compelled to be contrary.

Hard Harvest

“No, I—”

“Shh, trust me, David. Close your eyes and feel.”

Now Hannah stood before him, her face filled with expectation and the silent plea to do as Trey asked. When had she become so invested in making this work between them? Had she cared all along? Was he really that blind? And when did what she wanted become all that mattered?

David sighed and closed his eyes. Trey shifted against his back, pressing hard against the length of him and anchoring him in place. The next few minutes passed in a rushing flood of heat punctuated by needle-sharp darts of pleasure. David struggled to guess whose hands stroked him, so intimate and entitled. Which teeth nipped at his neck, what tongue flicked over his tightened nipples? Were those Trey’s fingers pressing at his hip? Hannah’s soft mouth nuzzling the base of his throat?

A dense cloud of energy enclosed the three of them, sparking with rogue electrons and making David’s nerve-endings sizzle and pop with sensations he couldn’t process. Hannah’s scent filled his head with cinnamon and salt, sweet hay, and clean, red earth. The urge to break free and fall on her like a feral animal grew, pulsing in his brain and elsewhere. To keep from giving into it, he clenched his jaw and held perfectly still.

Hannah laughed, warm and low. “You’d better relax before you bust something we might need later.”

But he couldn’t. Didn’t they see? He *couldn’t* let go of his control. What if, once he started, he wasn’t able to stop? What if she saw how much he felt—how *intensely* he felt—and hated him for it? What if he hurt her?

Without warning, they abandoned him. The shock of cool air where their bodies had pressed against his made him stagger forward. He opened his eyes and blinked against the glare of the lantern.

Hannah lay sprawled on the floor at his feet. Trey knelt behind her, supporting her upper body. He reached down and hooked the hem of her

Hard Harvest

skirt with a crooked finger. As he pulled the fabric back, Hannah bent her knees and planted her feet on the floor, spread wide like an offering, like temptation painted in splashes of cream and gold and dusky rose.

“Do want me to show you how to touch her?” Trey asked. His hand lingered on her thigh, so large and tan in contrast to her pale skin. It sounded less like a challenge or a taunt than a genuine question, as if maybe Trey expected David to break and lunge at Hannah and mount her like a stallion in rut with no finesse or care for her pleasure.

David didn't bother being offended. Trey couldn't know how many long nights he'd spent dreaming of this very thing, Hannah under his hands and against his mouth, taking all he had to give. At the thought, a low noise erupted from his throat, part explanation, part warning.

Trey nodded, a smile playing about the corners of his mouth, seemingly satisfied with his answer.

David dropped to his knees and crawled the few feet to where Hannah lay. His shoulders grazed the flesh of her inner thighs, just above her knees. He leaned in till he could feel the heat of her face. As much as his cock ached, his mouth watered more.

“David.” She breathed his name like a prayer. He spared her a single glance, long enough to note the shape of her lips around each panting breath and how the black of her pupils had nearly swallowed the soft, pretty blue of her eyes.

There was no formula for this. No scripted set of rules or protocols, or even a textbook chapter to memorize. The scholarly part of him bemoaned the lack of a logical, step-by-step procedure toward a specified goal. The bestial part licked its lips, bent its head and pressed its mouth to where she was hot, wet and waiting.

At first taste, she was both sweet and sour, like lemon tea with a healthy dose of honey. A deeper sampling made salt and musk burst on his tongue. He pulled back to savor it and circled her opening with his finger, collecting moisture and spreading it over the flushed and swollen skin. All of her, so exposed, hot and growing hotter.

Hard Harvest

When he paused to glance at her again, the expression on her face caught him by surprise. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't this mix of soft amazement and scorching lust. And affection? For him?

Something elemental loosened in his chest, like a time-weathered knot of roots giving way. The relief felt almost painful in its intensity, the lifting of a burden he didn't know he carried. To hide his confusion, he bent again, spread Hannah open and used the tip of his tongue to draw chemical equations and geometric patterns around her clitoris till she cursed him and bucked her hips in obvious frustration. Then, with a smile he couldn't quite contain, he pushed her down with his forearm across her pelvis and went to work with the flat of his tongue.

She whimpered, and he looked to see Trey's hands beneath the bodice of the dress, his fingers busy on her nipples. Even as Trey touched her, his eyes were on David, watching his every move. David pressed his face deeper, slid his tongue into Hannah and felt her melt down his chin.

He worked his tongue inside her, and she scrawled her nails across the back of his neck, leaving behind the biting sting of bonfire sparks on exposed skin. When she came, it was with the sharp cry of a cornered animal. She moved beneath the weight of his arm in tight, hard jerks. As her orgasm faded, her pulse beat against his tongue till he felt it in his head, his belly, and the painful fullness of his cock.

Trey murmured something, and Hannah shifted. David looked up to see the other man unzipping her dress, pushing it off her shoulders and down her arms to bunch at her waist. David stared, feeling his brain's higher functions shut down, one by one, at the sight of her pink, swollen nipples. He took the hem of her skirt between his hands and yanked hard. The thin fabric gave easily, tearing up the center. He yanked again. The bodice ripped in two, and Hannah lay naked on the loft floor.

David caught Trey's eye. The other man nodded, not giving permission as much as acknowledgment. Hannah's eyes were clenched shut, her brows drawn down in a scowl of deep concentration. A hectic, post-climactic flush stained her cheeks. David hooked his arm beneath

Hard Harvest

her left knee and lifted, gripping his pounding cock in his other hand.

“Hannah, can I? Is it all right?”

He hadn't been this nervous since the first time, in her maidenly bedroom with her younger brothers only a floor away. He'd tried to be tender—a gentleman and a gentle *man*—but he'd hurt her and made her bleed. Only a little, and she'd brushed off his apologies with a careless shrug, but he knew she hadn't enjoyed a moment of their mating.

Since then, he'd tried only to be quick and clean, polite and considerate, and in perfect control of himself at all times. Respectful. Decent in an indecent situation. She deserved at least that.

Now, though, she was asking for something else. If Trey was right—and nothing David had seen or heard tonight proved the other man wrong—Hannah wanted something more than decency, respect, or even consideration. What had Trey said?

“She needs someone else to take charge once in a while.”

All at once it rose up, the weeks of living together and yet apart, of watching her go about her endless chores with her slight shoulders and stubborn jaw set against the world, of touching her as little as possible when they coupled no matter how he wished he could muss her hair and plunder her body. Now it rose up and took David by the throat with iron claws.

Enough.

He didn't wait for an answer to his plea for consent. With a dip and roll of his hips, he took possession of his wife and let go of his precious control.

Hannah tipped her head back against the loft floor and let David's first thrust push a low moan from her throat. He went deep, his thick shaft stretching her past the point of comfort. She reveled in it—gloried in the bite and burn. She let her hands wander over the contracting muscles in his arms and shoulders. Her palms came back slick with his sweat. Her mouth watered for a taste of his skin.

Hard Harvest

Somewhere nearby, Trey's knees made a shuffling sound as he moved along the floorboards. She turned her head and found him at her side, close enough to touch, so she grabbed his hand.

His face was flushed beneath his tan, and his eyes looked hungry, starved, in fact. He leaned over her and murmured, "Tell us what you need, Hannah."

She opened her mouth, but couldn't find the words to explain that she already had all she needed at her fingertips and between the angled spread of her thighs. Instead, she tugged his left hand forward and placed it firmly on her breast. The heat of his fingertips sunk into her flesh and coiled through her center to meet David's next slow, deep thrust.

David held still inside her, his muscles bunched beneath her hand and his gaze pinned somewhere above her head. She reached up and raked her nails through the ruffled crop of his hair till they caught at the back of his neck.

"Let me see you, David. Look at me."

His eyes made her heart stumble, the irises as green as she'd ever seen them, luminous rings around huge, black pupils. Focused so sharply, taking everything in. She licked her lips, and he followed the tracing of her tongue as if mesmerized.

Trey groaned and shifted restlessly on his knees. His jeans were stretched tight over a bulge that appeared downright agonizing. "The two of you together are enough to make a man forget his manners."

Over the pulse of blood in her ears Hannah heard the edge of desperation in his voice. She tapped a fingertip against David's neck and quirked an eyebrow at him, curious to see if he'd read her meaning. His answering nod warmed some undiscovered region inside the cage of her ribs.

She slanted a grin at Trey. "My mama always said manners are for those who can afford 'em. Just how wealthy are you feeling tonight, Trey?"

He answered her grin with one of his own. "Flat, stony broke, as a

Hard Harvest

matter of fact.”

Hannah closed her eyes and listened as Trey’s belt-buckle fell undone with a clank. The whisper of buttons pulling free came next, and then a raw grunt that could only mean her hired help had taken himself in hand. Heat radiated from his body, only inches away. Without opening her eyes, she dragged his fingers from her breast to her mouth and sucked them inside.

David and Trey growled in unison, like a pair of beasts sighting prey at the same instant. Hannah opened her eyes in time to witness the scorching look that passed between the two men—competitive, yes, but something more, as well.

David’s palm skimmed the outer curve of her thigh. He lifted it higher, folding her nearly in two, then dug in with his knees and drove upward in a staccato rhythm that made her clench around him. Hannah bit her nails into his shoulder and sucked harder at Trey’s fingers, playing her tongue over the calluses at their tips. Trey cursed, and Hannah watched the links of his tattoo writhe and twist with the shift of the muscles in his arm. They moved together, the three of them, vibrating the air around them with their grunts and cries.

David stilled again. His brow lowered and his eyes squeezed shut in an expression of pained determination. Hannah felt him jerk inside her, pounding out a steady beat in the drum-like tightness of her body. She canted her hips upward and ground against him in a slow circle that set off long, shuddery spasms in the muscles of his back. He drew in a breath, loud and sharp, and began to ride her as if he meant to drive her through the loft floor and down to the barn below.

The deep, stabbing strokes teased out a hurt kind of pleasure, like the bruise left behind by a too-passionate kiss. Hannah held herself taut beneath the onslaught and nipped at Trey’s fingers till he pulled them from her mouth and slid them into her hair. She arched into David’s thrusts, chasing the achy, wild feeling that built along her spine and in her belly, feeling it rise and twist back on itself. When it burst, it shot

Hard Harvest

beads of liquid pleasure to every corner of her body, melting in her crevices like honey in the comb.

The aftershocks forced moans from her chest with David's every solid thrust. Trey's hand tightened in her hair, pulling her head back against the floor. As if from a far, foggy distance she heard him cry out and felt the streaks of wet heat across her breasts.

An instant later, David's body tightened and froze. He came apart in silent fits and shuddering starts, his hot spill warming her again from the inside out. Without a word, he buried his face in the curve of her neck and breathed humid air on her skin.

Sweat dripped from his hair and rolled off her shoulder. Next to her, Trey panted as if he'd sprinted a mile and back. He leaned forward, gave David's shoulder a squeeze and pressed his lips to Hannah's forehead as if he were bestowing a blessing. Then he sprawled backwards into the shadows, his head hitting the edge of David's cot with a thump. He closed his eyes, and Hannah realized he was trying to give them some privacy.

She nudged David and felt him drag along her body's every nerve ending, inside and out. She turned to face him as he lifted his head, and their mouths brushed together in a soft, wet caress. The kiss felt new and familiar all at once, like something she'd searched the whole world to find only to discover biding its time in her own back pocket.

Hannah nuzzled his cheek and whispered, "I think I've got splinters in my butt."

David's laughter rang in the rafters. He flashed a genuine smile, the first one Hannah had ever seen on her husband's face. Looking at it was like falling face-first into the summer sun.

"What's so funny?" Trey sounded more sleepy than curious.

David laughed again, and Hannah giggled with him. Though Trey looked confused, he joined in with a rumbling chuckle as the night closed around them, cradling them in its dark, gentle hand.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Seven

“Would you like to see my lab?”

While she considered David’s question, Hannah readjusted the blanket she wore like the misbegotten cross between a too-short toga and a rain poncho. She scratched at what looked like a patch of dried saliva on her shoulder. “Do you want me to see it?”

David finished tying his boots and rose from the edge of the cot. “It’s your barn.”

They had spent the night camped out on the on the loft floor like children. David had wrapped her in the blanket while Trey gathered a few armloads of loose hay and fashioned a pallet for the three of them. They lay together and counted shooting stars through the open wall of the haymow. The last thing Hannah remembered was the feel of David’s shoulder against her temple and Trey’s hand, firm and warm, on her arm.

Now the sun was up in a milk-white sky that promised a change in the weather. Trey had disappeared to who-knew-where, and David was refusing to meet her eyes. He’d drawn into himself again, his face a beautiful mask behind his glasses. If not for the fingerprint-shaped bruises he’d left on her thighs and hips, Hannah might’ve thought the previous night’s lovemaking just another sweaty, frustrated dream.

And now this invitation to see his lab—unexpected, and not altogether welcome. She hadn’t ventured near the barn’s cellar since the day she’d cleared out the last of her family’s belongings to make way for David’s equipment and supplies. But she couldn’t bring herself to reject the offer.

“We’ll have to be quick. Trey and I have two acres of timothy left to cut, and if it rains, we’re in trouble. You can’t harvest—”

“Wet hay.” David moved to the top of the ladder, glancing at her as he went. “Don’t look so surprised. I was trained to pay attention to details.”

Shocked into silence, Hannah watched him descend through the

Hard Harvest

opening in the loft floor. She followed a few seconds later and tried to ignore the phantom sensation of her husband's gaze on the backs of her bare thighs.

The concrete steps to the barn's cellar felt gritty against the soles of her feet. David flicked the light switch at the bottom and the fluorescent bulbs came alive, bathing the large, low-ceilinged room in cool light. Spread out before her were two stainless steel counters. The first was lined with glass beakers, test tubes, microscopes and other equipment Hannah couldn't identify at first glance. The second plainly served as David's desk. His computer blinked to life as they entered the room and gave a greeting in an oddly warm electronic voice. Next to it stood a stack of papers covered in typewritten notes.

David's breath on the exposed skin of her shoulder made her jump. "I've been wondering what used to be down here."

Hannah let out a sigh. She pointed at empty shelves in the far corner. "That's where Mama used to keep the beans and corn and pickles she put up in jars at the end of every summer." She gestured at the opposite wall. "And over there, Daddy hung his butchering knives."

"He slaughtered his own meat?"

Hannah nodded. "I asked him once why he spent so much time at the whetstone. He said, 'A sharp knife is a kind knife.' He believed you should treat your livestock with kindness and respect whenever you could, even when butchering them. He said it kept you square with the universe."

She half-expected David to laugh. When he didn't, she turned to look at him and found him staring at her with something unreadable in his eyes. "He sounds like a wise man."

For some reason, this sentiment—which was only the simple truth—brought a lump to her throat. "Sometimes I wonder what he'd say if he knew I buy our meat and canned goods at the farmer's market in Custer County."

David shrugged. "You already work sixteen hours a day, Hannah."

Hard Harvest

He'd understand."

Hannah swallowed thickly and shook her head to clear it. "What about your parents? Are they alive?"

She knew it was unlikely. Almost everyone over the age of forty-five had been wiped out in the last round of bio-warfare to sweep through the Eastern Sector. Only the families of the highest-ranking government officials and most valuable Commission scientists had been permitted to wait out the synthetic plagues inside the fortress of the Republic's capital city. Still, it occurred to her that she'd never asked about his kin, not even once in all these months, and she felt ashamed.

David had crossed the room to fiddle with a collection of test tubes in steel caddy. When he looked up to meet her gaze, his glasses caught the glare of the overhead lights. "I never knew my parents."

"Brothers?" she asked, a sudden suspicion taking shape in her mind. "Sisters? Aunts, uncles, cousins?"

David was saved the trouble of answering by the appearance of Trey at the lab's doorway. "Isaac says he can't keep Abe away from the bacon much longer, so if you want breakfast—"

"We do," David interrupted and moved toward Hannah and Trey. "I understand we've got two acres of timothy to conquer today. Sounds like we'll need the energy."

He brushed past Trey and headed up the steps, leaving Hannah to stare after him.

"Like I said," Trey whispered as they followed David across the yard to the back porch, "you two are full of surprises."

Hannah set the last clean dinner plate on the stack in the cupboard and dried her hands on the dishtowel she'd tucked into the waistband of her jeans. The savory scent of the chicken Abe and Isaac had killed, plucked and roasted hung in the heavy, damp air around her.

It had been a good day. The acres of timothy had gone down easily under the hard swing of Trey's scythe, and David proved himself a quick

Hard Harvest

study in the art of running the ancient, balky hay-baler. Hannah recalled the way the fleeting rays of sunlight had caught the glints of gold in his hair, and how the line of Trey's throat looked as he tilted his head back to drink from their shared thermos of lemonade. The memory was almost enough to make her look forward to next month's corn harvest.

Now the sky was darkening, a good hour before the day had any business fading to dusk. She looked out the window at the heat lightning flashing against bruised clouds in the west and thought again of the marks David's fingertips had left on her body, and the scorch of Trey's gaze on her bare skin. Soon it would be time for bed. Could she expect a repeat of last night's encounter? Did she dare suggest it? Lazy heat curled low in her belly, mingling with uncertainty.

She turned from the window to watch as Trey served Abe and Isaac the last of the apple pie and shoed them out to the back porch with instructions to give a shout if it began to rain. David sat with his back to her, his shoulders a taut line beneath his gray t-shirt. No doubt the muscles of his back and neck were sore from the day's labor. Her fingers itched to knead them and feel them loosen under her hands. She cast about for a topic of conversation to distract herself.

"You never finished telling me about your family, David." She pulled out a chair between the two men and took a seat.

David shrugged and didn't quite meet her eyes. "Nothing to tell. Like I said, I never knew them."

The flat tone of his voice made the back of her neck prickle. She was missing something important here. She glanced at Trey, who seemed more interested in scraping the tines of his fork over the surface of the tablecloth in unreadable patterns.

She turned again to David. "Then who raised you?"

"A succession of Commission operatives. I don't think I ever knew their names."

No, she must've misheard him. He didn't mean that. No, he couldn't mean that. "Beg pardon?"

Hard Harvest

He looked at her oddly, as if despite her best efforts her dawning horror showed on her face. “I grew up in a Commission breeding facility just outside the capital.”

A swell of emotion fizzed up like acid from Hannah’s gut. Shock, disbelief, and *anger*. “You mean a *baby farm*?”

“I’ve heard it called that.”

Hannah pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. She wouldn’t shame them both by accusing David of a lie by omission. After all, maybe her husband thought it was none of her business that he’d been raised in one of those horrible places, where children were treated like livestock. Since he was likely going to leave her anyway, maybe he thought it didn’t matter.

She’d be an idiot to show him how much it did matter. How much the idea of his growing up isolated and deprived of love made her want to grab her rifle and go gunning for the bureaucratic fools who’d substituted their own misguided judgment for common sense and simple decency.

It made sense now, David’s infuriating air of detachment. He’d never seen how a family worked. He didn’t know how to make himself at home because he’d never had one.

She squeezed her eyes shut and drew in long breath. When she opened them again, David’s face was fixed in a frown. “Did I say something wrong?”

The note of confusion in his voice defeated her good intentions, and she found herself leaning toward him with her fists clenched at her sides. “I’ve heard about those places. They keep the babies in cages. They never touch them, never hold them or show them affection. It’s barbaric.”

Trey reached across the table to touch her arm. “Hannah.”

“I treat my Bantam hens better than they treat those children. They’re monsters, those people who raised you. Look what they’ve done to you, what they’ve turned you into.” She trailed off, the red haze of rage dissolving and revealing David’s blank, stone-like face.

Hard Harvest

“They’re not monsters, Hannah. They’re just doing their jobs.” He spoke slowly, as if explaining himself to a child. “As for me, I wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for that so-called baby farm. But maybe that would be for the best.”

“What?” Hannah shook her head. “No, that’s not what I—”

“If I disappeared tomorrow, no one would miss me,” David continued, talking over her and looking past her. “The Commission would be out the money they spent to raise and educate me, but I’m expendable. Just another cog in the machine, and there’s plenty more where I came from. They’d send you another husband next year. A better one.”

“Stop it,” Trey said, his voice clear and deep. “That’s enough.”

“You’re right, it is.” The chair scraped against the floor as David stood. He adjusted his glasses and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it. “I apologize for making a scene.”

When he lifted his head, Hannah searched his eyes for anger or wounded pride. All she found was resigned acceptance.

The quiet, controlled slap of the screen door sounded like a period at the end of a too-short sentence.

Hannah glanced at Trey. “That went well, don’t you think?”

He looked back at her with his sad, dark eyes. “Do you want me to go after him?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’d better do it. You won’t always be here to clean up after me.”

“You’re right. I won’t.”

After sending Abe and Isaac to bed, Hannah found David on the path between the house and the barn. He stood with his arms at his sides, staring up at the dusky sky. There was just enough light to make out the unforgiving angle of his jaw. It made her wonder if she was beaten before she even started.

No. She wouldn’t give up so easily. Cowards gave up when the road to harvest got too hard—when the tractor broke down, or the calves died of fever, or the fields dried up and blew away. She was no coward.

Hard Harvest

She was still trying to think of something to say when David spoke. “Think it’ll rain?”

“Hard to tell. Smells like it.”

He cut his eyes at her. The muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched in half a smile. “What does rain smell like?”

“Like snow, only warmer.”

As they stood there, a squadron of bats emerged from the eaves beneath the roof of the house, crisscrossing over their heads in swooping figure-eight patterns. They watched in silence till the last of the winged critters disappeared into the shadows.

Hannah took a breath. “What I said came out wrong and I’m sorry. But I’m more sorry you had to grow up like that.”

David crossed his arms over his chest and bent his head as if there were something on the path between his feet he needed to glare into submission. “I don’t want anyone to feel sorry for me.”

“No, I guess you’ve got that covered all by yourself, don’t you?”

Now he transferred his glare to her, and Hannah gave as good as she got. The stalemate lasted till a coyote let loose with its first lonesome call of the evening. They both looked away toward the horizon.

“Do you think it’ll always be this hard?” David asked. “Between us, I mean?”

“My mama used to say nothing worth having ever comes easy.”

He nodded. His next question came out in a sandpapery whisper. “Do you think she would’ve liked me?”

“She would’ve loved you.” *Like I will, if you ever give me the chance.* The unspoken words hung in the air between them like the vows they’d never taken.

She held out her hand. “Let’s go inside.”

Hannah adjusted the lantern till Trey’s tall, broad shadow stretched along the floor of her bedroom. His hair hung loose on his neck. He’d already shucked his shirt, and the tattoo that wound from his chest over

Hard Harvest

his shoulder and down his arm looked alive in the glow of the flame.

She watched as he kicked off his boots and slid out of his jeans. When he was completely undressed, he beckoned David to his side. The two men stood just a few feet away from where Hannah sat on the edge of the bed, near enough for her to see the flex of tendons in Trey's hand as he gripped David's wrist and the beat of blood just beneath David's jaw, but the men seemed miles away. Too far to touch. Surely too far to lure them away from each other and closer to her.

Trey leaned in and whispered something in David's ear. David's head came up, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. A few moments later, he stood naked as the day he was born.

That made three of them.

She waited for the men to turn to her, but Trey seemed to have other ideas. He murmured again, and David glanced at Hannah before nodding. She watched as Trey's hand traveled up David's arm, across his chest and over the flat acreage of his belly. Jealousy welled up like blood in a pinprick at the sight of another's hands on her husband, but Hannah held her peace.

Only when Trey dropped to his knees with an eerie kind of grace did Hannah make a sound, something between a choked whimper and a cry of protest. He smiled at her, his eyes filled with wicked intent.

"Feel free to join us whenever the spirit moves you." He turned and pressed his lips against David's abdomen.

David's body stiffened. From her angled vantage point, Hannah saw his burgeoning erection twitch and swell. His mouth fell open, and his eyes went lazy and soft as he stared at her over Trey's head.

She watched and wondered about the texture of David's against skin Trey's tongue. The flavor of him. Salty? Musky? Or something altogether different? She closed her eyes and felt the hungry desire grow jagged edges inside her, sawing away at her nerves till she couldn't draw a breath that didn't taste like *want* and *need*.

She rose from the bed to join her husband and their lover. It turned out

Hard Harvest

there wasn't so much space between them after all.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Eight

David thought he must be dreaming.

In his experience, reality didn't include a man like Trey falling to his knees and mouthing at the cut of his hip, or a woman like Hannah crossing the room to press herself against his side. As he slid one hand into Trey's thick hair and planted the other on the curve of Hannah's backside, it occurred to him that reality could go fuck itself.

Trey's eyes shone like chips of obsidian in his tanned face. He stared up at David for a long moment, then dropped his gaze to David's erection and licked his lips. The invitation was too plain to miss.

Hannah hummed low in her throat. "Show me," she whispered. "I want to see."

Trey grunted an assent and used the tip of his tongue to trace small, quick circles on the head of David's cock. He painted a lazy swipe along the thick vein at the underside. David watched it all, noting every detail of his body's response as if it were happening to someone else.

Only when Hannah set her teeth in his shoulder did he wake from his trance. As Trey opened his mouth and eased David inside, she bit down hard, sending a flare of pain down his arm. David tightened his fingers in Trey's hair, reveling in the way it felt to take back a measure of control. He clenched his jaw and fought the urge to shove himself down other man's throat.

"You've done this before," he muttered, not intending for the words to sound like an accusation, as if Trey's past encounters with other men were any of his business.

Trey pulled off his cock with an obscene-sounding pop. "Guilty as charged. Now shut up and let yourself benefit from my vast carnal experience."

He winked at Hannah, and her answering laughter spun a web of

Hard Harvest

shivers down David's neck and across his back.

Trey closed his mouth over David again. This time, he set a rhythm that matched the drumbeat of David's heart, in and out, up and down, fast and faster. Urgent pleasure curled like a fist around the base of David's spine till he yanked at Trey's hair in warning.

Trey released him and sat back on his heels. "Shall we move this to the bed?"

David nodded. His cock bobbed against his stomach, leaving a wet smear just beneath his navel. He untangled his fingers from Trey's hair. Trey stood, his erection hanging heavy between his thighs. David tried not to stare.

Hannah unfolded herself from the cradle of his arm. "Sorry about the bed. It's kind of small."

David snorted. "I've been sleeping on a cot, and Trey's been bunking ten feet from a litter of pigs. We'll make do."

Without giving another thought to the logistics of three grown adults on a bed built for two, David crawled to the center of the mattress and kneeled there. Trey slipped in behind him, his hands warm and rough on David's shoulders. Hannah scrambled across the coverlet to face them both. Her cheeks were flushed a deep, cherry red and her eyes glowed.

"How do you want to do this?" David asked, intending the question for both Trey and Hannah. All at once, he felt uncertain. Somehow the damp heat of Trey's body against his back felt even more intimate than the man's mouth on his cock. And while he knew instinctively Trey would do nothing he didn't want, David wasn't so sure about himself. What if he lost Hannah's respect? Or even his own?

Hannah reached out and ran the tip of one finger up the length of his erection, making it twitch. "You're thinking too much again." She looked over David's shoulder at Trey, her expression a blend of exasperated fondness and mischief. "We must not be doing this right."

Before David could defend himself, she bent and closed her lips over him just as Trey had done. David groaned, the wildfire flash of pleasure

Hard Harvest

making him bunch his fists in the coverlet on either side of their bodies. Trey's hands on his hips kept him from thrusting reflexively as Hannah tasted him with kitten-like licks and swirls of her tongue. The sensation was maddening—too much and not nearly enough—and David groaned again, his nerve endings firing in a cascade of sparks.

Hannah straightened and smiled, her lips now as red as her cheeks. "I thought that might do the trick."

She pivoted on her knees and shimmied backward, spreading her legs to straddle him, canting her hips and bracing her hands on his thighs. Again she enveloped him, sinking down on his cock with a shuddery sigh. Behind him, Trey shifted. His erection bumped against the small of David's back.

Hannah leaned against David's chest and dropped her head on his shoulder. Trey met her halfway. David shifted, craning his neck to watch their kiss. Trey outlined the shape of her mouth with his tongue, and David's cock jerked inside her. The noise she made sounded halfway between a whimper and a moan.

Trey stroked David's sides, his fingertips slipping in the sweat and catching in the notches above his hips. When he whispered in David's ear, his words sounded less like an order and more like a plea. "Tell me what she feels like."

David stalled for time by nuzzling the back of Hannah's neck. When he spoke, his words gouged his throat. As he was learning, the truth often came studded with thorns.

"She's hot and wet, but that goes without saying. So sweet, like raw sugar, like the best thing you ever tasted or heard or saw. But mostly," he murmured, "she feels like mine."

Behind him, Trey growled, "Yes, yours." In the timbre of his voice, David heard both triumph and a note of envy.

Trey pressed his body closer till David could feel the thud of the other man's heart and the twitch and roll of his muscles. His breath was like steam against David's temple. David turned his head and caught Trey's

Hard Harvest

lower lip between his teeth, sucking his startled grunt right out of his mouth.

Hannah twisted her neck to watch them. As their kiss deepened, she rocked her hips in tight, hard jerks.

David broke away from Trey and lifted his hands to Hannah's breasts. Her nipples were diamond points against his palms. As her rocking became more frantic, her breathing disintegrated to ragged panting. She tensed, stretching up in a long, tortured line. A moment later she burst around him like the uncoiling of a spring. Her guttural moans made David shudder. He felt an answering tremble in the body pressed against his back.

Deep inside Hannah, David's cock pulsed to the double-time beat of his heart. He steadied himself with harsh gulps of air. Hannah continued to move, grinding herself in slow circles against him, plainly asking for more. David gripped her waist and lifted till his cock barely breached her. He held her there for a few long seconds. The twinges in his arms and back and shoulders reminded him of the hard day's work he'd done.

He let her drop. The smack of skin against skin echoed off the walls as he thrust deep. Hannah made a hiccupping noise and used her fingernails to score the flesh of his thighs.

"Again," she whispered. "Don't you dare be gentle."

Trey reached around David and took hold of Hannah's hips. They found a rhythm, the three of them, and what had been a jerky, awkward effort became the gliding motion of a well-designed machine. With each quick rise and hard fall, David felt the slide of Trey's chest and the heat of the other man's cock at his back.

Hannah whimpered, a helpless sound that struck a chord at David's core. He felt her strive for the edge of another climax. He lifted her higher, shoved her down harder, and heard her teeth click together with the force of their coupling. The jump-flutter of her inner muscles drove him half-mad. Against his chest, her skin burned like a tin roof in the sun.

Hard Harvest

Trey slid his hand from her hip to where her body met David's. The shock of his touch made both of them falter and fall out of rhythm. He traced her opening around the base of David's cock, then pressed tight against Hannah's swollen flesh and rubbed in relentless circles. She let her head fall back, bruising David's collarbone, and cut loose with a broken, keening wail.

David reached up and slipped two fingers into her mouth to stifle her cries. When she came, she bit down hard enough to draw blood, her body jerking like a live wire on a patch of wet ground.

This time, she slumped limp and easy against him, her breath a wheezy whine in the back of her throat. David stroked her hair to soothe her. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head and belly and cock. Trey held still at David's back, waiting, with only the finest tremor in his hands where they rested on David's thighs.

After a minute, Hannah straightened and fell forward onto the mattress. She laid her cheek on the coverlet and braced herself on her elbows, never breaking the connection between them. David saw her lips move, but couldn't hear what she said above the rush of blood in his ears.

"Go," Trey whispered, and this time it *did* sound like an order. David found he didn't much care.

He drove into her, greedy for the chance to take her at his own pace. Hannah tightened down on him, clenching around him like a fist. The answering spike of pleasure was enough to punch the breath from his lungs. He gulped for air like a man breaking the surface of the ocean and let go with a shout. This was release as he'd never known it—not alone on his cot with the image of Hannah scorching his squeezed-shut eyelids, and not in any hormone-fueled fantasy of his lonely youth.

A single word echoed in his head. In another moment, it slipped past his lips on a sigh. "Mine."

Behind him, the drag and catch of Trey's damp skin felt like dying sparks shooting down David's spine. Trey's hands closed like vises on

Hard Harvest

David's hips. His forehead burned like a brand at his shoulder. He rutted against David's back, and when he came, he muffled his cry in the curve of David's neck.

Thunder rumbled in the far distance, fading. David steadied himself and listened to the quiet.

Trey was the first to speak. "Looks like that storm's going to miss us, after all."

He used his hand to swipe at the remains of his passion left behind on David's flank. Then he pulled away and slid off the bed. David shivered at the loss of contact.

Beneath him, Hannah groaned. "Better luck next time, I guess."

She wriggled off her knees and onto her belly. David reached out to stroke her thigh and let his hand hover, unsure if the touch would be welcome. When Trey made a sudden return, the bounce of the mattress dropped David's palm on Hannah's backside with a smack.

"Hey!"

"Sorry." He felt the tips of his ears grow hot and grinned at her anyway.

They shifted around till Hannah lay sandwiched between David and Trey. Trey turned down the lamp, and the shadows grew murky around them. Hannah rested her head against David's shoulder. David yawned, not bothering to cover his mouth. Above their heads, the curtains bowed like sails in the warm wind.

"When I was a kid, I wanted to stay up all night long and hunt for June bugs and fireflies and glowing, green moths," Hannah began, her voice drowsy and soft. "Mama told me there'd be plenty of time for that later, when I had a life of my own and could make up the sleep during the day. But the only time I see the other side of midnight is when one of the cows is calving."

"Not much time to hunt fireflies in the middle of that," Trey murmured. "I guess your mother didn't think you'd be a farmer."

Hannah sighed and shook her head. Her curls tickled against David's

Hard Harvest

shoulder. “She just didn’t know I’d be doing it all alone.”

David held himself still. To him, Hannah’s words sounded like a code he couldn’t break, with some vital message hidden in her pauses and breaths. To his surprise, he found himself wanting to read that message. He wanted to hear every secret thought in Hannah’s head. The desire to know her, to *really* know her, had caught him when he wasn’t looking, its roots burrowing into the dirt of his soul and wrapping around his heart. The realization left him feeling gutted.

“And what about you, David?” Trey whispered. “What would you do differently if you weren’t alone?”

“I don’t know.”

Trey turned on his side. David imagined the other man’s eyes burning twin holes into his profile.

“You’ve been trying to save the world since you were a kid. That’s quite a burden to carry all by yourself. Aren’t you tired?”

Reluctantly, David nodded. “Yes.” He could hear the weariness rise to the surface in his voice. He’d been bone-tired a long, long time. It had become like a sickness in him, or maybe a wound, and now Trey was picking at the scab. “Yes, I’m tired. I’m exhausted.”

Trey reached across Hannah and touched David’s shoulder. “But you’re not alone anymore, neither of you. And you never have to be alone again.”

They lay there in the hush of the night, listening to the thunder grow faint and disappear. After a while, long after David had believed her to be asleep, Hannah wriggled between the two men, flipped over onto her belly and muttered, “If either of you boys drools on me again, we’re going to have words.”

David snapped awake sometime after midnight. To his right, Hannah lay curled against Trey’s side, her face buried in the other man’s shoulder.

He slid out of bed, found his glasses, pulled on his clothes in silence

Hard Harvest

and tucked his socks and boots under his arm on his way out of the room. The stairs didn't creak under his weight. The kitchen floor felt cool and sticky beneath his feet. He took care to close the screen door behind him without a sound.

The cloudless sky stretched out in layered brushstrokes of indigo and charcoal, stars strewn like handfuls of salt. Trey's prediction had been correct. There would be no rain tonight. David sat at the bottom of the porch steps to put on his socks and boots. He let out the breath he'd been holding since he awoke.

It was too much—the loss of his self-control, the mind-bending sex that stirred up all these overwhelming *feelings*, but mostly his sudden possessive urges toward Hannah.

Mine?

Worst of all, he suspected these new developments in their relationship had the potential to make him happy. Happiness couldn't be trusted. Duty and the satisfaction that came with successfully completing an assigned task, those were concepts he could embrace. But he'd fouled his assignment, first by not successfully impregnating Hannah, and then by letting himself care too much. He'd known going in that if he were unable to complete the mission, he'd have to walk away.

"But now I'm screwed," he whispered into the shadows, "because I don't want to."

Too easy to blame Trey. A Commission operative followed Commission orders, however contradictory or nonsensical those orders might seem. As far as David could figure, Trey's job was to see that Hannah procreated before her peak period of fertility came to an end. The fact that David couldn't manage to get sexually involved with his wife without getting emotionally involved, as well, wasn't anyone's fault but his own.

Maybe it wasn't too late to fix the mess he'd made. A clean break, before Hannah got too attached? She and the boys had Trey to help them get over any anger or hurt they might feel at David's desertion.

Hard Harvest

Eventually, the Commission would send a replacement.

He finished tying his boots and stood. A glance at the eastern horizon told him sunrise was still a few hours away. He could be miles down the road by the time anyone missed him.

It was the right thing to do. They'd all be better off.

So he told himself, and kept telling himself, till the words were just noise in his head. But his feet refused to move along the path to the barn until he caught the acrid scent of smoke on the bone-dry breeze.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Nine

Hannah was sure it could only be a nightmare.

This wouldn't be the first time she'd smelled the stench of burning wood in her dreams, or heard her brothers shout her name. When someone tried to shake her awake, she fought the intrusion. She hadn't slept so well in months. Maybe years. The bad dream would pass, if only they'd let her sleep.

"Hannah, you have to get up *now*." Trey's voice, urgent in way she'd never heard it before, yanked her completely out of her doze. She sat up straight in her bed.

Fire.

The farmer's most dangerous enemy. More capricious than weather, which gave as it took. More cruel than disease, which could be treated or cured or withstood. Fire had smarts. Fire had will. Fire wanted you to chase after it, so it could turn, and catch you, and eat you alive.

She was running barefoot along the path with no memory of pulling on her jeans or shirt. The sky glowed orange and crimson above her head. She stopped and stared. The whole eastern wall was ablaze. The roof would catch soon. All those old shingles. It could only be a matter of minutes.

The barn was already lost.

A hundred feet to her left, Abe and Isaac were dragging hoses from the cistern. Through the choking haze of smoke, Hannah made out the shapes of her two Guernsey cows as they scrambled through open front doors and jogged away from the disaster. Who'd freed them from their stalls? And what about the pigs?

And where were David and Trey?

She took another step and tripped over something large lying stretched across the path. She hit the ground hard and bit the tip of her

Hard Harvest

tongue. Hot copper flooded her mouth as she struggled to her knees. A hand closed over her elbow and dragged her to her feet.

“Where’s David?” Trey spoke directly into her ear.

Hannah shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe Abe or Isaac—”

“No, they haven’t seen him.” Trey pointed behind Hannah at the obstacle on the path. “I heard David yell. When I ran outside, I found this guy. David must’ve knocked him cold.”

Hannah wished she could feel some degree of shock at the sight of Larry Boscott lying unconscious in her back yard with an empty kerosene can at his side. But some part of her had known her business with him wasn’t finished.

Even surrounded by showering sparks and hyper-heated air, the dread that gripped her felt bitter as a January blizzard. She dug her nails into Trey’s arm. “Larry couldn’t do this alone. His brothers must be here somewhere. *Find David.*”

Isaac ran to them, a pair of squealing piglets under each arm. “I found the sow and the whole litter running around in back. Somebody got the tractor out, too, and most of the tools. All that’s left is the hay that’s stacked in the loft and David’s lab.”

Hannah and Trey shared a single, stricken glance.

She turned to Isaac. “Tell Abe to drag the hoses around to the front of the house. Gather up the livestock and drive the tractor there too. Start wetting down the roof and walls as quick as you can.”

Isaac’s eyes widened in his soot-smudged face. “But the barn—”

“It’s too late. Let it burn.”

Then she was sprinting toward the cellar door, Trey at her side. They reached it just as the eastern wall of the barn caved in with a resounding crash.

David’s lab. His equipment, his computer, his notes, the painstaking work of six months. They’d never be able to haul it all out before the fire burned through the floor. Impossible. Foolhardy to even consider trying, and she’d have plenty to say on that subject once she’d dragged her

Hard Harvest

husband up the steps and around the front of the house to safety. How dare he take such a stupid risk when they'd only just—

The door was locked.

He wasn't down there.

“Then where?” She looked at Trey. His face was drawn in grim lines. She whispered, “The loft. He wouldn't, would he?”

Trey didn't stick around to answer. He turned from her and slipped away, dodging sparks as he went. Hannah followed, both hands pressed tight between her breasts where her heart tried to pound through the wall of her chest.

She rounded the corner of the barn and looked up. The roof was ablaze.

She shielded her eyes from the unholy glare and scanned the southern wall. There, in the open doors of the hayloft, stood David. Even from a distance, Hannah could see how his face and hands were blackened with soot. As she watched, he tugged a new bale of timothy to the doors and threw it out. It dropped twenty feet to the ground below, where five or six other bales already rested.

He'd left his lab to burn in order to save her livestock, her tractor, and her tools. Now he was fighting to save her meager harvest of hay, risking his life to protect what belonged to her, what she loved. These weren't the actions of the distant, detached Dr. Cabot she thought she knew.

“David!” she screamed and choked on a lungful of smoke.

A second figure joined David in the open doors. Hannah couldn't hear their conversation over the roar of the blaze, but she saw Trey grasp David's arm and try to pull him away. David fought him, gesturing at the stack of bales to his left. Trey shook his head and pulled at David's arm again.

Then came the sickening, cannon-shot crack of the roof's center beam giving way. It seemed to Hannah that David turned and looked directly into her eyes, though she knew he likely couldn't see her through the smoke. What happened next would be seared into her memory for all

Hard Harvest

time.

David swung around, took Trey by the shoulders and shoved him through the loft doors. As Trey fell, he grabbed at David's arm as if it was the last branch on the last tree dangling over a hundred-foot drop.

The men tumbled together out of the loft.

Above them, the barn's roof fell in with a mighty, endless roar.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Ten

The wave of heat and noise rolled over Hannah and knocked her back several steps. She tripped over the unconscious form of Larry Boscott a second time and landed on her backside. Burning shingles and splinters of wood fell around her, scorching the grass. The house would catch next—bound to happen, no way to stop it—but somehow the idea seemed of no great importance compared to—

David.

And Trey. David and Trey.

Fear collected in her chest like iron filings drawn to a magnet. A cold, distant voice in the back of her head told her she was about to live through the worst moments of her life. Worse than the night of her father's death, worse than the morning of her mother's funeral.

She scrambled forward on her hands and knees, fighting to reach her feet. A pair of hands fell on her shoulders. She twisted around to see who held her back and barely recognized her own brother.

"Let me go. I have to find them!"

"You don't. Look!" Isaac pointed at two figures staggering out of the smoke.

Trey appeared to be supporting most of David's weight, but they were both upright and stumbling away from the barn at a good clip. Hannah swiped at her streaming eyes. It wasn't possible, was it? She watched as the flaming debris fell around them, never quite touching them, as if they moved inside a protective bubble.

In another ten seconds, the men reached the path. Trey grunted as he lowered David to the ground. Hannah watched as he bent over David's prone body.

After an endless half-minute, Trey straightened. "He's a little crispy around the edges, but he's breathing. We need to get him out of this

Hard Harvest

smoke.”

Hannah’s heart felt wrung out like a rag, as if it might never fill or pump properly again. A moment later it swelled, first with relief and then with irrational rage. She took a step toward David, wanting to curse him for a reckless fool and hoping he was alert enough to hear and understand.

“The house!” Isaac shouted. “It’s catching!”

Hannah whipped around to see the roof over the back porch smoking beneath a scattered layer of burning debris. The breeze picked up, and the outermost shingles burst into flame.

Trey grabbed her wrist. “You and Isaac haul David around front and stay there. I’m going to see if Larry’s brothers are anywhere around.”

“But—”

“Do it now, Hannah.”

She hesitated only long enough to see the grim determination in Trey’s face.

It took them a good five minutes to move David. He’d begun to perk up and struggle a bit, twisting out of Isaac’s grip beneath his arms and kicking at Hannah’s hands on boots as they half-dragged, half-carried him.

“Put m’ down, I c’n walk,” he slurred and batted at Isaac’s arm.

“The hell you can,” Hannah shot back, fighting the inclination to drop him on his head.

They deposited him under the big oak tree where Abe was busy keeping the litter of piglets from wandering. The cows were tied to the tractor, and the sow snuffled for acorns beneath the spreading branches of the oak.

“Stay with him,” Hannah told Isaac, her words hard and clipped in her own ears. “Try not to let him do anything else insane or stupid.”

David sat with his back against the tree trunk, watching her. His eyes had swelled to slits, his face unrecognizable behind its mask of soot. His glasses were nowhere to be seen.

Hard Harvest

Hannah turned and headed back the way she'd come to save the no-account life of Larry Boscott.

When she turned the corner of the house, she found the roof over the back porch fully engaged. The flames from the ruined barn crawled in tendrils through the dry grass toward the spot where Larry lay. If she dragged him to safety, there would be no time to run into the house and grab food from the icebox or clothes for the boys.

She sent up a silent prayer and knew it was too much to ask—David's life *and* the house? She'd never be so blessed. Then she stalked toward Larry, pushing back her sleeves as she went. "I hope whatever's addled your brain isn't catchy to the touch, you worthless piece of slime."

A nearby movement caught her eye. She peered through the smoke and saw Trey standing maybe twenty feet away. He faced west and stared up at the sky, his arms lifted high above his head. Hannah followed his gaze and saw an inky mass gathering to blot out the meager starlight.

A purple shock of lightning lit the clouds. Thunder followed with an echoing bang. A moment later, the sky let go with the kind of rain Hannah hadn't seen in years.

It fell in waves, as if heaven itself had organized a bucket brigade.

The rain doused the flames spreading along the grass and eating up the back porch. Steam rose in a hissing fogbank from the blackened wreckage of the barn. Water ran in rivers down Hannah's face. It drenched her in seconds. She reached down and turned Larry's head to one side so he wouldn't drown like a turkey in a summer storm.

Trey came toward her from out of the cloying haze. He didn't meet her eyes, nor did he speak a word as he hauled Larry up, settled him over his shoulder like a wayward sack of grain, and walked away toward the front of the house.

Hannah had learned early never to question bad fortune. It came and went of its own accord, and there was never any use in asking why. As the rain washed the last of the smoke from the night air, she found

Hard Harvest

herself just as unwilling to challenge a miracle.

After they'd all cleaned up as best they could, Hannah sent the boys to bed. Trey went to radio the sheriff and secure Larry Boscott for the night, leaving Hannah and David alone in the kitchen. With fingers that hardly shook at all, Hannah applied salve to one of several burns on David's shoulders.

Outside, the rain had slowed to a drizzle. Inside, the weather was quiet and cold. Hannah hadn't spoken a word to David beyond "sit there" and "hold still."

He picked at the bandages on his right hand. "How long do you think I'll be out of commission?"

She didn't answer, too afraid she'd let on how much he'd scared her and how betrayed she felt by his foolhardy thoughtlessness. Too angry to keep from saying things she might not mean and couldn't take back.

"I ask," he said, "because the barn will need rebuilding. And there's the corn to harvest and whatever's left of my lab to salvage. Good thing I left my extra pair of glasses in your room last month."

The screen door, which had survived the fire in another minor miracle, squeaked open. Trey stuck his head in the kitchen.

"No sign of Boscott's brothers," he said. "The sheriff says she'll be around sometime tomorrow to collect Larry."

"Where'd you put him?"

"Tied him to a chair on the front porch." Trey glanced at David. "Nice work, by the way. He's still out cold, but I think he'll live."

David flexed his hand around the thick cotton wrapping and winced. "I've never hit anybody before."

Trey grinned at him. "It's amazing what you can do with the right motivation." He yawned and pulled a hand through his hair. "I'm going to check the animals one last time. Then I'm heading to bed." He shot David a sympathetic glance and exited without another word.

When he was gone, Hannah drew a breath and let it out from between

Hard Harvest

clenched jaws. “The sheriff is going to want details.”

David nodded. “Not much to tell. I was outside and I smelled smoke, so I checked the barn. It was already on fire. Larry was sneaking around the corner. I chased him. When I caught up to him, he pulled a knife.”

Her hands stilled on his shoulder. She crossed to the counter in silence and began to reassemble the first aid kit.

“I took the knife away and stuck it in my pocket, but I lost my glasses,” David continued. “I don’t remember much after that.”

She opened her mouth to tell him his memory would likely return in a day or two. What came out was an accusation she hadn’t planned to make.

“You were fixing to leave us, weren’t you? That’s why you were wandering around in the middle of the night.”

David jerked as if she’d slapped him, but when he spoke, the words were measured and even. “I thought it was in everybody’s best interest.”

She didn’t throw the first aid kit at his head, but it was a near thing.

“So what’s stopping you?” she asked. “Besides a little smoke inhalation and a few second-degree burns, I mean.”

In the long pause that followed, the clock over the stove ticked down the seconds between “before” and “whatever might come next.”

Finally, David shrugged and gave her a crooked smile. “It’s one thing to walk away from the only home you’ve ever known. It’s another to watch somebody try to take it from you. Like every other common idiot, I didn’t realize how much I had to lose until I almost lost it.”

Hannah stared at him, her mouth hanging open and her hands clenched white on the edge of the counter. As the seconds slipped by, all the harsh words she’d stored up to spew at him seemed to curl in on themselves and dissolve like so much vapor.

Through the ringing in her ears she heard the front door open and close, signaling Trey’s return. She blinked and shut her mouth with a click.

“How,” she croaked and stopped to clear her throat. “How do you feel

Hard Harvest

now?”

“How do I look like I feel?”

“Like a slug in a salt-shaker.”

His laughter rang like a bell in her head—a wedding bell, to be exact, though she’d never say anything so sappy out loud. Instead, stood in the middle of her kitchen and let her husband laugh at her.

It felt like the least she could do.

They found Trey sitting at the bottom of the stairs. “I wasn’t sure.” He gestured toward the second floor.

David looked at her with a question in his eyes. Hannah nodded. Welcoming Trey into their bed was another “least thing” she could do, so long as David agreed.

On their way up the stairs, David put a hand on Trey’s shoulder. “You’ll stay and give me a few carpentry lessons, won’t you?”

Trey hesitated, and Hannah grabbed his other arm. “We need you, Trey. We’ve got no barn, and half the harvest is still in the fields.”

Trey shook his head. “You two and the boys will do just fine without the likes of me.”

“Yes,” Hannah said, because it was the truth. “But it’ll be hard.”

Trey sighed and shook his head again, but Hannah knew he’d stay to see their corn to market.

David paused at the window in the hall. “Storm’s passed.”

Hannah joined him to look outside. Above the charred pit where the barn used to stand, the sky glowed pink as the belly of a seashell from an ocean she’d never seen and likely never would.

They turned from the window and entered her room hand-in-hand. Trey was already in bed, waiting for them with kisses that tasted of smoke and rain.

On the morning her life almost burned to the ground, Hannah fell asleep counting her blessings.

Hard Harvest: Chapter Eleven

It took Trey, David and the boys three days to build a shed to house the livestock. Two weeks later, the profit from the corn crop proved to be enough to rebuild the barn come springtime.

And four weeks after that, on a Sunday afternoon, David stood beneath the oak tree in the front yard and vowed to love and cherish Hannah for the rest of his life.

Trey officiated, asking questions that sounded more like poetry.

“Will you love her when the white heart of winter beats in the wind, and the fever dreams of summer fall upon you?”

“I will.”

“Will you lay with her in a stony field or a bed of thorns?”

“I will.”

“Will you keep her close in anger and bide with her in time of trial?”

“I will.”

“And will you give your children the gift of honoring their mother above the sky, the earth, and your own two hands?”

“I will. I surely will.”

When it came Hannah’s turn to answer—standing up straight in her mother’s ivory wedding dress with her rose-gold curls blowing in the wind—her voice was as quiet and certain as the color of the September sky. David felt his heart give a tug in her direction, as if it knew where it really belonged.

After the boys had demolished the cake and erected their pup tent in the yard “to give the newlyweds some privacy,” as Isaac said in his matter-of-fact way, David took Trey aside.

“I don’t have the words to thank you.”

Trey didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “You two did all the hard work. I’m just grease between the gears.”

Hard Harvest

David looked at other man for a few long moments. “You’re not really with the Commission, are you?”

Trey shook his head.

“Then who are you? More to the point, *what* are you?”

Trey shrugged. “A helpful stranger. A well-intentioned passer-by.” He smiled. “An outlander.”

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

“No problem.” He clapped David on the shoulder. “Don’t you think it’s time you gave your wife her wedding gift?”

David glanced toward the house where Hannah waited for him on the newly rebuilt back porch. He turned again to Trey. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

Trey’s smile faded. “It’s time,” he said. “Don’t tell Hannah till I’m gone. It’s better that way.”

David nodded and pulled the other man into a quick, hard embrace. “Good luck to you, my friend.”

Then he turned and walked away.

Hannah watched David yank Trey into a hug and tried to ignore the little twist of jealousy her gut. Trey deserved all their affection and none of her selfish possessiveness, but she couldn’t deny wanting David’s undivided attention, just as he had hers. It didn’t seem like too much to ask on her wedding day.

Now David approached, and his grin was all for her. He’d been giving out smiles like shiny pennies lately, like they barely cost him anything. Another small miracle to add to her collection.

“Come upstairs,” he said when he reached her. “I have something to show you.”

She laughed at him. “Is that what passes for seduction back east, Dr. Cabot?”

But she went, tripping over her long skirt in her eagerness to be alone with her husband. When they reached the upper hall, David took her arm

Hard Harvest

and led her away from the bedroom they'd shared for the past six weeks and to a room she only entered when she felt like being sad.

"What have you done, David?" she asked him, already sure she knew. The house wasn't that big, after all. Pretty hard to miss the clomp of manly boots over the kitchen at odd hours, or the way her brothers giggled and whispered behind their hands when she wondered where the stepladder had gone, or the sewing kit, or the paint brushes she kept in the cupboard next to the sink.

David pushed open the door and guided her into her parents' bedroom, the room she swore she'd never use till she was married, for real and forever.

New white curtains fluttered in the windows. New blue paint glowed like a pale morning sky on the walls. The bed was the same, a maple four-poster her great-grandfather had carved, but now it was made up in linens she recognized from her own hope-chest, which had been locked in the attic so long she'd nearly forgotten it existed.

"You did this for me?"

"Ask me what I wouldn't do for you," David said, not smiling now. "It'll be a short conversation."

They undressed on opposite sides of the room, in an unspoken agreement to dispense with coy wedding night rituals. When they met in the middle of the bed, his skin was hot under her hands, as hot as nickels on the hearth, as though his own personal climate ran a few degrees above what was normal and customary. She wondered if it had anything to do with the extra energy needed to power that big brain of his.

She'd learned a lot about her husband over the past several weeks, but even more about herself. She'd learned she liked his hands in her hair, pulling her head back to suck at the trip hammer of her pulse. She'd learned she loved it when he held her down and made her take whatever he had to give, long past the point where she begged for mercy or just a moment to form a clear thought.

She'd learned she merely had to look at him a certain way and the air

Hard Harvest

would thrum between them like a struck chord, and he would be at her side. She'd learned a woman could get used to that kind of power.

Now she ceded all dominion to him and felt him go from fierce to tender in the space of a breath. His open mouth skidded on a line down to where she'd gone wet and soft for him, his breath like steam on the flesh of her thigh.

She let him drive her to distraction, to a place beyond pleasure, where the edges of the world grew hazy and there was no need for air. And when he finally took her, she allowed him to set a pace so achingly slow and brutally thorough, she thought she might die from sheer satisfaction.

Afterwards, they lay with the dying sunlight washing over their skin like the glow from a guttering candle.

"Maybe you could use my old room for your new lab?" she asked him. "Would you like that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

David turned in her arms and placed his long-fingered, capable hand on her belly. "We'll need that room for a nursery."

She didn't bother pretending surprise. "How did you know?"

"The girl I married six months ago was green on the vine. The woman I married today is halfway to ripe."

She laughed. "Not quite halfway. Not even a third."

"I calculate a late spring harvest."

"We'll make a farmer of you yet, Dr. Cabot." She wriggled against him, searching for a comfortable fit. "Trey's gone, isn't he?"

"Yes," David said. "Are you sorry?"

She shook her head. "We'll miss him, but it's for the best."

When dusk fell, David rose from the bed. He slipped on his glasses, lit the lamp and crossed to the open window. As he moved, lamplight transformed into a handful of gold dust scattered across his skin, and desire chased exhaustion through Hannah's body like clouds across the face of the sun.

Hard Harvest

“Smells like rain,” he said, in the tone of a scientist stating a fact, as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

With a sigh born of perfect contentment, Hannah agreed.

A tingle shot down Trey’s arm as another link in his tattoo dissolved.

He stood on the road and contemplated the open portal at his feet. He’d often thought disappearing into the ether shouldn’t be as easy as it seemed. So many thin spots in the world, so many places where the tangible and real disintegrated into the shadowy and vague. So many times he’d left no more lasting trace than his footprints in the dust.

He looked deeper into the portal and called up an image from the future, something to help him remember why his work was important beyond his own need for redemption.

There. The Jenkins farm, or the Jenkins-Cabot farm, as it would come to be known. A woman stood on the back porch of the house holding a tow-headed infant on her hip. When she lifted her head, Trey saw Hannah’s face, looking a good ten years older if the lines at her eyes told a true tale, but healthy and hardy all the same.

A shout came from the barn, and three more children ran along the path, two redheads and another blonde, laughing as their Uncle Abe herded them toward the house.

“Isaac says if you don’t come to the table now, you can all starve,” Hannah called. “He’s got a date, and he’ll be danged if he’ll miss it on account of you hooligans!”

A man stepped through the squeaky back door and let it slam behind him. Here was David, his glasses a little thicker, his hands a bit coarser from the years of labor he’d embraced along with every other part of Hannah’s life.

Hard work in the name of love had yielded a lasting harvest.

Trey saw David lean down and whisper into Hannah’s ear. He saw Hannah turn and laugh, adoration shining in her eyes. As the image faded, swept up in a whirl of possible outcomes, probable futures, and

Hard Harvest

certain happy endings, Trey stepped into the portal and let the turmoil bear him away.

The End

Special Bonus Section

“Bedroom Food” by Alice Gaines

About “Three Kinds of Wicked”

Sneak Peek: “To Touch a Woman” by Alice Gaines

Also Available in the “Three Kinds of Wicked” Series

“Bedroom Food” by Alice Gaines

Okay, you’ve found the right man for a liaison. You’ve invited him to your place for an intimate dinner. After that, some good wine, seductive music on the stereo, and a fire to keep you warm. Everything goes as planned, and it turns out you’ve chosen well. He’s really, really good in bed.

The two of you wake up in the middle of the night and he again makes you feel like a princess. Only after he’s done, it’s two in the morning, and you’re both famished from all the exertion. What to do?

You have to feed this magnificent male. After all, you want him back for a repeat performance at some point. The way to his heart may not actually go through his stomach, but that’s the body part that’s talking to him now.

As a woman who’s spent decades enjoying myself in the kitchen as well as the bedroom, I have a few tips for you. You’ll notice that none of them involve chocolate. I’m assuming the two of you consumed chocolate earlier. Besides, I’m not sure its effects are as powerful on men as well as women. And, after all his work, he deserves something with a little more sustenance.

Kitchen sink eggs.

I once had a lover who routinely woke up in the middle of the night hungry. He’d troop down into the kitchen and scramble some eggs. He put anything he found in the refrigerator into those eggs and loaded them up with butter. Yummy. Also very fattening, but this is a special treat.

You can prepare ahead of time. Chop onions, peppers, tomatoes, and herbs and store them in a plastic bag in the fridge. You can brown some

sausage ahead of time and put that into its own bag. Ditto, ham. Or ham and sausage. Grate some cheese – one or more types of your choice – and put that into another bag.

Now, all you have to do is heat some butter and add the vegetables. While they're cooking, beat a goodly number of eggs with a fork. At least five eggs for two people. Remember, you have a hungry man to feed. When the veggies are cooked, add the meat(s) and warm them. Then, add the eggs and scramble. When the eggs are set, add the cheese and let it melt in. Grab one plate, two napkins, two forks, and head back to the bedroom.

Cold fried chicken.

Although fried chicken loses its crunchiness when it cools, it's still a delicious snack. This is something you can make ahead of time and have on hand in the refrigerator. Here are the tricks I've learned about frying chicken. First, the best coating is seasoned flour. That seems too simple, but it's true. In a plastic bag, shake together flour, dried herbs, garlic powder, and either red pepper or paprika (depending on your taste for heat). Put the chicken pieces into the bag and shake. Leave the chicken in there for at least a half hour, shaking it from time to time. Longer is even better.

The second secret to good fried chicken, believe it or not, is the pan. The pan size and type will determine how well it retains heat, which is crucial for proper cooking. The pan should be large enough that the chicken fits without crowding. Otherwise, when you drop the chicken in, the temperature of the oil will drop too much, and the crust will be gummy. Similarly, the pan should be good and heavy so it retains heat. Something like a cast iron Dutch oven is perfect for 4 or 5 chicken thighs. When the oil is at 375 degrees, put the chicken into the pot.

If you don't have a thermometer for oil, get a few cubes of dry

stuffing mix. Drop one into the oil and see what it does. If it takes a while to sizzle, the oil is too cold. If it goes crazy immediately, as if it could hop out of the pan, the oil is too hot. It should sizzle and dance immediately, but not a frenzied dance. Does that make sense?

Once the chicken is in the oil, cover the pot partially and cook for a minute or two. When the hissing has quieted down some, cover the pan completely and cook for seven minutes total. After seven minutes total, turn the chicken, recover, and cook an additional seven minutes. Drain on paper towels, cool, and refrigerate.

Pie. Yes, pie.

I've never met a man who wasn't impressed by a good pie. My boss once ate a piece of my pie and declared, "Your husband is a lucky man." And that was just cherry pie with canned filling. My mother got so sick of hearing about my father's mother's pies that she cooked a pie every week until she could make them as well as her mother-in-law.

Pie crust is the bane of almost all cooks. The main reason for this, I think, is the common wisdom that too much water makes the crust tough. As a result, we've all spent years trying to roll crust that's too dry and tears and breaks. Since reading Flo Braker's excellent *The Simple Art of Perfect Baking*, I've become convinced that – rather than the amount of liquid – what makes pie crust tough is heat and overworking. Use cold ingredients and handle your crust as little as possible and give yourself permission to add enough water (ice water, of course!) to make the crust hang together without bits of flour remaining in the bowl. Divide into two for a double crust pie. Wrap each piece in wax paper and mold as gently as possible into round disks, and let the crust sit in the refrigerator for an hour or more. If you've added enough water, the crust will roll out easily for you.

Recently, the amazing folks at *Cooks Illustrated* came up with an idea

that I'm going to try. Substitute some of the ice water with cold vodka. Yes, vodka. According to CI, the vodka adds liquid but doesn't work the gluten in the flour. Gluten is the protein that makes bread chewy. You don't want chewy pie crust. The liquor cooks off in baking, and vodka leaves no strange tastes. They say you can add extra liquid in this manner without sacrificing tenderness. Now, bake your pie according to your favorite recipe and save it for the middle-of-the-night munchies.

When the time comes, cut your man a slice of pie. Perhaps top it with some ice cream, and serve it to him in bed. He'll have two great reasons – great sex and great food – to ask for a second visit.

About “Three Kinds of Wicked”

Trey, a time-striding demigod, spends his life skipping through the human timeline and reuniting couples torn apart by evil forces. Sworn to chastity, sworn to protect those he serves, Trey's own desires must never be expressed.

But on a mission to the Summer of Love, Trey meets Sage, a free spirit with a broken heart, and Russ, a scarred POW with a broken mind.

His mission is to reunite Sage and Russ. But passion claims them, and their love triggers a destruction and chaos unmatched by any evil. By rights, Trey should be executed for breaking his vows.

Instead, he is sentenced to a new kind of servitude. With his chastity no longer an issue, he must find broken human couples and heal them sexually. Only after healing these broken bonds of love will Trey heal the broken human timeline. Only after reuniting these predestined pairs through his physical love will Trey be reunited with Sage.

Watch each month for a new “Three Kinds of Wicked” release, starting in July 2009, from Red Sage Publishing. The first story in the series, “Wicked Temptation,” unleashes the dangerous passion between Trey, Sage, and Russ. Each following stand-alone story explores Trey's efforts to physically reunite another couple in the preordained human timeline. The series ends with “Wicked Redemption,” the companion to “Wicked Temptation,” which brings Trey, Russ, and Sage together again.

Sneak Peek: “To Touch a Woman” by Alice Gaines

Edward and Margaret Sinclair are very much in love and would be deliriously happy in their marriage except for one thing—as good Victorians, neither have had much experience with the marital act. As a result, sex is painful for Margaret and frustrating for Edward. They encounter a mysterious stranger named Trey who may be able to help them solve their problem. Can Trey teach Edward how to touch a woman?

Excerpt:

Chapter One

Why did love have to be so bloody hard? As the carriage rattled over country roads, Edward Sinclair gazed across the narrow space that separated him from his wife of three months. With nothing but the lanterns outside for illumination, she resembled a fae creature of fragile beauty. The shifting light played over her amber curls, pale skin, and deep green eyes. Even in near darkness he could read her fear. Fear she tried to hide behind a brave but faltering smile. Fear of him, for the love of God. Fear that he’d want carnal knowledge of her body again and that he’d muck it up. Again.

“Are you quite well, Margaret?” he asked.

She gave him the pleasant expression she always did, an upward curl to her lips that masked the trepidation in her eyes. “I’m very well, my darling.”

“You seem...” Oh hell, what word would he use tonight? “Out of

sorts.”

“A bit tired. It’s been a long day.”

“We should reach Baresford soon. The inn there is clean and sets a decent table.”

“There you are,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

If only he could believe that. They’d shared such happiness before their marriage. Such joy at falling hopelessly, madly in love with each other. Such excitement when their parents had approved the match.

Then, on their wedding night, when they could finally make the ultimate commitment to each other, he’d hurt her with his clumsiness. Things hadn’t gotten any better since.

“I want you to be happy, Margaret,” he said.

She leaned across the seat they shared and put her hand on his. “I am, my darling. Truly.”

He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed the backs. “I’ll make that other thing good. I don’t know how, but I will.”

Mistake, that. She stiffened. Not much, only enough for a loving eye to catch. She smiled as she pulled away and settled back against her seat.

“We should talk about this,” he said. “Other couples must have faced the same problem. They’d have worked through it somehow.”

“We will, too.”

“Only if you help me. I need to know how to please you. I need to know what makes you feel good.” Damn him, he already knew what hurt her.

“Everything you do feels good.”

Now, she’d started lying outright. She couldn’t think she’d fool him with that. She only hoped to put off the conversation. Well, he wouldn’t allow that any longer. His body craved hers like a drug. If they didn’t do something soon, he’d go mad with wanting her.

“My darling, I know you’re reluctant to talk about this, but—”

The coach stopped suddenly, nearly throwing him across the seat and onto her lap. Outside, tack jangled, and the horses whinnied and stamped

their feet. He regained his balance and stuck his head out the window.

“Ned, what’s going on out there?”

“A stranger, Mr. Sinclair. I swear, he jumped out at us.”

“Make yourself known,” Edward called. Most likely, the fellow wasn’t a highwayman. If he had been, he’d be issuing orders by now. More likely a farmer who’d drunk too much and had gotten himself lost.

The man who approached the carriage was no farmer, though. He wore a finely cut suit of black wool, every bit as expensive as Edward’s own. When he removed his hat, he revealed dark eyes and gleaming black hair a bit too long for fashion.

Also Available in the “Three Kinds of Wicked” series!

“Wicked Temptation” by Liane Gentry Skye

Beyond the bounds of pleasure, a single chance for redemption..

Trey, a demigod, is sworn to guard the fates of human couples on whose relationships hinge the course of history. Over the eons, his affection for mortals has left him yearning for the one thing he can never have—a heart mate to call his own. When a ruthless goddess resorts to an aphrodisiac to force him to break his vow of chastity, his heart is instead claimed by the mortal woman who is destined to help her human lover save the world. Can a mēnage possibly help him undo the damage he’s done?

“Reckless Exposure” by Anne Rainey

As fashion photographer, Rand Miller listens to all the reasons why his sexy lover must move out of not only his apartment but also his life, he decides to give her the going away party of a lifetime. The list of party goodies includes: massage oil, margaritas and their mysterious neighbor, Trey Madison. But when dawn creeps over the horizon, will Rand be able to watch the only woman capable of taming his wicked ways walk out of his life forever?

“Renegade and His Rebel” by Titania Ladley

When her deserting cad of a husband Renegade LaMarr reappears in Moose Junction, tomboy Cassandra “Rebel” Thatcher’s as spitting mad as a peeled rattler and prepared to shoot the handsome coward right out of his boots. She’s got her rifle at the ready and a fine-looking,

mysterious drifter named Trey to warm her between the sheets and guard her jaded heart against Renegade. Armed with a secret and determined to get rid of Trey, Renegade plots to finally claim Rebel, chaps, spurs, boy breeches and all. Only problem is, before he can draw his six-shooter and declare a challenge, Renegade finds himself falling under Trey's magical spell right along with his passionate, spitfire wife.

“Triple Threat” by Mia Varano

Vegas showgirl, Brandy Tate, is on the run from the mob and the FBI. When stoic FBI agent, Ridge Coltrane, tracks her down he puts them both in danger until a mysterious stranger named Trey rescues them. Brandy opens her heart... and her bed... to both men. Will her desire to trust end in heartache, or will it introduce her to a world of seductive delights at the hands of two men?

Check the “Coming Soon” page at www.eRedSage.com for more previews of upcoming stories in the Three Kinds of Wicked series!

And check Trey's website at www.threekindsofwicked.com for inside information, letters from Trey, sneak peeks, and other deliciously wicked treats!

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