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Larissa Stone



ANNIE GETS HER GUNMEN



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The story behind The Lost Collection

During recent excavations in several abandoned western U.S. mining towns, a Siren editor/archaeology enthusiast discovered crates of old, tattered diaries and journals buried and lost for more than 100 years.

Hot passion and daring romance was alive and well among the intrepid women of the Old West. Siren Publishing invited a few of our most distinguished bestselling authors to take on new pseudonyms and use their imaginations to bring to life some of the love stories of the Old West.

Once Siren releases the 50th book in The Lost Collection, we will reveal the identity of some of these authors.

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MENAGE EVERLASTING



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ANNIE GETS HER GUNMEN

LARISSA STONE

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Prologue

1882 – Colorado

Annabel Wallace didn't fool herself into believing the Wyoming Territory Sharpshooter's Club might actually let a woman compete in their twelfth annual contest, but she wanted to make the effort for three important reasons.

One, she wanted the money. She didn't need it desperately, but the cost of the trip that far away was significant, and if they didn't let her shoot, she didn't have a chance to recoup any of her travel expenses. The honor was as significant as the prize money.

Two, her father had competed in the competition, and she loved the idea of placing in the same contest. Her father, a renowned gunsmith, taught her everything about guns including how to shoot. She'd been handling guns since she'd been big enough to hold one without dropping it on her foot.

And three, because she was a damn fine marksman and wanted to test her abilities against the best. Her father had always been filled with pride over that fact. He told her on several occasions there wasn't a man in town that could out shoot her. The very few times she'd competed informally for sport, she'd always been victorious. A small part of her wanted to see if she could beat anyone else besides strangers who shot for a living and those outside of this small town.

Her father, Alistair, *God rest his soul*, had competed in the sharpshooter's competition and won first place. A gunsmith by trade, her father didn't participate after the first year because twelve years ago, her mother had died during the winter, and he'd been left with the responsibility of raising a young child all alone. Not much extra time in his life for out of town journeys with a daughter in tow.

The recent death of her father had sent her digging through all the things he left behind, a difficult chore to muster with her emotions so sensitive at his recent passing. Sorrow now ingrained with his loving memory.

He didn't have much, but the few possessions he prized were well loved. A tobacco pipe, black with repeated use and carved by his older brother long ago rested on his nightstand. A neatly-folded handkerchief her mother had stitched that still held a faint fragrance of rosewater was in the top drawer of the same nightstand. And finally the plaque, given to him as winner of the first annual Wyoming Territory Sharpshooter's Club competition, that hung on the wall next to his bed.

Just over the border into the Wyoming Territory and near Colorado's state line, in a small corner near the Nebraska state boundary, the annual event was held in the small town of Pine Haven. It was an event that brought shooters from all over the west to compete.

By sending a letter of interest to the competition well before the deadline to enter and signing it A. Wallace, she hoped to at least be allowed to make her case to the contest's judges upon her arrival. That would secure her a place to try and qualify, *if* they would let a woman compete.

She'd been turned away from the last two competitions in nearby towns, but hope sprang eternal. Perhaps the Wyoming Territory Shooter's Club would be different.

Her only chance for success was that they underestimated her skill and desired her entrance fee more than ostracizing her from the

competition. Heartened by the fact that the “official” rules posted in the paper didn’t state that a woman couldn’t participate, Annabel gathered her precious weapons and packed for a trip to the wilderness of the Wyoming Territory.

* * * *

Dane Larsen spun the chamber of his pistol, slapped it shut with a snap, straightened his gun arm, and fired at a target twenty-five feet away.

Bull’s-eye.

The Wyoming competition loomed ever closer. With his growing ranch busier than cowboys herding cats, practice time was very limited. His two older brothers gave him shit about the competition, but that alone wouldn’t stop him from going.

Shooting a gun was one of the few skills he excelled in, next to breaking horses. His brothers wished he would give up the shooting all together in favor of taming horses but didn’t begrudge him an annual shooting tournament. They did, however, affectionately harass him until the day he left.

Dane twisted his head, looked over one shoulder and surveyed the western sky. He figured he had about another hour of light before he’d have to head home. With the sun casting an ever deepening orange cast to the land, Dane sighted the target and readied to fire.

The second shot went through the center of the second target he’d set up.

Bull’s-eye. A smile crept up inside as he tried to keep his emotions buried. Focus.

Shifting the gun to his left hand, he aimed and fired at the third target.

Not a bull’s-eye. Damn it. He was an inch off the mark and it might as well have been a yard. Not that he needed to be able to shoot as well left handed, but the skill would certainly give him much

needed confidence.

This year, he planned to beat Garrett Butler by a mile instead of an eighth of an inch. After coming in second place for two years in a row, Dane would be damned if he'd take a second place trophy home again this year.

Four years ago, he'd won first place easily. Three years ago the competition was tighter, and he'd won on the final day with his final shot. The smoke stung his eyes as the scent of gun powder filled his lungs, and his target had registered a big hole in the center for a win that second year in a row. He still remembered the rush of elation at that finishing bull's-eye and the hard-won first place trophy.

Two years ago, a new lawman from a town on the Colorado border showed up and narrowly beat him in a sudden death match.

Sheriff Garrett Butler had swaggered into the contest and taken that first place trophy by a hair's breadth. It was the first time in the history of the contest that a measurement of the target had to be used to determine the winner.

The lawman was admittedly a very good shot. Dane conceded the contest graciously that first year. Garrett was a good man by all accounts and a worthy contender.

Last year, Dane had been fit to be tied at the second loss in a row. Another close match resulted in a second tie for first place that had to be broken. Dane had missed the mark by an eighth of an inch, whereas Garrett hit the damn thing dead center.

They each had two wins. No other contestant had ever won this contest three times. If Garrett won this year, it would be three times in a row, and Dane didn't plan to let that happen.

He loaded his pistol again, put three new targets in place, and hit three bull's-eyes before he switched to his rifle.

A dozen rifle shots yielded a dozen bull's-eyes before the sun dropped beneath the horizon. The pungent scent of gun powder fogging the air smelled just like success.

* * * *

“Hey, Sheriff, Billy Anders wants to challenge you to a gunfight. He’s over at the saloon bragging about how good a shot he is,” Delbert, Sheriff Garrett Butler’s only deputy, announced the moment he entered the jailhouse building. His friend Cody stood just outside the door.

Garrett inwardly sighed. *Another one?* Jesus. If he won the shooting contest for the third time in Wyoming Territory this year, the gunfight requests like this would only get worse.

“Tell Billy I’m not interested.”

“But, Sheriff, you don’t want them to say you’re yellow, do ya?” Cody’s expression was incredulous.

“I’m not a coward because I don’t want to gun a man down in the street. These reckless fights have to stop. I almost killed that last fool by accident.” Garrett had learned to shoot fast to disable, not to kill. His last “street gunfight” was an impromptu one thrust upon him the second he exited the jailhouse one afternoon. At least this potential conflict was forewarned.

The only time Garrett hit dead center with his gun these days was during target practice.

Cody came inside the office. “Billy says he can shoot the gun out of your hand before you even draw.”

“Well, that’s stupid. If I haven’t drawn yet, I wouldn’t have a gun in my hand, now would I? Idiots.”

Cody’s confused expression, as he worked out the problem of whether Billy could shoot a gun out of his hand before he drew, made Garrett tired.

“Tell him I’ll meet him for target practice if he wants a test of skill, but I’m not meeting him in the public street for a gunfight. Folks might get hurt. Or worse, *I* might get hurt.”

“But you’re the best shot in the West.”

“I appreciate your faith in my abilities, Cody, but the answer is no.

I'm not meeting anyone in the street for a shoot-out."

The two exchanged a defeated glance but soon shrugged. He was glad they understood no meant no and didn't keep hounding him.

Garrett hoped his deputy would be all right while he was gone to the tournament.

"I expect you to keep the peace while I'm gone, Delbert, and that means no gunfights in the streets." He also sent a pointed look at Cody.

Delbert smiled. "They don't want to test *my* skills, Sheriff."

Garrett inwardly sighed. He was right. "Are you sure you'll be okay all alone here?"

"Don't worry, Sheriff, I'll be fine while you're gone." Delbert, using his most earnest expression, tried to reassure him that he didn't need anyone else to help govern their small town.

Garrett wasn't completely convinced. "Still, I'm going to ask the former sheriff to be your back-up deputy while I'm gone, just in case."

Upon consideration, perhaps he'd get the retired sheriff to look in on Delbert while he was away. Two heads were better than one, and Garrett wouldn't feel as guilty leaving his young deputy all alone to compete in the Wyoming Shooter's Club annual event.

"Mr. Allen? He's probably ninety years old if he's a day. I'd be better off on my own."

Garrett didn't doubt Delbert could handle things for a day or two, but a full week was a long time, even in this sleepy, little western town. "He's not ninety, and I already asked him. He isn't going to sit on you, but just fetch him if you get any trouble."

"All right, but if I don't need him, I ain't calling him."

"Fine." The townsfolk in Outpost, Colorado were pleasant enough, but there were always strangers coming through this area on their way to Wyoming and the northern territories who didn't necessarily care about the rules.

Garrett liked order in his town. A bunch of liquored-up cowboys

with more shit for brains than sense always put him on edge. Every year, more and more of them traipsed through town, stirring up trouble.

“This’ll be your third win in a row, won’t it, Sheriff?”

Garrett sent him a stern look. “I haven’t won it yet. Don’t count my chickens before they’ve hatched.” He was honored that Delbert had so much faith in his abilities but had a superstition about being over confident.

Delbert shrugged. “Unless there’s some new blood in the contest, you’ll whip them regular shooters like you did the past two years.” His grin of support was hard to resist.

“Thanks, but you never know about these contests. Anyone could show up and beat the pants off of me. I will, however, do my best for a third win, especially if Dane Larsen enters again.”

“Is that the big, blond cowboy you took the win from the last two years?”

Garrett nodded. “I’ll have to be at my best again because last year I only beat him by the length of a flea’s dick.”

Delbert laughed so hard he almost swallowed his chewing tobacco.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, though.”

“Sure.” Delbert grabbed a Winchester rifle from the rack hanging on the wall. “I’ll go ahead and walk through town and check on things. You can go out back and practice if you want, even though you probably don’t need it. I’ve never seen anyone that could shoot as good as you.”

“Thanks.” Garrett didn’t need to practice so much as he needed to center his thoughts and remain calm during the contest. “While you’re out, why don’t you find Mr. Allen and tell him you welcome his assistance.”

“Even if it’s a lie?”

“It’ll make him feel needed. With his wife gone, I’m sure he’s looking for something to entertain himself. It’s not like we have to

deputize him, just pretend you *might* need him.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.” Delbert nodded as if finally understanding what Garrett wanted to accomplish. He whistled an upbeat tune as he exited the jailhouse. His friend Cody followed him out the door.

Garrett settled in behind his desk and contemplated a third win. He’d have to beat Dane Larsen for a third year in a row. No easy task. Unless a new sharpshooter entered the contest, Dane would be his most difficult opponent.

He liked Dane. By all accounts, he was a good man and his family’s horse ranch had a reputation above reproach, but Garrett wasn’t about to throw the annual shooting match to save the rancher’s feelings.

Tomorrow, Garrett planned to get in some target practice. It wouldn’t hurt to brush up on his skills with his rifle, either. His revolver was what he used the most in his job, but he didn’t have to shoot it much as sheriff in this town, thankfully. With the exception of all the strangers coming to town to prove they were the fastest gun in the territory. For the folks in Outpost, a threat with his favorite gun did the job in most of the local disputes.

Garrett hadn’t spent as much time practicing this past year.

It likely didn’t matter. He hadn’t practiced last year or the year before either. His gun skills weren’t exactly something he could improve with practice. He’d done his share of target shooting in his life, but the skill he had with a pistol seemed to come from within. Almost as if the gun was an extension of his own hand, he simply pointed, aimed and fired. The bullet out of the barrel always went exactly where he wanted it to go.

Garrett didn’t know why a third win was so damned important, but just the possibility yielded a satisfied feeling he couldn’t explain. Not only would he be the first man to ever accomplish it, a third win meant he was skilled and not just lucky.

As long as overconfidence didn't ruin him, he should garner this win for a third time and earn a place in their championship history books.

Chapter One

The Apple Blossom Hotel and Saloon was about to discover the depths of Annabel's anger in the form of a lengthy, ear-piercing screech if they didn't straighten out the mess with her lost room reservation.

"I don't understand. I sent a written message to reserve a room and a detailed itinerary of when to expect my arrival. I received a confirmation. Why don't you have a room available for me?" Annabel glared at the clerk, hoping the intimidation factor would help him see reason.

The clerk swallowed hard and stuck a bent finger inside the collar of his shirt, presumably to loosen it. "Well, ma'am, since the stagecoach was late, and because there are quite a few extra folks in town, well, it seems your room was mistakenly given away."

"Given away? To whom?" Annabel shook her head deciding she didn't want to know the identity of the person who'd mistakenly gotten her room. She just wanted them to leave. Now. The lengthy, bone-jarring travel in the stagecoach was enough to send any sane person screaming into an asylum. Annabel had held her sanity with the lone thought of a nice bed waiting for her upon her arrival. And now it had been given away?

"Never mind. I suggest you send someone to *my* room and oust them."

"We can't do that, ma'am. He's already paid for the night and retired with his wife. It's late, you understand?"

"Yes. I understand. The stagecoach got stuck several times in long, dried-up ruts along the trail today, and I arrived much later than

I anticipated. However, I expected that my room would still be waiting for me. Besides, it's not *that* late."

"The policy is to rent the room if no one shows up as expected." A righteous gleam came into his eyes. "What if you hadn't shown up at all? Then we would have lost a perfectly good room rent."

"And you didn't think to check to see if the stagecoach had arrived first?" She threw her hands into the air in frustration. "Well, what am *I* supposed to do now?" She'd be sleeping on the dusty streets outside the hotel if they couldn't find her a bed somewhere.

The clerk glanced over one shoulder at a doorway behind the polished wooden counter. The opening was covered with a dark curtain and pulled closed. "I don't know, ma'am. All I know is that all the rooms are spoken for tonight."

"Are you sure? There isn't one single room available in this entire hotel?"

His cheeks suddenly turned red. Likely, there was a room available but not at the price she'd agreed to pay. If she were royalty and had the clout to back up a threat, the clerk would find her a room in no time.

She dug in her satchel until her fingers brushed against the edge of the paper inside and pulled it out. She held up the letter confirming her reservation. "This letter states a room would be waiting for me. If you won't give me one, then I want to talk to the proprietor." The nervous clerk bobbed his head in agreement and scurried off to find the man in charge. He ducked behind the curtain and pulled it closed again.

Such a bother. At her feet rested her oversized bag containing her weapons. She refused to let them out of her sight. If she didn't get a room, she suspected the only place left for those travelers without a place to sleep included the church, if this town even had one, or impromptu camping outdoors. It wasn't that she *couldn't* sleep outside. She'd spent lots of nights in her life sleeping beneath the stars but simply hadn't prepared for it on this particular trip.

Annabel rested an elbow on the waist-high counter and surveyed the lobby. The scent of linseed oil emanated from the wooden counter. The place seemed very clean and had come highly recommended by a friend from home. She would amend her own recommendation to include her reservation problem.

It wasn't as if an overabundance of hotels existed in this town. It was fortunate they boasted even one. The only other "establishment" in this small township, a bordello at the opposite end of the dusty street, would not suffice. Given rumors she'd heard about such places, sleeping did not top the list of amenities. Rather, loud, rutting noises during the night through the paper thin walls transpired instead. If a house of ill repute would even admit her. They probably only allowed men through the doors.

The wide open entry to the dining room and bar area caught her attention as a very handsome blond man passed through the opening and headed to the counter where she waited. Well over six feet tall by her estimation, the man had hair the color of late summer wheat. As he walked closer, she got a look at his eyes and noticed the bright blue shade.

She wasn't a short woman, but as he stood next to her, she was dwarfed by his size. She also couldn't help but note his masculine scent. He smelled of leather, smoke, and a musky fragrance unique to desirable men. Alone for nearly four years now since her fiancé died, Annabel hadn't ever been enticed by any males from her hometown. This man, however, ignited a long-forgotten feeling. The first man to stir her passion in so long, she'd almost forgotten it existed.

A shameful thought occurred in the form of a question. Would this man let her stay in his room if the hotel manager failed to find her one? If ever there was justified temptation, he defined it.

His smile revealed straight, white teeth and a surge of desire encompassed her, body and soul. She couldn't seem to tear her gaze away from him until he asked, "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"I'm actually not. The hotel clerk gave away my room because the

stagecoach was late, and I even had a reservation.”

His expression changed immediately from engaged to concerned. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He glanced at the curtained opening.

“The clerk went to retrieve the proprietor, but I don’t expect they can conjure a room out of thin air. The man who got my room is already sleeping in it with his wife. I live in hope that they might find a space for me on the roof.”

The blond man smiled at her joke and cleared his throat. “That’s unfortunate. If they can’t find a suitable room for you, and you don’t want to sleep under the stars on the roof, perhaps you’d allow me to offer you my room instead.”

Annabel wanted that more than anything else but only if he stayed. It was too bad she’d already decided that course of action would be inappropriate. She shook off the folly of spending the night with a stranger. She couldn’t possibly do that, could she?

No.

She couldn’t allow herself to get a reputation on this trip. Being labeled a disreputable woman along the way wouldn’t help her case once she got to the competition. She couldn’t take the chance that her fellow travelers weren’t headed to the same destination she was.

As much as she regretted it, she needed to sleep alone.

She shaped her lips into a frown. “No. I couldn’t let you do that. Where would you sleep? I can’t imagine the roof is very comfortable.” She offered a timid smile and tried to keep calm. It was also inappropriate to speculate over where a kind gentleman would sleep after offering her his room. Perhaps *he* could get into the whorehouse down the street, but the visual of him traveling there and away from her made her unhappy.

“Actually, I have a friend I can stay with in town. I only secured a room in case he was gone.”

“So your friend is in town?”

“I was just about to go and check, but even if he’s gone, I couldn’t enjoy my room knowing you were stranded without one and on the

streets. Or on the roof.” His engaging smile made her heart flip over.

Annabel grinned. “But you don’t even know me.”

He leaned closer, and she got another whiff of his arousing scent before he extended his large hand. “My name is Dane Larsen.” She placed her hand within the warmth of his grip.

“I’m Annabel Wallace.”

“Now that we’re acquainted, please allow me to offer you my room tonight.” His mesmerizing gaze drilled through to her soul and with the added inducement of his touch, Annabel’s insides heated.

Reluctantly, she removed her hand from his grasp. “Perhaps the manager will discover a room, and you won’t have to relinquish yours.”

Dane moved closer. They practically touched. She didn’t have the wherewithal to ask him to move away, even though the meager distance between them was very indecent. “Regardless, I hope you’ll agree to have dinner with me this evening. Then we can get to know each other even better.”

Annabel’s hunger had nothing to do with food but she nodded. “Thank you. I’d love to have dinner and get to know you even better.”

“Excellent.” He suddenly backed away a full step and as he did, the curtain parted to emit the nervous clerk and a red-faced, rotund man with a bushy dark mustache who’d obviously been pulled from his bed.

The proprietor didn’t mince any words. “Madam, we do not have any more rooms available. I don’t see what rousting me out of *my* bed accomplishes.”

Annabel held up the letter. “You promised to hold a room for me. It’s only eight o’clock in the evening. You shouldn’t have given my room to someone else. Now if I were someone important, like the city mayor or the governor of the state, I have no doubt you’d find a room suddenly available. Therefore, you can give *that* room to me.”

The manager smirked. “*Are* you the city mayor or the governor of the state?”

She pushed out a frustrated sigh. “That, sir, is not the point, and you know it.”

“We don’t have any rooms. Not even for someone important.” His gaze ran from her head to her hips and back again, and the expression on his face told her he didn’t find her important in the least. He looked back at Dane.

“Are you with the lady, sir?” His head tilted backwards to look her champion in the eyes.

“No. However, I’d like to relinquish my room for Miss Wallace, if you have no objections.” Dane towered over the two behind the counter. “I haven’t even taken my belongings up there as of yet.”

“I have no objections at all. Anything to get back to the comfort of my bed and back to sleep. Percival, tend to the details. If you’ll all excuse me.” The grumpy proprietor exited through the curtains, leaving Percival alone with them.

He quickly turned the registration book around for her to sign in. Dane reached into his pocket and handed her the room key.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Larsen.” Annabel signed her name in the book two rows beneath where Dane had signed in. Next to his strong signature was a line with the room number listed as eighteen.

“Please call me Dane.”

“Dane. I certainly hope your friend is in town. I’d hate to think of you sleeping out in the dusty street because of me. Or on any roofs.” She was actually more worried that he’d end up at the town’s brothel. And in the arms of another woman. If he needed a room, she would love to find a way to offer to share. Without anyone finding out, that is.

“I’ll find a place to sleep. Would you like to freshen up before dinner?”

“Yes. Thank you. I’ll be just a few minutes.”

Percival came around to take her bags and escort her to the room. Annabel left the delectable Mr. Dane Larsen by the front counter. She ascended the steps to the second floor and glanced to see him

watching her with what looked like decided interest. Perhaps there was a way to discreetly invite him to her room for an after dinner conversation. Or better yet, an after dinner action without conversation.

No one who knew her would ever find out at any rate.

If no one saw him enter or exit, she should be safe to entertain a gentleman in her room tonight. The seductive idea took root in her mind.

It had been so long since she'd been in the arms of a man, she relished the idea of throwing caution to the wind on this one of a kind trip and engaging in a short love affair.

* * * *

Dane waited for Annabel in the lobby and judged his chances of inviting himself up to her room for a late drink and whatever else she'd allow. Given the searing look she'd given him after he'd donated his room to her, perhaps his odds were better than average.

She didn't take long to refresh and soon they were seated at a private table in a back corner of the hotel's dining room, making polite conversation and enjoying a rich, well-cooked meal.

Daintily wiping her mouth with a napkin, Annabel replaced it in her lap, sat up straighter in her chair and aimed her focus in his direction. "What do you do beside rescue damsels in distress?"

He laughed. "My brothers and I own a ranch where we breed, raise, and train horses."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You're one of *those* Larsen brothers? My, my, you do have quite a reputation in Colorado."

"You've heard of us?" Dane lifted his head as if in interest. At her nod, he then asked, "What have you heard? Is our reputation a good one or a bad one?"

She put her fork down, matched his stare with a seductive one of her own, and said, "I've heard only excellent things about the horses

coming out of the Larsen Brothers Ranch.”

“Good to hear.” Their eyes remained locked. “Where are you headed, Miss Wallace?”

Her expression changed slightly, as if she were closing off, but soon brightened. “I’m on my way to visit a friend. She grew up in the town I’m from but moved away shortly after she married. I haven’t been able to visit since my father became ill a couple of years ago. Unfortunately, he died last winter, so I thought it would be nice to take a trip and get away.”

“I’m sorry about your father.”

“Thank you. I miss him very much. It’s just me now. My mother died twelve years ago when I was ten.”

“And you aren’t married?” *Please don’t be married.*

Her eyebrows went up briefly. “I was engaged to be married four years ago, but a month before the wedding, my fiancé caught lung fever and passed away.”

“I’m so sorry, Annabel. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“It’s all right. But let’s change the subject, shall we? So what is it that you do specifically on your ranch? Do you breed, raise, or train horses?”

He felt his mouth automatically shape into a smile meant to entice. The vision of the breeding pen and watching a stallion mount his mare came screaming into his mind for some reason. “My job is to break wild horses to a saddle, and then train them for sale.”

Gaze still boring through him, Annabel licked her bottom lip. Dane’s cock thickened in his pants. He wanted so much more than a simple meal tonight. Her voice lowered to a whisper. “Tell me, Dane, if I were a wild mare, what’s the first thing you’d do to break me?”

“Take you to dinner.” The words came out of his mouth before he realized what he’d said.

Annabel’s eyes widened for only a moment before she burst in to lyrical laughter. His cock had stiffened to an uncomfortable level, and his new goal was to do whatever he could to invite himself up to her

room. Perhaps she needed a discrete escort to see her safely to her room and tucked in bed.

“Very interesting. Perhaps you could come up to my room later. I’d love to discuss your *work* with horses further.” She broke the gaze to glance around the near empty dining room. “Using the back stairs I noticed next to the room you so graciously donated to me, of course. I wouldn’t want anyone getting the wrong idea about your visit. Since we’ll be discussing the breaking and breeding habits of wild mares.”

Dane sincerely hoped he had the right idea about what she expected once he came to her room. And he planned to be there as soon as prudently possible. “Of course not. Perhaps I could bring a late night libation for our discussion. Do you like brandy?”

“That would be lovely.” She smiled, sipped her coffee, and kept her rapt attention on his face. Once she lowered the cup, Dane used every bit of will power to keep his cock from rearing up to full size. Even though there were few people about, leaving the dining room with his cock sporting a raging erection wouldn’t be prudent.

After trading several lustful looks while she finished her coffee, he studied her lovely form. She was taller than most females he encountered, but standing next to her at the counter, the top of her head barely came to his shoulder. Her trim figure was ensconced nicely in a lacey blue dress. Her hair was dark brown but that description didn’t do it justice. In the candle light, he saw hints of a rich mahogany red glinting in the brunette curls atop her head. By far, her emerald eyes were her best feature, second only to her bright smile. The freckles across the bridge of her nose were an added bonus to her beauty as well as being completely irresistible.

Annabel took the last sip from her cup and sat straighter in her chair. Time to go. He stood and offered his arm. She rose and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. He paid the bill and led her to the lobby. Percival still lingered behind the desk.

“I’ll bid you good night. Thank you for a lovely meal and for giving up your room.” She squeezed his arm once with her final word.

Dane hoped to be visiting that room very shortly.

“You’re welcome.” He glanced at the clock to note the time and sent his gaze deeply into her glorious green eyes. “I’m sure you’ll be comfortably asleep in less than an hour.”

The smoldering look she returned made his heart pound even harder. “Yes. In less than an hour, I hope to be very relaxed.”

Dane kissed the fingertips of one hand and walked out of the hotel without a backward glance. He headed straight for the saloon across the street and ordered a whiskey at the bar. After downing it and another fairly quickly, he requested a small bottle of brandy.

Forty-five minutes later, after securing his horse at the local stable and sneaking up the back stairs at the hotel, Dane tapped lightly on Annabel’s door. She opened it a crack and peered out at him before he’d counted to two.

Dressed in a lacy nightgown with her bare toes peeking out beneath the hem, and with her lovely hair down around her shoulders, she motioned him inside. He glanced down either side of the hallway to ensure he remained alone, stepped into her room without anyone seeing him, and closed the door quickly.

“I suppose you think I’m terribly improper.” She slid close to his side and placed a hand on his arm. Her gentle touch sent a virulent pulse down to his already stiffening cock. He wanted her with a passion he hoped he could control.

Dane covered her hand with one of his own and squeezed her fingers gently. “No. I think you’re very beautiful and all alone in a strange town. I can understand not wanting to be by yourself. Besides, I have a great desire to spend some more time in your delightful company. Wherever it leads us, I’m ready, and anytime you tire of me I’ll go, or we could just have a nice conversation.”

“You want to converse?”

He laughed. “Not really.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a loose embrace. She responded by circling her arms around his waist. Her head came barely to the top of

his shoulder. Dane kissed her forehead and then trailed kisses down one side of her face with slow deliberation. The path he followed led to her lips, but he took his time getting there. Annabel's head turned suddenly so that his mouth landed on hers with the next touch of his lips. So he kissed her.

The moment his mouth covered hers, Dane knew they'd spend the night together. She relaxed in his arms, and a low moan escaped her throat. The soft, tentative shift of her lips as she parted for him zoomed his lust immediately. He gently thrust his tongue inside her warmth for a long, slow taste.

Annabel reciprocated by brushing her tongue against his with insistent enthusiasm. Dane twisted his mouth across her lips to savor a deeper taste. His hunger so deeply urgent, he hoped he could temper his actions and not devour her whole. Unless that was what she wanted. He was ready to accommodate any desire she voiced.

Her fingertips dug into his back, as the kiss became more aggressive. He crushed her body to his chest, lifting her higher until only the tips of her bare toes remained on the floor. He was unable to get close enough fast enough. He stood ready to satisfy any unvoiced desires as well.

His cock dug into her belly and throbbed with every stroke of his tongue inside her mouth. Dane's hand slipped along her back until he cupped her derrière one-handed. He pulled her hips into his rampant erection, looking for her signal as to whether to go further.

The moan from her throat clinched it. Dane pulled her completely off her feet and carried her to the bed centered against the far wall. She'd already pulled the window curtains closed before his arrival. He pushed her down to the bed and followed, covering her completely without breaking the intoxicating kiss.

Dane slid his hand down and searched for the hem of her nightgown. Once he found it, he lifted the fabric and slid it up to uncover her slim thighs as his cock pulsed wildly against her belly, wanting to get inside her sweet pussy.

The moment her hips lifted into his pelvis with a sharp nudge, Dane knew he'd spend the rest of the night making love to her. If he had anything to say, they wouldn't be sleeping much in this room. He broke the carnal kiss to leave the bed and get undressed. He couldn't get his clothes off fast enough.

Annabel's lips shaped into a lovely grin as she watched him shuck his jacket, vest, and shirt off. He flung the garments around him like a tornado. She smiled even wider at his struggle to remove his boots and came off the bed to help him.

Once his pants slipped off and he got down to his long underwear, he pushed himself against her. "Let me take your nightgown off," he whispered.

"All right." She lifted her arms into the air and smiled at him. Dane didn't hesitate. He bent over, grabbed the hem and lifted the gown over her head and reveled in the beauty of her naked body inch by glorious inch.

The only light in the room was the kerosene lamp by the bed turned down very low and another one hanging on the wall by the door, but it was light enough to see that Annabel was a beauty. Her youth was more evident without her clothing to cover it up, and Dane wondered at her age and experience.

"Not to be indelicate, but have you ever done this before?"

Annabel blushed from head to toes. Even in the low lamplight, he could see her pale skin turn rosy. "That's a fair question, I guess. I'm just not sure what answer you're seeking. And at this important point in time, I don't want to get it wrong."

He caressed her chin and jaw lightly with his fingertips. "My only concern is hurting you. If this is your first time, I need to slow things down and do things a little differently."

"My fiancé and I were intimate before he became ill, so no, this isn't my first sexual experience. But it has been a very long time." The sadness in her tone spoke to her loneliness more than anything she could have said.

Dane kissed the corner of her mouth. “That’s the exact right answer.”

She smiled. “Is it brazen to invite a veritable stranger to my room for improper purposes?”

“No. Not at all. Besides, I’m not really a stranger any more. I’ll be less of one when I leave this room, if I ever decide to go. But I promise you this, nothing we do together tonight will be improper.” He captured her lips in another soul searing kiss. She moaned again, and his cock reared, wanting the freedom to fuck blindly into her soft body.

Her sudden, nervous giggle against his lips softened his urgency. Dane didn’t need to hurry this, not at all. They had all night long. Their kiss became languorous. He pulled away enough to stare into her eyes. Her green-eyed stare bore straight through to *his* lonely soul.

Dane pulled her closer into his arms and resumed the kiss. Slowly he tasted her, wanting to arouse her and at the same time assure her that she wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Women also had the capacity to get lonely and have desires as much as any man did. Annabel was certainly allowed to desire. Dane was grateful she’d chosen to trust him and planned to make tonight an experience worth remembering. Four years was a long time between men, but at least he didn’t truly have to *break* her in to the world of carnal pleasures.

His cock pulsed against her body again, and Dane eased his hips between her legs. Her unbound breasts pressed into his naked chest. He swore he felt her nipples tighten with each stroke of his tongue in her mouth.

In an effort to take his time, Dane trailed a path of soft kisses from her mouth, across her cheek and down to her breasts. The thought of tasting her nipples made his mouth water. Shifting his torso to accommodate his movements, he soon pressed his lips to the swell of one breast, then the other, before latching on to her pert, distended nipple.

The moment he enclosed the tip in the warmth of his mouth, Annabel arched her back, pushing the lush bud further between his lips. He sucked harder, stroking his tongue across the hard tip. Her sweet groan of satisfaction sent a pulse of desire straight to his swollen cock.

He released her nipple and trailed kisses to the other in order to taste that one, as well. Another moan came from her throat, and Dane decided to ensure her ultimate gratification before letting his cock enter her pussy. He pressed kisses between her breasts and then trailed lower. Across her flat belly he licked and kissed his way to the curls at the apex of her thighs.

The scent of her desire grew stronger and stronger until he buried his face between her legs and licked her pussy lips and clit.

Her hips shuddered, and another moan escaped her lips. She didn't question his actions, so he proceeded to suck on her clit and lick her pussy to his heart's content.

Annabel's breathing increased until she was panting. Her fingers pressed through the hair on his head, nails grazed his scalp, pulling him closer to her center. He buried his face between her legs and shot his tongue deeply into her pussy. Two fingers replaced his tongue inside her body, and he concentrated on licking her clitoris.

The sultry sounds of her moans told him she was close to reaching her ultimate satisfaction. His tongue licked across her clit and then he sucked the bud between his lips. Fingers curling gently inside her pussy, he smiled internally when a sudden sharp intake of breath signaled a start of her release.

The moment she screamed and her hips bucked wildly, he was assured she'd climaxed. The strong contractions of her pussy on his fingers signaled her satisfaction adeptly.

His cock, about to explode with a need to fuck, propelled him to slide his body into position for the next round of pleasure. Dane shoved his long underwear down his thighs and positioned his legs between Annabel's thighs.

“I don’t think I can wait much longer, sugar. Are you ready for me?” he whispered urgently as his cock nudged her pussy lips, desperately wanting free reign to enter.

Eyes closed, she nodded as a very satisfied smile shaped her lips.

“Open your eyes, Annabel, I want to watch your face as I come inside you.”

* * * *

Annabel opened her eyes after the most amazing and unexpected feeling had shaken her to her very soul. She gazed into the bluest eyes she’d ever seen, belonging to the most perfect man she’d ever met. A man who had just done something scandalously wonderful to the sensitive bud between her legs using his tongue.

“Whatever you just did was absolutely amazing. I feel like I should thank you.”

His warm grin put to rest any remaining anxiety she felt over this clandestine experience. His cock pressed closer to the entrance of her still quaking body. “No need to thank me.” He surged forward until the head of his cock entered her. “Just let me inside.”

She widened her legs and slipped her arms around his neck. “I’m yours.”

Without any further hesitation, Dane thrust his cock all the way to the end of her slick pussy. His eyes closed before he got all the way inside. He groaned and stiffened before pulling out half way and pushing forward again. “You’re so unbelievably tight. Tell me I’m not hurting you.” His eyes opened and pierced her with a look as strong as his cock thrusting inside her body.

“I promise. You aren’t hurting me,” she whispered and held his stare with one of her own. He kept his focus on her face as he continued thrusting his wide, hard cock inside her body. The sensation was incredibly seductive. Her body stretched to accommodate his wide girth. He sped his strokes until she thought she

might burst from the pleasure of their mating. She wrapped her legs around his hips and tightened them to bring him closer.

The friction of his movement across her clitoris soon brought her to the pinnacle of another climax. The power of his cock moving within her increased her pleasure tenfold. The moment his eyes drifted shut, a low groan came from his throat. He pierced her deeply, pushing his cock directly against her womb, and she fell off into a shuddering, wonderful oblivion with him.

Shattering into a thousand slivers of pleasure, which then careened through her body, Annabel hoped she'd live through this amazing experience. Sensing that this encounter was coming to an end, she already wanted him again. How inappropriate would it be to ask for seconds? Or was it thirds?

Dane flattened himself across her body, panting hard against her throat and pinning her to the bed. Annabel could barely catch her breath.

After several moments listening to their loud breathing, Dane shifted to his elbows and shot another very passionately inquisitive look her way. "What are you thinking about, sugar?"

The smile erupted before she could stop it. "Truthfully, I was wondering if we could do that again."

Chapter Two

Early the next morning, Dane withdrew from Annabel's room discreetly and exited through the back door of the hotel, ensuring no one saw him leave. He didn't even attempt to wipe the smile from his lips. She still slept peacefully, but before retiring, and after they made love for the third time in the wee hours of the morning, he had convinced her to "accidentally" meet for breakfast in the hotel dining room before her stagecoach arrived to collect her.

He wanted to see her one more time. Or perhaps he *needed* to see her. Either way, separating from her was more difficult than he ever imagined.

Annabel was a siren in bed. He knew she wasn't *experienced*, but her enthusiasm for making love all night made her hard to resist. Giving and sweet and clever during their time together, Dane knew he was already half in love with her.

Last night, she'd been less than forthcoming about her destination on this trip north. Come to think of it, he didn't know where she lived, either. Perhaps she didn't want to see him again, but he sincerely hoped not. He told her the name of the town where he lived, although she smiled sweetly and reminded him she knew exactly where he lived. He also ensured she knew how to get to his ranch, so she could get a hold of him if she ever needed to do so. It wasn't that she was coy but rather distracted and guarded over her upcoming plans. She told him she *might* write to him in a month or two.

It would be a very long month or two in his mind.

Dane headed for the stable and checked on his horse, even though he knew his stallion was perfectly fine. He simply killed time waiting

for the dining room in the hotel to open. The only other place open in town was the saloon, and whisky before breakfast had never been something he craved. He wouldn't mind getting an hour of shut eye, but feared over sleeping and missing the promised meal together. He could sleep later.

Behind him, Dane heard several horses whinny, signaling the approach of someone. The sound of spurs jingling registered, but before he could turn around, something hit him on the head. He went to his knees trying to grab hold of his fading consciousness.

The second blow put him face down on the ground and out cold.

* * * *

Annabel waited in the dining room as long as prudent for Dane to show up for breakfast before she had to eat or go hungry on the first leg of today's stagecoach journey. His absence shouldn't hurt so much, but a small part of her was very disappointed at his lack of attendance. While she had been the one to maintain they didn't need to see each other again, he'd been rather insistent they meet today before she left.

With his nonappearance this morning, Annabel decided he merely tried to be polite given the liberties she'd allowed him the night before. Offered the chance again, she'd certainly agree to spend the night with him regardless of today's absence. Between exotic bouts between the sheets, they had discussed their lives. Among other things, they'd discussed a tentative future. Well, truthfully, she hadn't even told him what town she lived in. However, he made sure she knew *exactly* where he could be found should she ever need him. And after this trip to fulfill her desire to shoot in a contest, she would need to find him. A repeat of that very satisfying experience would always be a welcome desire.

Heat rose in her cheeks as sultry memories of the night before filtered across her conscience. She'd experienced quite a bit of need

the night before. And Dane fulfilled every one of her desires.

“Would you like more tea, Miss?” The serving girl startled her out of her reverie.

“No, thank you.” She glanced at the clock, and added, “I must be on my way.” Annabel almost stopped the girl with the notion of leaving a message for Dane, but it wouldn’t do to ask about him or infer they had planned to meet. And besides, what would she say in a message. “Thank you for making all my wildest sexual desires come true last night. Sorry I missed you at breakfast?”

No. That wouldn’t do at all. Annabel had been the one to insist that if they met at all, they must meet by happenstance so as to alleviate any impropriety. Last night had been nothing but improper behavior and lots of it. Annabel swallowed a smile in memory of the seductive night with Dane. Honestly, she was more surprised than anything else that he didn’t join her for the morning meal. Perhaps he’d overslept after their lack of sleeping the night before. Another smile threatened to erupt. She inhaled deeply and exited the hotel dining room with only a small hint of regret.

Regardless of if they ever met again, she would carry a fond memory from this day forward.

An hour later, the stagecoach rolled out of town, and Annabel focused her attention on the upcoming battle with the Wyoming Territory Shooter’s Club sponsors. She’d have to choose her words carefully in order to have a chance to compete. That was where her focus should be and not on Dane’s firm, muscular body or his beautiful blue eyes.

She released a long sigh and settled back against the leather cushion in the swaying stagecoach. There were three more days until she arrived in Pine Haven and three more nights to reflect on how she’d be sleeping alone.

* * * *

Garrett saddled up his horse, packed his traveling essentials, and left Outpost, Colorado, five days before the preliminary qualifying round of competition in the Wyoming Territory. His travel choices were either three days riding hell bent for leather to his destination or four days of a more leisurely paced ride. He wanted at least a day to rest up before the first day of shooting, so he found a comfortable gambol and hoped to come somewhere in between three and four days for his arrival at Pine Haven. He was set up to stay at the hotel in town and looked forward to the vacation almost as much as he did the competition.

Delbert and the former sheriff had matters well in hand for the coming two weeks, so Garrett looked forward to this respite. No breaking up saloon brawls, no chasing riff-raff out of town, and no dodging sultry, longing stares from the women at Madam Celia's House of Ill Repute as he rode through town. It was actually just called Madam Celia's, but everyone knew what went on behind the red, stained-glass doors leading to the garishly decorated front parlor.

Involving himself with one of those women was something Garrett took great pains to avoid. It wasn't so much that he had a problem sharing a woman with another man, even though he had never done it before, but the mayor had been very clear during the negotiation of employment about such licentious behavior and involvement with whores by the town's sheriff as being a firing offense. If he wanted a woman in his life, apparently he needed to marry a proper, well-brought up female.

No favoritism was allowed for the residents at the local whorehouse.

Garrett had the choice of keeping his comfortable job or spending time with a fallen woman, but he couldn't have both. So he opted to keep his career as sheriff alive and avoided Madam Celia's at all costs. He'd never contemplated marriage, but perhaps he'd just never found a woman willing to put up with him on a daily basis. And he was also willing to admit that he was fairly picky about just *any*

woman sharing his life permanently. He wasn't much for simpering females without a backbone, leaching on to him for a comfortable life.

He suspected the mayor's wife, Matilda, was behind the stern rule he now lived by, but in truth, it wasn't much of a trial. He wouldn't have availed himself of the charms of the women there anyway. Seeking a woman while on vacation was a completely different proposition. He could do as he liked while away from prying eyes. So if the right situation came along, perhaps he'd avail himself of certain carnal pleasures on this trip.

Two days out of town and Garrett had to admit a certain eagerness for the coming challenge. Three time champion had a nice ring to it, and once ensconced in the books as such, he'd have a credit to his name should he ever decide to capitalize on it. He didn't plan to be a sheriff forever, but perhaps a championship title would help with a position on the city council.

After riding hard for the first two days, Garrett slowed his pace and surveyed the landscape around him. Rife with hills and valleys of rich cinnamon red earth dusted with the vivid gray-green contrast of low scrub bushes and a copse of pine trees every so often as if dropped there for the sole purpose of being decorative scenery on a long, lonely ride, Garrett relaxed a notch and soaked in the natural beauty of the land.

It was just after mid-day, and he'd noticed stagecoach tracks in the dusty road he traveled. If he caught up with them before night fall, perhaps he'd ride along for company.

Having traveled this road before, he knew around the next bend some needed shade waited. A copse of tall trees and an overhang of rocks promising cool comfort for a few miles would make his journey even better.

Garrett slowed the pace of his horse even further, planning to enjoy the leisurely section of road, but instead of a nice, shady ride, he encountered chaos in the form of what looked like a stagecoach hold up. He put his hand on his gun and searched for bandits.

Upon closer inspection, the robbery had obviously already taken place. Milling around a horseless stagecoach were three passengers, two men and a woman carrying a wailing baby, and an angry driver.

“Whoa, there, mister,” a seasoned man with a faded red bandana around his neck called out. “We need some help.”

Garrett pulled on his reins and stopped. “Are you the stagecoach driver?”

He nodded. “I’m Sam Colbert.” He removed his brown, weathered hat and slapped it against one thigh. “Who are you, friend?”

“I’m the sheriff from Outpost, Colorado. Name’s Garrett. Were you robbed?”

“Yep. Four men stole the hidden box of gold we was carryin’ and let loose our horse team. We’re stranded here until we round them up. Hopefully, the team didn’t get too far down the way. The horses were still all harnessed together when they took off, so maybe that slowed ‘em down some.” He looked over his shoulder at the dusty road. “We were bound for Westerville, in the Wyoming Territory. Still a couple of hours away.”

Garrett nodded. “I know it. I’m headed in that direction myself.”

The thin-lipped woman wearing a severe black dress approached quickly from the door of the stagecoach, her pinched expression dire. As she got closer, he realized she was fairly young. “And they kidnapped a woman. Don’t forget poor Miss Annabel being taken.” The baby in her arms had stopped crying but also wore a frown as if further tears loomed.

The driver directed his gaze at the ground. “They’re gone twenty minutes already. She’s likely dead by now.” He paused and hocked up some spit. After releasing it to his right side, he murmured, “Or wishing she was.”

The lady in black shot the driver a quelling look. He wasn’t sure if it was due to the driver’s spitting manners or something else, but then she moved closer as Garrett scanned the area looking for where the

bandits might have gone with *Miss Annabel*. There was only one obvious trail.

“Did you see which direction they took her?”

The lady in black adjusted the baby on her hip one-handed and pointed due west. Her baby started crying again as if sensing its mother’s distress. She shushed the child quietly before turning her face up to Garrett again. “Please rescue her, Sheriff. I’m sure she’s terribly frightened.”

Garrett turned to the driver. “Gather your horses and head for Westerville. I’ll find Miss Annabel and meet you there.”

“Four against one ain’t very good odds, even if you are a sheriff.”

“Well, luckily, I’m an excellent shot, as well.” Garrett noted the sun’s position in the sky. He had less than four hours of daylight left, and he was already twenty minutes behind his prey.

“Are you Sheriff Butler?”

Garrett turned and did his best to hide the surprise at being recognized. “Yes. How did you know?”

The man’s grin was missing one front tooth. “I seen you shoot ten bulls-eyes in a row last year at the sharpshooter’s club up in Wyoming Territory and tie that rancher fella. Maybe you do have a chance, after all. Good luck. I’ll see you get part of the gold as a reward if you find the strong box and bring it back.”

Garrett nodded once and put his horse into a full gallop in the direction of the vile kidnappers. Treasure was not his immediate goal. He just hoped he wasn’t too late to save their female captive, Miss Annabel.

Chapter Three

Annabel, wrists secured with rope behind her, squirmed and screamed as she rode belly down across the uncomfortable pommel of the vile bandit's horse. If she could only reach his gun, she'd take vast pleasure in shooting him between the eyes.

She had the skill to do it, even with two hands tied behind her back. The despicable blackguard had been grabbing at her skirt, rubbing her backside since they rode away from the stagecoach. Every time she protested or attempted to squirm out of his way, he squeezed and pawed at her with even more enthusiasm, so she played dead and stopped moving. After a while, he stopped and focused on keeping them on the horse during the breakneck speed of their escape.

After traveling for what seemed like an hour, the four horsemen in this party crested a hill and left the woods. Annabel had quieted down and pretended to be in a faint. She sensed this short trip was about to come to an end and didn't want to contemplate what these men had in store for her.

They rode down into a small valley next to a meandering stream, turning abruptly towards a rock face. The pace slowed as they led their horses single file into a wide crack at the base of the rocky cliff. Annabel's heart flipped over in terror at being trapped in tight quarters with these horrible men. Even if she could get away, running blindly through a maze wouldn't accomplish much.

Her only chance was to appropriate a gun and shoot them. Or threaten to.

Unfortunately, she had never shot at a live person, only targets. Did she have the fortitude to kill her captors, given the chance at a

weapon? Her uncertainty made Annabel search for alternative ideas of escape. Her hands would need to be free to appropriate a horse and even hope to get away. Grim determination would be needed to accomplish her goals.

Once the riders all slowed down significantly, her immediate captor stroked his hand along her spine from neck to ass. She didn't move a muscle. No need to incite him again. But how long could she play dead?

"I want to find out how much gold is in the box," came a voice from nearby.

The man she rode with brought his horse to a stop, stood in his stirrups, swung a leg over, and left her on the horse. "Then we'll shoot off the lock and find out how much gold we just earned." He slapped her on the bottom and dragged her from the horse. She continued the pretense that she'd fainted and remained dead weight. Her captor dumped her on the ground after a few steps. Annabel remained unresponsive as the four men abandoned her and gathered a few yards away from where she rested. They surrounded the small strong box they'd stolen from the stagecoach and watched it as if it might just pop open if they stared at it hard enough.

Opening her eyes half way the moment her captor walked away, she watched as the foursome first kicked the box then attempted to shoot the lock off with a gun. The first bullet ricocheted, and each of the men shouted in alarm.

"Goddamn it, Jess, watch what you're doing. You want to kill one of us? Aim your damned gun at the ground."

A second shot was fired with more care to the possibility of ricochet, and the lock dropped to the ground. They all hunkered down around the box and started pulling out gold coins and bills. Stolen treasure. Money being sent on to the city of Cheyenne in the Wyoming Territory, to pay wages and other debts. Bastards. They hadn't *earned* this money.

Annabel decided in short order that if she could get hold of a gun,

perhaps she would be able to pull the trigger, especially if what they had planned for her came to pass. It wasn't a stretch of her imagination. She knew what went on between men and women in the bedroom. Her recent memory with Dane solidified the fact that caring for your partner made the experience so much more delightful, and the memories had staying power.

A lesson she'd learned initially with her fiancé long ago, when they'd made love. James had been so sweet and so careful for her first time with a man. She knew any concern for her well-being wouldn't be repeated today. Annabel swallowed bile and did her best to get hold of her emotions. They couldn't take what she wouldn't give. She refused to cower or cry if they abused her. She would instead focus on revenge. And God help them all if she ever got hold of a gun.

Tonight, she vowed to shut down and stay alive until they were finished with her. From the sounds coming from the quartet around the strong box, the take was more than they'd expected. They whooped and hollered and danced around a bit before settling down. One man ran over to a decrepit wagon and pulled a couple of bottles of liquor out. They commenced to drinking along with the whooping and hollering.

She kept her lashes half closed hoping they'd forget all about her, but after a few turns around the open treasure box, the man who'd pawed at her all the way here cast a look in her direction. She narrowed her eyes further closed and watched as he sidled closer to where she pretended to sleep. He stopped only long enough to take a deep swig from the bottle he held.

"Let's wake up our captive and have some fun."

He was on her three seconds later. With her hands still bound behind her, Annabel couldn't fight him off. She tried to keep from screaming at first, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he scared her, but she soon lost the battle and let loose a piercing shriek meant to summons help from two states away.

The fumes from the alcohol on his breath, along with whatever

horrid, pungent meal he'd last consumed, turned her stomach. She fought him by attempting to twist away, but it was a losing battle at best. He twisted her towards him and tried to kiss her. She turned her head and struggled harder.

"I'm going to fuck you blind."

The others laughed and fired off a few rounds of gunfire into the air. Foul breath panting in her face as she struggled, the man grabbed two fistfuls of the front of her dress and ripped the fabric wide open. She felt the cool air on her chest first and his hot breath on her breast next.

Unable to stop herself at the added insult of him ruining her favorite dress, Annabel took another deep lungful of air and let loose another scream as loud as she could the moment his mouth landed on the bare skin of her naked, exposed breast. Her voice echoed against the walls of the canyon and mingled with the riotous laughter from the other three men now sauntering closer to watch her struggle against the vile beast accosting her.

"Quit fighting me," he snarled. He lifted off of her, and she spit in his face.

Saliva dripping off his cheek, the man suddenly rose up on his knees with his arm in the air poised to strike a blow.

Annabel closed her eyes and swallowed hard to keep the contents of her stomach from erupting. The bright sunlight rained down but was blocked by his raised arm for a moment as Annabel waited for him to smack her into what she prayed was sudden and long-lasting unconsciousness.

* * * *

Garrett heard a heart wrenching feminine scream echo against the canyon walls but didn't force his horse into a gallop, although he truly wanted to. The sound of her panic sent his heart thumping wildly in his chest with hope. Screaming meant she was alive.

The sound of several gunshots had led him into this crevice situated between two towering cliffs, but being unfamiliar with this particular piece of landscape, he didn't want to risk a mad dash into the unknown. He wanted to rescue the female captive, not become a victim himself.

Calm and serene, Garrett ambled between the rock faces, spying the tell tale signs of recent travel by several horses. They were in here all right. Bastards.

Until he'd heard her cry out, Garrett conjured easily a scene where she lay dead beside an empty strong box, ruined, hurt, and all alone in her final minutes. No one deserved to die all alone. Least of all, an innocent woman caught up in circumstances beyond her control.

"You're too late." His subconscious prodded his worried heart.

But he wasn't. She'd screamed and was, therefore, still very much alive. He urged his horse into a faster trot, just short of a gallop. No need to signal to the bandits as he neared.

Another gunshot sounded like a TNT blast in the quiet afternoon seclusion. Soon after, loud, laughing voices erupted, and Garrett knew he was almost on top of them.

He dismounted as he slowed, grabbed his rifle, and walked to an outcropping of loose boulders gathered to one side of the red canyon wall. A little landslide of cover built in as if waiting to shield him for this rescue.

Garrett climbed up the stair step of boulders, gripping his favorite rifle, and crouched to view the scene displayed between two obliging, strategically placed rocks in the landslide cover.

He surveyed the scene as the sound of fabric being torn viciously floated through the space in the rocks. She screamed again, and Garrett raised his rifle as if by reflex. Through the narrow sight, he zeroed in on his target, the one villainous man hunched over a woman who wore a bright blue gingham print dress. *Annabel*.

Garrett saw the pale white of her creamy skin and her exposed breasts. It was no secret what these men intended to do to her. A flash

of relief that he'd made it in time rushed through Garrett. He fired his round at the raised arm of the man about to strike her.

Bang. His shot true, Garrett hit the man in the shoulder. His gunfire initially unnoticed by the other three goons. They didn't move an inch.

When the man on Annabel yelled and fell to one side, Garrett immediately sighted his rifle to the right and targeted the largest of the remaining three men.

Bang.

He hit the man with the scarlet bandana square in the upper left side of his chest. Not a fatal wound, but it had enough force to knock him on the ground. Villain number two began moaning and writhing as soon as he hit the dirt. The remaining two bandits drew their pistols and aimed all around the canyon walls. Obviously, they hadn't noticed where Garrett was perched or where his shots had come from.

Stupid.

The man on the ground near the feminine victim drew a weapon and started to point his pistol at the woman's head.

Garrett sighted on the man for a second time and pulled the trigger with a straight shot to his head before she was ever in any danger of being killed. The bandit was slammed to his back and didn't make any further movement.

The woman he assumed was Annabel turned over onto her stomach and began rolling away from her dead abuser. Garrett noticed her bound hands for the first time. She rolled and squirmed with what looked like supreme effort but without making much progress.

The other two robbers still stood rooted in the same spot and had stopped swinging their pistols wildly around the canyon walls. With one of their crew now dead from his third shot, they zeroed in on Garrett's hiding place and advanced. Each carried two pistols and had murderous expressions etched in their faces.

Although they fired several shots in his direction, none came close enough to make him jump out of the way for fear of his life.

Marksmanship was apparently not required as a skill in this gang's recruitment process. Garrett picked them off, first one and then the other. He didn't shoot to kill, but one bandit fell forward and struck his head on a rock and didn't move afterwards. The other went down shrieking like a school girl in a play yard.

Garrett surveyed the scene after lowering his gun. The only thing still moving was the woman still attempting to move away from the carnage he'd wrought and the fourth man still squealing like a trapped pig facing a roasting pit.

He climbed down from his perch and grabbed his horse's reins, carefully making his way out from behind his cover.

"Ma'am, are you hurt?" She stopped moving at the sound of his voice but didn't respond. Garrett moved closer and saw tears spill from her lids and trail down her dust stained cheeks.

He reached out to cut her bonds, but she startled when he touched her arm and wrenched her hands out of his reach. "I'm just going to cut the rope to free your hands. I promise, I won't hurt you." She didn't move at all.

Garrett avoided touching her, sawed through the ropes, and released her from the awkward confinement. She immediately drew her arms to her sides and then up to her chest as she awkwardly rose to her knees. She faced away from him, but he'd already seen what she was trying desperately to cover up. He planned to pretend he hadn't seen one single inch of her lovely body.

Garrett glanced over one shoulder to check how much daylight remained. He discovered more than he estimated, but they still needed to get going. Time to make the introductions. Keeping his distance and endeavoring not to make any sudden moves to frighten her, he asked, "Are you Miss Annabel?"

"How do you know that?" She whipped her head and torso around enough that he saw the damage to her dress. It was completely ruined, and the only thing shielding her naked breasts from view was her

forearms crossed over her chest, and her slender limbs didn't cover everything. The outer curves of her breasts were clearly visible.

"I came across the stagecoach you were taken from, and they told me which direction the bandits had gone. I followed as fast as I could to come after you."

"You're my hero then. You got here just in time." Her lips trembled, and she looked on the verge of tears.

He glanced at her chest. "Not quite." Garrett focused his attention on her face. "I'm sorry they ruined your dress."

Her gaze lowered to her arms briefly before returning to his face. "Please don't worry about my dress. My circumstances could have been so much worse." Her eyes dipped down to her chest for a longer look. When she lifted her face again to stare up at him, her vibrant green eyes were filled with tears. "Thank you." She sniffed, and another tear rolled down her cheek. "He almost—"

"But he didn't, did he? You aren't hurt, right?" He interrupted, not wanting her to relive the atrocities already committed against her.

She didn't move for several seconds. Looking to her right at the man who'd almost violated her, the expression on her face darkened. Eyes narrowed, she studied his limp form and then mashed her eyes shut.

"Ma'am, are you sure you aren't hurt?" he asked again.

Another long pause came before she shook her head. "No. But my dress is torn beyond any temporary repair."

Relieved that she was talking and coherent instead of hysterical and nonsensical, he pondered what to do to help. "I have a shirt you can borrow. It should shield your torn dress, at least until we get to town."

"Thank you. That would be very generous of you."

He nodded and turned away quickly to get the spare shirt from his saddle bag.

When he returned, she had risen to her feet. Arms still strategically crossed over her bare breasts, Garrett swallowed hard

and leaned forward only enough so he could reach her without coming across as a threat. He didn't want to scare her. He draped the shirt over one shoulder and backed up a step. Unable to turn away at first, he kept his distance and watched her.

It wasn't lost upon him that she was very beautiful. Even in the disheveled state from her horrific experience, she had a strength and determination about her that was difficult to ignore. His libido came alive as the floral scent of her intruded on his conscience, and he quelled any amorous intent given the situation.

She was hurt, frightened, and vulnerable. He wasn't the kind of man who *ever* took advantage of women, let alone a fragile one directly after a depraved bandit had tried to accost her.

But she sure was pretty. Her striking green eyes mesmerized him.

Garrett smiled with as much reassurance as he could and turned away. He occupied his time by checking the status of the four desperadoes. He discovered that three were dead and one was breathing but unconscious. He gathered the other horses, automatically searching for any recognized brands. Likely, they were all stolen, too.

Ten minutes later, he walked over to where she stood wearing his tan shirt. Even buttoned all the way up, he could see all of her throat and part of the pale skin below her collar bone. The sleeves were a thick roll of fabric against her forearms.

"My shirt sure looks a lot better on you, ma'am."

Her smile warmed his heart and lit a fire further below, as well.

"I appreciate what you did for me..." she paused and sent her gaze to the dusty red ground. "I don't even know your name." She lifted her head and pierced him with a tentative look as if she were embarrassed to have needed rescuing.

"It's Garrett Butler. I'm a sheriff in Outpost, Colorado, and honestly delighted to be of service. I was just on my way north to take some time off."

“A sheriff? From Colorado? I’m from Colorado. I’m so glad you didn’t stop being a sheriff when you went on holiday.”

He shrugged. “I’m always a lawman, wherever I go.”

“I’m very grateful.” She took a step closer and tilted her head back.

Without the intentional thought of doing so, he drifted closer until only inches separated their bodies.

He couldn’t look away. The sun was lowering with every minute, and they needed to get back on the trail, but he couldn’t tear his gaze from her. She inched closer. He didn’t stop the inevitable touch of their bodies.

She leaned forward until her breasts pushed into his chest, the two layers of shirt fabric not able to hide her excitement in the form of her pebbled nipples digging into his body.

Before he could stop her—and he wouldn’t have anyway—she slipped her hands around his neck.

“Thank you for what you did. I thought I was going to die today.” She pulled his head down and pressed her soft lips against his mouth.

Garrett only meant to reassure the fragile emotions of Miss Annabel, but the tender kiss between them became much more after only a few seconds. A chaste kiss would have been enough of a reward, but she had more in mind.

Twisting her head, she parted her mouth and stroked his bottom lip with her delectable tongue. He growled in surprise, wrapped his arms around her back, and returned the passion of the surprise kiss with scorching intent.

Her lips parted more. When he felt her tongue slide against his lower lip again, he was obliged to twist his mouth across hers for a deeper taste. Miss Annabel tasted very sweet and yet a part of him knew it was wrong to go much further. He didn’t want to take advantage of her vulnerable state.

Garrett pulled back ever so slightly, but she pushed forward and didn’t let him get away. She initiated the level of their kiss, and he

intended to see it through to the end.

Thrusting his tongue into her warm mouth, his brain froze in wonderment, but his cock reared in lusty readiness for this unexpected embrace. He wanted her.

A slim rational thought surfaced that said this was only gratitude for the timely rescue but was just as quickly squashed by his ardent libido wanting so much more from this fragile beautiful woman.

The kiss went on and on and on until Garrett had to stop the distraction or call himself a cad. Taking advantage of her was something he'd already told himself he absolutely would not do. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, and she leaned into him until she was swallowed by his frame. His cock took the opportunity to identify that a lush, beautiful woman was squeezed in his arms and stiffened in salute.

He released her with a long sigh and kissed the top of her head. It was going to be a very long ride back to town, and they needed to get started or else they'd arrive after dark. That would ruin her fragile reputation even more than if a slim ray of light still registered on the horizon. Riding in after dark brought with it all sorts of innuendo about being alone with a woman. It shouldn't, but often, reason and logic were not in abundance during these types of situations.

"We need to go." Garrett moved away from her a little further.

Her posture went ramrod straight even though he didn't mean to be so distant. "Yes. You're right. I'm staying at the hotel in the next town where the stagecoach was scheduled to stop." She heaved a deep sigh. "If they even held my room after I was kidnapped from the stagecoach. Late arrival even on a stagecoach doesn't often guarantee a place to sleep."

"I won't let you go without a room tonight. The sheriff in the next town is a friend. Besides, I'm sure the stagecoach line will insist you get a room given your ordeal."

She looked dubious but soon nodded. "I hope you're right."

"I'll gather the horses. Can you ride?"

She shot him a panicked look. “May I please ride with you?” *No. Absolutely not.* “I’d feel much safer. And, quite frankly, I’m so shaky I don’t think I can stay in a saddle without someone to hold on to.”

“Of course,” he replied automatically. Like a fool. “You can rest on the way to town.”

And I will suffer. Pleasantly so.

Chapter Four

The ride out of the narrow canyon was certainly more pleasant than the trip into it and not just because she wasn't belly down over the pommel of a bandit's horse, fearing for her life. Even though Garrett was as much a stranger as the others, Annabel knew this man would keep her safe. He was a sheriff. A man she could trust. Her rescuer. And besides, she tasted that conviction in his kiss.

Garrett had been the one to back away from her impromptu gratitude. He'd even seemed slightly embarrassed to have so enthusiastically participated, but his cock growing rigid against her stomach during the exchange told her that he found her attractive.

The sound of his gunfire picking off the degenerate ruffians had taken her by surprise. At first, she thought the idiots were simply firing wasted ammunition into the air, until the man who'd ripped the front panel out of her best dress grunted and fell to one side, bleeding from his chest. He'd been about to strike her for spitting in his face, but the pain she expected from his open hand poised above her never came.

Without thinking, Annabel had flipped to her stomach and tried to get away, not understanding that a rescue was imminent. Her first thought was that another criminal waited to do his worst.

Until he said her name. Until he'd cut her bonds. Until he'd given her his shirt to wear for modesty's sake.

He was a true hero. Her hero.

Snuggled against his steely frame, Annabel snaked an arm around his waist as they rode away from the secluded canyon. The blazing sun eventually tempered its heat the closer nightfall came and headed

for the shelter of the mountains. She took a deep breath of satisfaction and relief. Along with the air came Garrett's masculine scent. He smelled of leather, gun powder, and the unique musky fragrance so inherently common to men.

Garrett held her securely in his arms and glanced over his shoulder occasionally to check on the only living member of the gang who'd taken her. Her previous captor was now belly down on the first of four additional horses trailing behind them.

After half an hour of riding, they came across the place in the road where she'd been taken. The stagecoach was already gone.

He didn't slow the horses but remarked, "Guess they got the team of horses rounded up. I told them to take off down the road to the next town."

"Did you? Why?"

"They told me about you being taken. I offered to go after you and didn't plan to head for town myself until I'd found you. There was no sense in them waiting around, too."

"I guess not." She tightened her grip around his waist.

"Once we get to town and get your things, you'll feel better."

"I'm certain you're right."

She wondered what else might happen once they got to town. Annabel wasn't sure she wanted to relinquish Garrett's strong, safe arms for the night. It would be completely inappropriate to ask him to stay over in her hotel room, but the thought of spending the night safely in his arms gathered importance with each mile they covered on the road towards her next destination.

In two days, Annabel would arrive at the town of Pine Haven ready to plead her case before the judges and coordinators of the annual Wyoming Territory Sharpshooter's Club contest to let her participate. Tonight, though, she desperately needed comfort and a feeling of protection from this man. And the fact that Garrett was very attractive didn't hurt at all either.

Dane's beautiful face entered her mind briefly, but she separated it

from her current thoughts. Tonight's desire for companionship was about feeling safe and expressing gratitude to the man responsible for her even being alive.

Her emotions still very fragile, Annabel kept flashing back to the sound of her dress ripping from her body. Hands bound in agony behind her back and helpless to stop her kidnapper from doing whatever he wanted, she shuddered inside each time that particular memory surfaced. She pushed the thought of what didn't happen out of her mind, even as she squeezed Garrett's waist tighter.

They rode in relative silence almost all the way to the next town of Westerville. Garrett told her he knew the sheriff here. His name was Mathew, and he met them about a mile out of town.

"Sheriff Butler," he called in greeting. "The stagecoach driver reported being held up. I was just on my way to lend you some assistance."

Garrett handed him the reins to three of the four horses. The fourth, directly behind his mount, had the strong box strapped to the saddle. Mathew took possession of the extra horses and the unconscious bandit.

With a weary sigh, Garrett pointed over his shoulder. "I left the other three to rot in a small canyon about ten miles back and to the west."

Mathew nodded. "I know where it is. Thanks for helping out."

"I'm going to see that the young lady gets a room over at the hotel and give the strong box back to the stagecoach driver, then I'll come to the jail and tell you in more detail what happened."

Mathew shrugged. "You can just stop by tomorrow before you leave. No rush." He eyed Annabel once or twice throughout the short conversation but never asked any details about her. She was grateful not to have to explain why she wore a man's shirt or what nearly happened back in the canyon.

Garrett clicked his tongue, and the horse started moving. "We're almost there. You all right?"

While Annabel looked forward to a quiet room and the possibility of a bath to scrub away the day's horrible events, a part of her hated to say good bye to Garrett. When would she see him again? How could she properly thank him for saving not only her life but from being violated by those men? How could she ever sleep tonight all alone without his strong arms to protect her? How could she get him to cooperate and stay with her for the night?

"I'll make sure you get a room before I leave."

She lifted her head and stared into his blue eyes. "Don't leave me. Please. Will you stay with me tonight?"

His lips quirked into an odd shape before straightening out. "The only way I could stay in your room is to register as your husband, and the stagecoach folks know that isn't true. We wouldn't get away with it."

"But you could just say you're my guard." Annabel hated to sound like she was begging, but the powerful attraction she felt for this man right now overrode any common sense. His honorable intentions only made him more desirable.

"Annabel, as much as I'd love to spend the evening with you, it wouldn't be proper. I understand that you're still upset about what happened, but the best I could do is guard the outside of your door."

"I accept your offer."

His eyes widened as if surprised by her forthright attitude regarding her desire to spend time with him, even if it was through a door. It wasn't fair to ask him to sit in an uncomfortable chair all night propped against the wall in the hallway, but perhaps sometime after midnight, she'd be able to coax him into her soft, comfy bed.

Plan well in hand, Annabel smiled at her own seductive scheming to get another man into her hotel room. Garrett was so much different than Dane, both in coloring and in demeanor. Garrett was taller, thicker and both his skin and disposition was darker than the whipcord lean Dane with his blond hair and happy-go-lucky attitude.

The stagecoach driver came out of the town's public stable as they

rode towards the hotel. Annabel thought he looked relieved to see her, although he hadn't put up much of a fight when they'd taken her in the first place. Perhaps he felt guilty about her kidnapping.

"Glad to see you, Sheriff." He glanced at Annabel briefly. He couldn't miss the fact that she was secured to Garrett's side like a tick on a fat puppy.

"Were you able to recover the strong box?"

Garrett pointed to the horse he led behind him. "Yep. Got it right there. The lock's been shot off, but I was able to recover all the money. And more importantly, I was able to rescue Miss Annabel just in time."

The stagecoach driver looked away as if suddenly embarrassed by her abduction and what might have transpired if Garrett hadn't gotten there *just in time*.

"Good. I'm glad she fared well."

"Fared well?" Annabel didn't realize she'd spoken out loud until the rheumy eyes of the stagecoach driver fixed on her. "They kidnapped me and nearly violated me, and all you have to say is you're glad I fared well?"

He looked away again. "I'm sorry you were taken, but I couldn't stop it."

"You didn't even try."

His head whipped around, and he pierced her with a petulant stare. "They out gunned me four to one."

Annabel wasn't inclined to let him off the hook. "So what? You had a gun, too."

His gaze went to the horizon. "True, 'cept mine wasn't loaded. You may find this hard to believe, but I've never been robbed before. And I know it ain't any consolation, given today's circumstances, but I won't ever make that mistake again."

Garrett squeezed her in his arms as if to temper any further combative conversation from her. "We're headed to the hotel." He tossed the reins from the second horse to the stagecoach driver who

caught them one-handed. "Here's your strong box. The horse is likely stolen. Stable it here, and I'll tell the town's sheriff to come for it later."

The stagecoach driver nodded and turned away without another word to either of them. Annabel tried to take his obvious embarrassment as an unspoken apology, but she stewed over the fact that her life had almost taken a very horrible turn for the worse. The tragedy was unwittingly aided by an unprepared, and eventually unrepentant, stagecoach driver.

As if he read her thoughts, Garrett murmured, "Don't get worked up over his failure. It won't change anything."

"I know you're right. If I'd been in charge, I'd have ensured the gun was loaded."

"Miss Annabel!" The shriek of her name came from the other woman who'd shared the stagecoach with her, Mrs. Dempsey. "I never thought I'd see you alive again."

Dressed in the severe black dress and holding her baby tight against her chest, Mrs. Dempsey hurried over to the horse, and the previous conversation was put on hold or perhaps best left forgotten. Her narrow hawk-like gaze zeroed in on the man's shirt Annabel wore, and a frown shaped her mouth. "Oh no, Miss Annabel, please tell me you weren't ravished by those bandits." Her eyes had a particularly vibrant glow filled with obvious fear. Annabel, certain Mrs. Dempsey would probably fall into a dead faint if she ever found out how close Annabel came to being ravished by bandits before being rescued, decided to ease her fellow traveler's fears.

"I wasn't. Don't worry, Mrs. Dempsey, the sheriff got to me just in time."

Mrs. Dempsey's expression brightened after a moment or two, and she looked up at Garrett. "Why, that makes you a hero, Sheriff Butler."

"Just doing my job, ma'am." Leaving Annabel balanced on the saddle, Garrett swung one leg over and got off his horse. He reached

for Annabel, and she made a point to grasp his neck with her arms in a tight hug and slide down his body before allowing her feet to touch the ground.

Once stable, she didn't release him but held on to Garrett's forearms, afraid to let go and never see him again. She stared into his beautiful, stormy gray eyes for several moments longer than propriety would normally allow. She didn't even care if any repercussions were imminent. She wanted Garrett to understand her desire for him was strong, and if he'd only cooperate, they could have a lovely night together. And she'd be able to sleep without nightmares.

Unless Mrs. Dempsey didn't leave.

When she turned her head, Annabel noted Mrs. Dempsey's eyes were wide as saucers, and her mouth hung open. "Why are you wearing a man's shirt?"

Annabel cleared her throat. "My dress was ruined by the bandits. Sheriff Butler was kind enough to let me borrow his shirt, so I could at least be presentable when we came to town."

Miss Dempsey's gaze slid back to Garrett. Annabel recognized the new admiration. "You're a fine man, Sheriff. You should get a reward."

"Not needed, Mrs. Dempsey, but thank you all the same."

"Please call me Edna, no need to be so formal. Mrs. Dempsey is what they call my husband's mother. God rest his soul."

If Edna's baby hadn't started crying again, then she might have spent a longer time in conversation. Learning that the woman was a widow might make her a rival for the Sheriff's attention. But if Annabel had anything to say about it, Edna wouldn't get a chance to corner him. Likely as not, Edna simply appreciated his efforts on her behalf. However, it couldn't have escaped her attention that he was very handsome, too.

Garrett stepped back and took her elbow. "Let's go see about getting you a room."

"And a bath?"

He nodded and one corner of his mouth quirked up. "And a bath."

Tipping his hat once to Edna, Garrett led her into the hotel. Across the lobby was a desk very much resembling the one at the last hotel she'd stayed at where she'd been with Dane.

The clerk made a careful study of the man's shirt she wore as she crossed the rug strewn space to the desk counter.

"Please don't tell me you gave my room away because I got kidnapped off the stagecoach, and you didn't expect me." Annabel stared at the clerk waiting for bad news.

"Of course not. Your room is ready." He ran another gaze from her collar to her hips. His expression said he didn't care for her attire. "Will you require anything special?"

"Do you have bathing facilities on the premises?"

His practiced smile came into view. "Yes, it's on the lower level at the back of the hotel. It costs an extra fifty cents. Shall I order the water heated for you?"

"Yes. Please."

"Here is your key." He handed her an elaborately decorated brass key with a number eight engraved on one side. "The stagecoach driver unloaded your bags a while back, and we stored them for you. We're a little short staffed at the moment. Do you have someone to bring your bags to your room?" The clerk gave Garrett a once over glance.

Annabel turned to ask, but before she uttered a word, Garrett spoke. "I'll take them up."

"Thank you." Annabel wondered how long before the hotel would have assigned her to the lost cause category, decided she wasn't returning, and distributed her things to the needy. Ah, well, it didn't matter. All water under the bridge.

Annabel was reluctant to let Garrett out of her sight for even a moment. He allowed her to climb the stairs ahead of him as they went to her room. An idea occurred that she thought had merit, and a plan formed to keep the sheriff close at hand for a little longer.

“I suddenly realize it’s terribly selfish of me to ask you to guard my door all night. You need your sleep, too. So instead, will you guard the door to the bathing facilities until I’m finished cleaning myself up?”

They had reached the second floor. She turned in time to see his shocked expression. “What?”

Annabel smiled. “I’d like for you to guard the door while I bathe. Then I can give your shirt back.”

“Ma’am, I’m not sure that would be a good idea.” He pointed to a door on their right. Her door. Damn. He’d likely deposit her bags and leave as quickly as possible.

Garrett unlocked the door, and his gaze drifted down her body. “After you.”

Annabel sighed and crossed the threshold into a brightly decorated room. The space was small but clean and well appointed. A lovely quilt-topped, brass bed rested against one wall. On the small night stand next to the bed was a pretty lace doily beneath a lantern with the flame turned up. Across the room stood a chest high dresser with another lace cover and a miniature Cheval mirror centered on top. She drifted forward into the room and placed a hand on one of the posts attached to the bed’s foot rail. The metal’s cold surface mirrored her heart at the thought of Garrett leaving her alone tonight.

The sound of the door closing with a click startled her, and she turned to face the man she wanted with all her soul.

He didn’t say anything but advanced until his boot tips slid beneath her skirt. He took her chin between two fingers and kissed her lips with careful attention.

Annabel threw her arms around his neck and pulled herself closer. His other arm surrounded her as the kiss deepened. His tongue parted her lips and stroked inside her mouth. He was so warm and tasted so wonderful, Annabel never wanted to leave his arms. The seductive kiss ended all too soon when he pulled his mouth away.

“I must be crazy,” he murmured against her lips. “But I’ll agree to

guard the door and keep you safe while you bathe.”

He stepped back and his warmth seeped away.

“Gather your things, and I’ll meet you downstairs.” He opened the door and was gone before the tingle of his sensual kiss drifted from her lips.

Annabel opened her bag, checked her precious guns, and grabbed her bathing essentials along with a robe and slippers.

Now to see if she could persuade Garrett to wash her back and a few other places and follow by joining her in this room later on.

* * * *

Garrett hastened down the back stairs to where a hand painted sign posted on the wallpapered hallway directed bathers to go. He should not be contemplating all the delectable things he could do with a naked Annabel, but his mind spilled the possibilities across his brain with vivid clarity. He’d already seen a glimpse of her breasts. The visual memory of her perfect, creamy, smooth skin and the pert, rosy nipples made his cock stiffen.

Why in the world he offered to guard her bath time was beyond comprehension. He should have declined and run like hell in the opposite direction, but she was still under his safeguard. At least, that’s what he told himself.

She didn’t need his protection as she wasn’t a shrieking mess from her abduction. He’d been involved in a case quite a while back where a woman had been violated by a stranger. The woman had never recovered.

Garrett was grateful that he’d made it in time to save Annabel from that fate.

A stout woman with graying hair passed him in the first floor hallway carrying a pail of steaming water. He followed her to the bathing room.

“Is this bath for Annabel?”

She nodded and emptied the pail into an oval wooden bathtub. "Three more buckets should do it," she said and exited the small room.

Garrett stared at the steam rising off the water already in the tub and easily pictured Annabel smoothing a bar of soap over her limbs. His cock thickened at the mere thought of watching her bathe.

The stout woman came back twice more before Annabel arrived.

Wearing a soft robe in a shade of robin's egg blue, Annabel was a vision. Cinnamon brunette hair piled on top of her head, she came into the room slowly, eyeing him until she was near enough to touch.

"Thank you for guarding me."

Garrett wanted to help with her bath. "You're welcome. I want you to feel safe."

"I do." She inched closer but paused when the woman carrying another bucket of water entered the space.

"Hello, ma'am. Here's a pail for rinsing. Will you be needing anything else? A cake of soap?" She set the water bucket next to the tub.

"No. I have my own soap."

The woman eyed Garrett and smiled. "Well, I'll leave you alone, then. Ring the bell on the wall if you need something."

"Thank you."

The woman left them and even closed the door on her way out. Either she thought they were a married couple or didn't care.

Annabel pressed herself against Garrett once more, and he didn't attempt to pull her away. Resting his chin on the top of her head while she squeezed him, he pondered the extent he was willing to go.

"You'd better get into the bath while it's still hot."

Annabel moved away. "You're right." She untied the belt holding her robe closed and dropped the garment to the floor, revealing her beautiful, nude body.

Garrett looked at her bare breasts first, then he glanced down at the dark patch shielding her pussy. He wanted her. Wanted to protect

her and wash away her fears. “You tempt me, Annabel. I’m not sure I can continue to be a gentleman.”

“Good. I don’t want you to be a gentleman.” She stepped into the bathtub and slipped her hips beneath the steamy waterline. The water only came to her narrow waist. He couldn’t seem to keep his gaze from her nipples.

She scooped water into her cupped hands and trickled the drops down her breasts. His cock throbbed. He wasn’t going to be able to hide his admiration for much longer.

“You’re traumatized by the abduction, and you want to feel safe, but the two of us getting involved might make it worse.”

“No. It won’t. The last man who touched me ripped my dress to my waist and told me he couldn’t wait to fuck me blind. Please don’t let that animal be my last memory of a man’s hands on my body.”

Her gaze tore through his defenses, and he suddenly understood her need.

Garrett nodded and approached the bath. He didn’t need much more encouragement, anyway. She handed him the cake of soap she’d brought, and the scent of sweet summer flowers wafted to his nose.

“All right.” He would soap her body completely and ensure pleasure was the last memory of a man’s hands she’d have until a new man entered her life.

Then he did his best not to scowl at the vision of another man touching her the way he was about to caress her luscious body.

Chapter Five

A heated rush of desire skated across Annabel's skin the moment Garrett agreed to her sensual demands. Soap in hand, he turned away and walked to the door. He picked up a chair and secured it under the handle.

"Since the door doesn't lock, I don't want any surprise visitors."

She smiled. "Good idea." Annabel leaned forward, pushing her breasts into her bent knees.

Garrett knelt next to the tub and dipped the soap into the warm water's surface. His gaze seemed to be everywhere but on her.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" he asked in a whisper.

"I believe you're going to wash every inch of my skin with that cake of soap."

His gaze zeroed in on her eyes. The depth of passion in his serious expression made her heart flip over. "Yes. And I'd like to touch you. Have you ever been intimate with a man?" Dane's face, contorted in pleasure as he entered her that first time, crossed her mind. Was it wrong to want two different men in the exact same way?

"If I say yes, will you think less of me?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "Of course not. I just didn't want to do anything you weren't expecting." He rolled up his sleeves slowly and carefully. She watched the muscles in his forearms bunch and release as he preformed the simple task. She couldn't wait until he touched her.

Glancing into his beautiful gray eyes, she murmured, "I know what happens between a man and a woman. It can be very nice."

"My intention is to make you call out my name in pleasure." His

hand came down on her back, and he rubbed slowly between her shoulder blades.

Annabel smiled. "That would be lovely."

"But first, I'd like to wash your hair and perhaps massage your back to help you unwind." His quite melodic voice lulled her into a sense of reassurance she hadn't felt in years. He slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck and gently rubbed her scalp.

"What you're doing is wonderful."

"I'm glad. Lie back, relax and enjoy it."

The few pins holding her mass of locks on top of her head were no match for his large fingers working their way through her hair. One pin fell in the water and two more dropped to the floor. Her wavy hair slid around her shoulders and down her back in disarray. A few locks in front fell over her face and the tips dropped into the warm water.

Plunging her fingers into the water and feeling around the bottom of the tub, she retrieved the hairpin beneath the water and handed it to him. He gathered the others one handed and placed them all on the small table at the foot of the tub. He never released his hand from her head.

Once he settled himself on the stool, he burrowed both of his hands through the locks of her hair. He massaged her scalp and neck slowly and methodically. Annabel almost moaned out loud when he removed one hand to grab the ladle and scoop water over her head until her hair was saturated.

He grabbed the cake of soap and rubbed it slowly between his hands and then plunged his fingers back into her locks. There was something utterly sensuous about having him wash her hair. Every touch, every stroke of his fingers sent a sensation like a bolt of lightning arcing through her limbs.

Garrett washed her hair with luxurious strokes, massaged her neck and shoulders, and finally the space between her shoulder blades. When his hands strayed to her sides and slipped to cup her breasts,

Annabel was so relaxed it was a wonder she didn't sink all the way to the bottom of the small tub.

His fingertips squeezed her nipples and a warm feeling encompassed her core. She was more than ready to call out his name in pleasure.

Annabel put her hands over his as he massaged her breasts with delicate precision. She pushed one hand down to the anxious space between her legs.

Above her head, she heard him chuckle. He pulled his hands away from her body and quickly moved the stool to the side of the tub. The look in his eyes so gentle and yet so penetratingly blatant, she thought he could likely see to her very soul and the desire waiting there.

Garrett leaned forward, took her face in one hand and kissed her mouth hard. He pushed her back against the edge of the wooden tub, and the hand holding the cake of soap slid between her legs just as his tongue dipped into her mouth to take a deep taste.

The kiss seemed to last for an hour. He took his time. His hand beneath the water stroked her inner thighs, gently never touching where she wanted him to go. In her impatience, she shifted her hips in such a way that his fingers grazed her clit. She moaned into his mouth at the sudden contact.

"Please touch me," she whispered. "I'm ready."

Garrett claimed her mouth again in another soul searing kiss and placed his free hand closer to the entrance of her core. The inner walls of her pussy clenched in anticipation of his hopefully eventual penetration.

His fingers found the sensitive nub of her clitoris and stroked quickly. Annabel sucked in a breath as he rubbed her clit with light pressure. She didn't doubt Garrett's ability to make her scream his name. She'd be shrieking it in no time at all if he kept up the movement building wild pleasure between her pussy lips. The core of her body clenched in expectation.

Enveloped in the warm water, Annabel allowed the relaxing

sensations of Garrett's actions to penetrate her defenses. She wanted him and refused to feel guilty over her desires.

Annabel stared into Garrett's eyes as he touched her intimately beneath the surface of the water. Each stroke of his fingers against her clit brought her closer and closer to the promise of a sublime release. She slipped her eyes shut to enjoy the moment. Garrett trailed kisses down her throat. She arched her back, pushing her breasts forward. Seemingly taking the hint, he licked his way to her nipple and clasped it between his lips. The suction he exerted sent a pulse of arousal straight to her pussy. Her inner muscles clenched as the onslaught of pleasure from his mouth and fingers continued. She was fast coming to a pinnacle of pleasure. Her breathing increased until she convulsed in what was a perfect orgasmic release.

"Garrett!" she called out in the sudden moment of supreme bliss.

Tongue still flicking her distended nipple, he merely chuckled and shot his fingers deeply into her clenching pussy. The awareness of his invasion amplified her pleasure up a notch. She wiggled against his hand, trying to get him to go deeper. She wished he was already undressed and piercing her pussy with his, no doubt, impressive cock.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured. His deep voice so reassuring she would never get tired of hearing it.

"I want you so very much, Garrett." She put her hand on his cheek. He lifted his head, leaned in, and kissed her mouth.

"Trust me. I want you just as much."

"Stay with me tonight. I don't want to be in the room all by myself. Please. I want you to hold me until I fall asleep."

She searched his troubled gaze for assurance that he wouldn't leave her to sleep all alone. After several long moments, he finally nodded. "All right, I'll meet you upstairs after you've finished bathing."

She smiled and caressed his face. "Thank you. You really are my hero."

"I hope you still feel that way tomorrow."

“Of course I will. And every day afterwards. You saved me. I owe you my life.”

“You don’t owe me, but I don’t want you to be alone tonight. I’d just worry about you.”

* * * *

Garrett helped Annie wash her entire body again after she’d called out in the rush of her climax. He almost came in his pants the moment she uttered his name. His cock remained at full attention the entire time he spent in the bathing room. He helped her dry off and almost fell backwards into the tub when she grabbed him and kissed him hard on the mouth.

She knew what she wanted, and she seemed to desire him. Although perhaps making her come helped her amorous attitude. He should not spend the night in her room but couldn’t bring himself to leave her alone. He told himself it was because he didn’t want her to be frightened if she had nightmares, but more than that, he wanted to make sure she was safe.

If he did nothing else, he would ensure she wasn’t alone. And if anything happened to relieve the ache in his cock, that memory would also be cherished.

They climbed the back stairwell without seeing a soul, but halfway back to her room, they heard voices in the hallway, so she went on ahead. He promised to come as soon as the coast was clear.

He waited only a few minutes before advancing down the hallway and knocking on her door.

She answered before he finished tapping his knuckles on the wood.

The moment he stepped into her room, Garrett hugged Annabel to him, breathing in the floral scent of her dewy skin fresh from her bath. She wore only a thin cotton nightgown. A part of him wondered if after this near miss rescue, he’d have to follow her for the rest of his

days to ensure she was safe. The initial gut reaction to this epiphany warmed his heart at the mere idea that Annabel could be his for the rest of his days. A woman to love and cherish might be that indefinable something he'd been missing in his lonely life.

A moan escaped her lips as his hands roamed freely across her soft body. In the warmth of her embrace, Garrett relaxed a bit as they held each other close, kissed, and prepared to join their bodies in shared bliss.

How would he ever be able to leave her if he made love to her tonight? Hell, given the speed at which they were headed for the brass bed, he only had moments to stop this before it became a luscious memory.

"Annie," he whispered against her throat. He would have said more in the form of rethinking this night of passion, but she stiffened in his arms the moment he said her name.

"No one's ever called me Annie."

"Will you mind if I do?"

"Not if you only do so while we're in bed."

Garrett laughed. "So in public I refer to you as Miss Wallace, but when we get naked together, then I can relax and call you my Annie."

Her coy smile only enflamed his passion more. "Who says we're getting naked together for more than just tonight?"

Garrett pulled her away to gauge the seriousness in her expression. "Of course there'll be more than just tonight. Don't you want more?"

"Perhaps. I'm not ruling it out, but this experience tonight is not meant to force you into declaring for me. Not at all."

"What do you wish for tonight to be then?"

"I need to feel safe. You make me feel protected. If it weren't for you, I'd have died in that canyon. Or wanted to die. I need a loving memory, and I know you'll provide it for me. That's the kind of man you are, Garrett."

"I won't deny it, but I don't want you to think this is ordinary. Far

from it. I have feelings for you, Annie. I haven't sorted them all out yet, but I fully expect to see you again. I'd like to know I'll be welcome."

She narrowed the distance between their bodies by pulling him into her chest. Arms around his neck, she pulled his head down to steal a kiss. "I'll let you call me Annie whenever we are intimate. And while I wouldn't expect a future between us, I'm not opposed to it. I have this trip to my friend's home, and then once I get back to my house, I'll decide if I want a man in my life. Perhaps we could write to each other once we get back to our respective domains."

"Or perhaps you could visit Outpost, Colorado, and decide if it is a place you'd want to live with me and start a family."

"Perhaps, but for now, just make love to me. I need to feel protected, and I don't want to think about tomorrow. Just tonight and you."

"All right."

"You have too many clothes on," she said between lip-locks.

"So do you." He nuzzled her neck with his scratchy whiskers. He probably should have shaved before contemplating intimacy but hadn't wanted to take the time. Pulling the neckline of her nightgown to the side, he kissed her shoulder once before nibbling a path to her collarbone. She sat up, slid off the bed, and promptly wiggled out of her nightgown. Garrett stood and raced to disrobe as fast as possible.

Once they stood in front of each other completely naked, Garrett lowered his mouth and captured her lips in a powerful kiss meant to ensure she understood his immediate intentions. He'd have to do his best to convince her that a future together would be splendid.

* * * *

Annabel's bare legs hit the edge of the brass bed. After all the decadent pleasures she'd experienced in her bath, it was a wonder she could still stand. Garrett's mouth blistered her lips with a demanding

kiss as he bent her back to the mattress. His nude body pressed her into the sheets. The overwhelming mass of his upper body nearly crushed her into the bed until he rose up on his elbows.

His mouth found one nipple and sucked on it deeply. She arched her back with the pleasure of it and a moan slipped out.

Garrett kissed his way further down her body to the juncture of her legs. Without warning, his face dived between her thighs, and his tongue licked at her clit. She bunched the sheets in her fists, trying not to scream. The walls were not thick, and she didn't want anyone to hear what she was doing.

"You taste like spicy honey," he whispered against her curls before burrowing his mouth against her pussy yet again. His hands slid beneath each butt cheek and gripped her flesh in large hands as he feasted between her legs.

The rough texture of his facial whiskers added a new level of arousal to the oral experience. She didn't think she'd last much longer before bellowing her release if he kept up the pressure on her clitoris.

As if reading her mind and not wanting her to come yet, his tongue soon shot deeply inside her pussy and lapped at her juices, relieving the pressure on her clit. But not for long. A few seconds later, he wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked.

Climax building, Annabel focused on not screaming too loud once the pleasure took her over the edge. Garrett sent two fingers deeply inside her pussy as he sucked on her clit. The combination proved to be the end of her blissful endurance.

She bucked her hips as the orgasm washed over her body. She clamped her lips closed to keep from shrieking the walls down but moaned and moaned as the release rolled through her limbs.

Garrett kept up the delicious torture for only a few moments longer before he shifted on the bed. Towering over her on his knees, he grabbed his massive cock and stroked up and down the length a few times before lowering his hips. He centered his cock between her slick pussy lips and pushed forward.

The sheer size of him was enough to make her almost come again, as he entered her all the way to the hilt. He groaned and pulled out half way before plunging inside her pussy again and again.

Arms braced on either side of her torso, Garrett picked up the speed of his strokes and soon was pounding inside her. She slid her hands up his arms and around his neck.

He lowered his mouth to kiss her as deeply as he pierced her with his cock. The spicy flavor of her essence rested on his lips as he devoured her mouth with his tongue and her pussy with his wide shaft.

Groaning suddenly, his body stiffened above her, and with one final deep cock stroke, he soon stopped moving inside her pussy and slumped over her again, resting on his forearms so as not to crush her.

Annabel stroked her fingers through his hair. His face was buried against her throat. His warm breaths skittered across her breasts with each exhale he made.

“That was amazing, Annie. I don’t know about you, but I feel very safe.” He pulled his cock from her body.

She laughed and pulled on his hair. “I do feel safe, but that’s because you’re here with me.”

“I can arrange to be with you for another day or two before I have some obligations to take care of, then I can escort you back home. I know you live in Colorado but not the town.”

“I know where you live, Sheriff. I promise I’ll contact you in a few weeks. For now, let me keep my secret.”

A deep rush of warm breath slid across her skin. “All right, you keep your secret for now.” He lifted his head to stare deeply into her eyes. “I care for you, Annie. Don’t ever forget.”

She smiled. “I won’t. Thank you for all you’ve done.”

His cock stiffened against her belly. He nudged her. “And I’m not even finished yet. Would you like to try something different?”

“Like what?”

“You could get on top of me and ride my cock. Then I could play

with your lovely breasts.”

Annabel smiled and nodded. Garrett shifted on the bed and rolled over to his back taking her with him. Legs wide and open to his hips, she looked down at his large, wide cock. “I can’t believe that ever fit inside of me.”

He laughed and the expression on his face filled her with love. He was a very attractive man. Not hard to love a man like this. Feelings such as these hadn’t occurred to her in so many years. It was very odd to have experienced it twice on this trip. Even as she filled her body with Garrett’s cock, she couldn’t help remembering Dane’s forceful thrusts the first time they’d made love. Each man was near to perfect as far as satisfaction in bed.

Annabel lowered her body on to Garrett’s cock and rode him like a horse. True to his word, he played with her nipples as she controlled the speed of the sexual encounter.

His hand slid down to her clitoris and rubbed, gathering some of her creamy essence on his fingers. Leaning up from the bed, he put his hand around to the puckered hole of her backside and slid one wet finger inside. She sucked in a breath of surprise and stopped moving up and down on his cock.

“Don’t stop, Annie. Let me try this. I think you’ll like it.”

The odd sensation of his finger wiggling around her rear hole didn’t hurt, and when she concentrated on moving up and down on his cock again, the pleasure she felt intensified. He was right, she liked it a lot.

He worked his other hand between her thighs and stroked her clit as she pumped her pussy over his cock to her own rhythm. After several moments of various new sensations rippling across her body, Garrett clamped his mouth over one breast and sucked her nipple between his lips.

The suction sent a vibrant pulse or arousal to her core and was the final touch needed to send her into orgasmic bliss. She screamed Garrett’s name as the fiercely intense release clamped her pussy

muscles around his cock.

Fingers still embedded in her derriere hole, Garrett pushed his cock deeply into her gushing pussy and growled what sounded like a very strong orgasm.

She slumped over onto his chest and buried her face against his throat. She hadn't felt this relaxed and satisfied since the night with Dane. A touch of sadness hit her at the thought. It was a little unnerving to have such strong feelings for two men. Men who were virtually strangers to her, albeit intimate strangers. Although each man was very different in looks and general attitude, she found that each of them had touched her very deeply.

Having a sexual interest in two men was yet another reason she needed to keep the secret of where she lived very private. She'd have to sort out her feelings for each man later on. After the coming competition was resolved, she'd contemplate her options.

Garrett slid from beneath her, cleaned them both up with the water provided in the room and snuggled up behind her in bed. They fell asleep together without saying another word.

By the early morning, Garrett had gone without waking her, and Annabel occupied her thoughts on the future of this trip to the gun competition.

Two more days.

Chapter Six

The unrelenting sway of the stagecoach bounced as if each stone they crossed was a veritable boulder. If she never saw a stagecoach again, it would be too soon. The only other person faring worse inside the close confines of the stagecoach was Edna trying to keep her infant calm during the jarring trip. Annabel didn't think she'd ever travel such a distance with a young child unless forced at gunpoint.

There was one more overnight stop before they would make it to her final destination in Pine Haven. In order to take her mind away from the uncomfortable ride, Annabel pondered the challenges she faced once she finally arrived there. She'd have to have her arguments all ready before revealing her identity. Having signed up as A. Wallace, it was possible they were expecting her father to show up. Annabel smiled inwardly at her own clever machinations.

Not expecting there to be any extra rooms at the local hotel because of the competition, Annabel made arrangements in advance to stay with a long time friend.

Mary and her husband used to live in Annabel's hometown. They'd grown up together, although Mary was several years older. Now she and her husband owned a large piece of land in the Wyoming territory just outside of Pine Haven. Nestled in the rolling hills on the south side of their vast property sat the original log cabin they'd lived in until their new home had been built down in the valley. At least that's the way Mary described it in her letter.

A place to stay out of town would be perfect. Annabel planned to remain in the cabin and borrow a horse to make the short trip or simply walk the couple of miles out of the town and to the annual

competition.

Leaving Garrett behind had been harder than she imagined. He didn't approach her the morning after they'd spent the night together, but she saw him standing outside the local sheriff's office as the stagecoach passed. She imagined he looked wistful, but perhaps it had been a trick of the morning light. Once again, no promises had been spoken, but the night before he'd made sure to let her know exactly where he lived if she ever wanted to contact him. He hadn't pressed her for information on where she lived, but knowing she traveled on a stagecoach, perhaps he had access to detailed itinerary information. If she didn't contact him, eventually he'd probably be able to track her down. If he followed the name Wallace, perhaps he'd find her even faster since her father had some fame as a gunsmith in local places near her home.

Annabel decided she'd be lucky to spend more time in the company of either Garrett or Dane, but stringing two men along wasn't exactly something she'd planned on letting happen. And given the choice between them, she didn't expect she could make one. Both men were perfect. Each special in his own way.

Now that she didn't have the responsibility of caring for her ailing father, perhaps she might consider the possibility of settling down, finding a husband, and starting a family. She had two excellent choices of men from which to make her ultimate selection.

The deciding factor might be whichever one didn't have a problem with her being an expert shot with a pistol or rifle. Since she'd learned everything her father knew about making guns, she might continue to create them once she got back home. Another factor in her choice between the two men could hinge on their support of her intended livelihood.

Her father had a name in the gun making business, and he told her long ago that most men wouldn't trust that a woman could do the job as well. He advised her to create guns and tell anyone asking that he'd made them before he died.

Annabel figured she could get away with that for a few years but not forever. Eventually, she'd have to find another way to support herself. The home she'd shared with her father wasn't big enough to cater to boarders, and her only skill came in the form of gun-smith knowledge and practices. Her father told her long ago she had a knack for it and limber enough fingers to craft nice pieces.

She'd sold several pieces with the Wallace name engraved in the handle, and no one had ever known that it wasn't her father's work.

Her fiancé had planned to help her carry off the continued ploy regarding the guns her father created and taught her to make. Daniel agreed to "take over" her father's business and together they'd make the custom guns available for sale.

In the past seven years, since her first secret sale, no one had ever been unhappy with any of the guns put out under the Wallace name. Everyone assumed that her fiancé Daniel had been her father's apprentice in the business.

In fact, Annabel was the only one her father ever trained. He told her she was as good as or better than he was. A nice compliment but the true test had been when she'd sold several of her own guns. The Wallace name was also hers, so it wasn't exactly a lie. People, or rather men, believed what they wanted with regard to gunsmith skills. Even if she'd admitted being the one to craft the guns, no one would ever believe her anyway.

* * * *

The very air was alive with a competitive spirit as Annabel rode into the small town of Pine Haven on her borrowed mare. She'd spent yesterday with her friend, Mary, before retiring last night to the cabin nestled in the hilly landscape of her property. The cabin was just as beautiful as described in Mary's letters.

The night before, she'd cleaned her weapons and gathered the correspondence she needed to make a case for her entrance into the

shooting contest.

The glimmer of hope that decided she was worried for nothing refused to die. Of course they would let her participate. Of course they would not hesitate to allow her a chance. Of course they would think she was wasting her entry fee because *everyone* thought a woman couldn't shoot a gun. But Annabel knew she could fire a weapon. And she was damn good at it, too.

The time had come to find out if this arduous journey had been worth all the trouble. She carefully dismounted her horse in front of the town's saloon where a hand-painted sign proclaimed *Shooters' Contest Fees Paid Here*.

Annabel slung her satchel over one shoulder and marched to the table where an attractive, older gentleman sat beneath the sign.

"Can I help you, little lady?"

Annabel squared her shoulders. "Yes. I'd like to pay my fees to enter the contest."

He cocked his head to one side as if he hadn't heard her clearly. "I beg your pardon?"

She pushed out a deep breath and repeated her statement only louder this time.

His eyes narrowed as if in total confusion. "This is a gun competition, ma'am. We shoot at targets with pistols and rifles."

"I'm well aware of what kind of competition it is, sir. I wrote in advance to ensure I'd be able to enter. I have the letter, if you'd like to see it."

He pushed his well-worn, tan cowboy hat back an inch off of his forehead and nodded. "I *would* like to see your letter." He glanced down at the table and asked, "What's your name?"

She handed him the letter welcoming her to the contest listing the specifics for the rules and regulations. He scanned a hand-written list in his hand. It was a yellowed roll of crinkly parchment paper. "My name is Annabel Wallace."

He shot a quick look up at her. "Well, I have an A. Wallace on my

list, but it doesn't mention that you're a woman."

"I'm A. Wallace. A is for Annabel. And what difference does it make if I'm a woman? Your rules and regulations don't say anything about a woman being prohibited. And I have my entry fee all ready to pay."

"Why didn't you put your given name on the entry form?"

Annabel smiled. "Why do you think?"

"We've never had a woman shooter in our competition before."

He scratched his chin and studied the letter she'd handed him.

Annabel didn't want to be dismissed. "Well, now is your chance to do something truly progressive. Are you going to allow me to enter?"

He pushed out a deep sigh and brought his head up to stare at her. He glanced up and down her body a couple times as if to ensure she truly *was* a woman. "I'm going to have to get the judges together and the board of directors for our contest to decide on if you can enter or not."

"Why? Can't *you* make this decision without getting permission from someone else?"

He shook his head. "I'm only coordinating the contest. The president of the shooter's club should make this unprecedented decision."

Annabel heaved a deep sigh and looked skyward, wishing this didn't seem like a brush off. But it did. She dropped her head and sent him a scorching gaze.

"And who might *that* be?"

He looked over his shoulder at the saloon doors. "He's probably having a drink at the bar. I'm not going to bother him. He'll be along in a little while."

She crossed her arms and frowned. "I'm not going away. When will you find out about this 'decision' to be made from your club president?"

He scratched his chin again. "Don't rightly know. Plus, now that I

think about it, I should probably ask our regular top shooters if they'd agree to shoot with a woman in the contest alongside them. Some men are superstitious about such things."

"How many of the contestants are you going to ask?"

He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at the saloon doors again.

"Land sakes, are you afraid that I'm too good of a shot, and one of your male contestants will be embarrassed to be beaten by a woman?"

He stood up. "Course not."

"Then show some backbone and make a decision, if you have the nerve."

Annabel locked angry gazes with the man. She heard someone approach from behind but didn't break her stare to see who it was.

"I'm one of the top shooters in the contest coming up, and I don't mind if the lady competes. Actually, I think I'd sort of enjoy it." The amused new voice in this conversation startled her with its familiarity. It sounded like Dane.

She glanced over her shoulder at the tall man standing directly behind her and discovered it *was* Dane. A grin split his handsome face as if discovering her made him happy.

"Well, you aren't the only competitor, now are you, Dane?"

"No, but I am one of the top two competitors from last year. All I'm saying is that if I get a vote, I think you should let her shoot. Why not?"

They were drawing a crowd, and Annabel stiffened her spine ready to defend the right to participate in this contest. But it was reassuring to know Dane didn't care if she entered.

A new stranger approached shaking his head. "It's bad luck to let a woman enter a shooting contest."

"Oh, it is not, Virgil!" Dane countered. "Your mama probably taught you how to shoot."

"That ain't true." Virgil frowned and crossed his arms. "You'd do best to watch your mouth, Larsen."

Dane only smiled and didn't look like he planned to watch his mouth. "Women are capable of shooting a gun. Many do and on a regular basis."

"Well, they shouldn't be allowed to compete." Virgil shaped his mouth into a pout. "If I get a vote, I still say no."

The crowd around the small table had doubled in only a few minutes. Annabel's insides roiled with both anger at the delay and pride that Dane would defend her. "The competition begins tomorrow. Today is the final day to enter. I'd like to pay my fee. If you won't take my money, I'd like to know when a decision will be made. I don't want to be denied entrance for being late to register."

Instead of answering, he turned his head to glance at the man exiting the bar.

The smell of whiskey and smoke wafted from the swinging doors of the saloon each time another man exited to discover what the loud voices and ruckus was with the shooting contest.

Her patience wearing thin, Annabel sighed inwardly at the delay and tilted her head up to check the heavens for the weather. The cloudless sky made for excellent shooting, and as a part of the entrance criteria into this contest, she needed to be able to hit the target with either a pistol or a rifle. She didn't have to hit the bulls-eye, and given the opportunity, she shouldn't show them her level of skill. At least until the real competition began. She lowered her head to begin her argument anew when someone new approached.

A well-dressed, distinguished looking man strolled up to the entry fee table.

"What's going on here, Cletus?"

The man she'd been conversing with answered, "Mayor Wheeler, I'm glad you're here. Perhaps you can help out with a possible dispute." Cletus turned and motioned to her. "This little lady would like to enter our annual shooting competition."

The mayor's eyebrows went skyward. "Why does she want to shoot?"

“Why wouldn’t I?” Annabel returned.

Mayor Wheeler frowned. “Where is your husband? Does he know you’re here?” His gaze went above her head to the crowd searching as if her non-existent husband would finally step forward.

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Well then, where’s your father?”

Annabel scowled at the mayor. “My beloved fiancé, James, passed away over four years ago from lung fever. My father died last winter from a similar condition. What does my marital state or the location of my parent have to do with whether I can shoot a gun in your contest? I have the entrance fee, I have the skill, and I definitely have the desire to compete.”

The mayor looked at Cletus, who shrugged.

He gazed around the assembled body of men and shouted, “Raise your hand if you’re entered in this contest.”

A couple dozen hands shot into the air, including Dane’s.

The mayor gestured for everyone to lower their hands and then asked, “All right then, how many object to a woman being allowed to shoot in our annual contest?”

Virgil’s hand shot straight up into the air. He waved his hand back and forth as if the more agitated he was, the more votes would be counted in his favor. Annabel hoped excessive enthusiasm on Virgil’s part didn’t matter. One or two other men also raised arms above their heads but certainly not as many as she expected to see.

“How many don’t care whether a woman wants to waste her money on entering this competition?”

Dane rolled his eyes and lifted his hand in the air. His expression said he wouldn’t have worded the question quite that way. Quite a few more hands went up into the air.

The mayor cleared his throat. “I guess the lady can enter then.”

Virgil’s eyes narrowed. He sent a petulant gaze her way, but she ignored it.

Cletus huffed. “Fine.” He pierced her with a stern look. “But you

still have to qualify just like every other man here.”

“Of course. What are the criteria for qualification?”

Dane answered, “You just have to be able to hit the target.”

“Inside the ring,” Cletus added.

Dane winked at her and nodded. “Think you can hit the target, inside the ring, sugar?”

She grinned. “Without a doubt.”

A murmur came across the crowd of men behind her, and Annabel looked to see what they were muttering about now.

A lone horseman dressed in a soft, tan shirt with a sheriff’s star attached to his brown leather vest, sauntered down the dusty street toward the assembled group.

The closer he got, the louder the voices in the crowd became.

“Sheriff Butler!” Virgil yelled as he turned to Cletus and the mayor. “As last year’s winner, he should get a vote, too.”

Annabel felt a sudden rush of heat creep up her neck and burn her cheeks. With Garrett’s name shouted into the air, she wasn’t mistaken about the rider’s identity. Beside her Dane grunted but kept his gaze fixed on Garrett’s approach.

There was not a doubt in her mind that Dane and Garrett not only knew each other but were also rivals in this contest.

Heated rivals.

That put a whole new spin on her relationship with each of them.

Garrett rode his horse, Trooper, all the way up to the saloon before dismounting. The tan shirt he wore today was the one she’d borrowed, and the heat in her face flamed again in memory of all the decadent things she’d done with him in the name of gratitude.

Just like with Dane, after spending the night with Garrett, Annabel hadn’t spoken to him before leaving town on the stagecoach the next morning.

Having both men show up at the competition shouldn’t have been a surprise, but she was stunned by the coincidence. What would she say to them? How would she explain her involvement and desire for

each man?

Garrett approached the crowd around the shooting contest's entry table with a hard-to-read expression. Until the moment his gaze found her, then his face brightened and a hint of a smile curved his sensuous lips.

"Sheriff Butler," Cletus called and then waved to get his attention.

Garrett kept his eyes focused on Annabel when he responded. "What's going on here?"

Virgil piped up, "This woman wants to enter the contest, of all the strange things."

Gaze still boring a hole through her eyes all the way to her soul, Garrett got within arms distance before he replied, "Why don't you let her, then? Women can shoot. Sometimes they need to be able to defend themselves."

Another murmur of surprise rose in the crowd at his willingness to let her shoot.

"Are you sure, Sheriff? We've never had a woman in the contest before."

"Then it's about time, don't you think?" Garrett finally broke his stare and turned to Cletus. "If you're looking for my vote, I say let her in the contest."

Cletus looked at the Mayor Wheeler as if for assurance, and the mayor shrugged. "Let her sign up."

Annabel's heartbeat sped up, and it wasn't entirely due to being let in the contest. Having both Dane and Garrett so close in proximity made her think about the impact each man had on her level of arousal and desire.

She turned away and bent over to sign her name on the line next to A. Wallace. She paid her fee in cash and received a contestant number. Twenty six.

"Tomorrow morning, bright and early an hour or so after sun up, we'll begin the qualification round. As long as you can hit the closest target with either a pistol or a rifle, you'll move on to the next round.

“Everyone that qualifies to shoot will be invited back for the quarter final round, which will start the day after tomorrow. The rings all have numerical values. The top ten scores from the quarter-final round will move on to the semi-finals. There will be a speed round for those ten contenders. You’ll have to shoot five shots in under a minute for a score.

“Only five will come out of that match and move on to the final match, which happens the very next day. If you were to make it to the final match, you would have to shoot closest to the center target with both a pistol and a rifle to win this competition. Got it?”

Annabel nodded. Her father had discussed at length the procedures for the competition. They hadn’t changed at all in twelve years.

Behind her, two men waited. Each likely expected to command her free time. Each certainly had the right. Annabel didn’t know what she would do. They obviously knew each other from past contest events.

After she’d gotten signed in at the twelfth annual shooting competition, she whirled around to face the two men who ruled equal parts of her heart and desire. She caught them sizing each other up. How would she ever choose between them? And would they make her choose only one man?

Garrett smiled. “I didn’t know you were headed to this contest.”

Annabel kept her gaze focused on his face. “It didn’t really come up at the time.”

His gorgeous smile widened. “I guess it didn’t. Are you all right?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?” Dane inserted himself between them.

Garrett chin checked him. “Larsen.” He looked back to Annabel. “She was kidnapped off the stagecoach a few nights ago. I found her.”

Dane put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Annabel. Were you hurt?”

“I’m fine, thanks to Garrett.” Annabel, cognizant of the crowd still milling around, lowered her voice and spoke quickly. “I know I need

to talk to each of you, but could we go elsewhere to a more private venue for the discussion?"

Chapter Seven

Dane waited patiently until Annabel finished signing into the competition and receiving the contest rules, thinking fast and hard about the obvious connection between the woman he was falling for and his greatest rival in this gun competition.

When she turned around and looked at the sheriff, he didn't have to wonder what level her relationship was with Butler. Her cheeks turned red each time she looked at either of them. If the sheriff had saved her life from being kidnapped, she had probably been grateful. Dane wondered how thankful Garrett had wanted her to be. Had they been intimate?

She'd been blushing since Garrett rode into town, so, likely as not, they'd been together. Dane pondered this for a moment. Was he upset? Not exactly.

It wasn't as if he and Annabel had declared any kind of understanding upon parting ways several days ago. As a matter of fact, Dane owed her an explanation as to why he didn't show up the next morning for breakfast after their long night together.

Annabel requested a private venue for discussion, and Garrett offered to take her to breakfast once he got signed into the contest.

Dane agreed, and the two of them headed over to the hotel dining room. Before they even got three steps away from the saloon, Dane started talking. "I need to tell you why I didn't show up for breakfast."

"No, you don't. We didn't have any promises."

"I would have given you one, but someone hit me over the head when I went to check on my horse."

A concerned expression registered on her face. “Are *you* all right?”

“I’m fine. I was mostly worried about leaving you alone that morning. You were my first thought when the stable boy woke me up. I was as mad as hell that I’d missed you. There were more things I wanted to say before you left.”

“Like what?”

Dane glanced over his shoulder and noticed that Garrett was already on his way toward them at a speedy trot. “Private things. I don’t particularly want to share them with Butler.”

“I appreciate that, but something happened between him and me.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me, Annabel.”

“I do if you expect something further between us.” She waved her finger between them.

Garrett caught up to them in that moment. “So I’m very anxious to find out how you two know each other?”

Dane looked at Annabel. She blushed again.

“I see,” he said looking at her red face. “So were you two acquainted before or after the kidnapping?”

“Before,” Dane answered. “Apparently, only two days earlier.”

They stood on the boarded walkway just outside the hotel entrance. Directly inside the lobby on the left side was the dining room.

“Can I assume you were very close?”

Annabel huffed. “You may assume anything you want. I don’t owe anyone any explanations, and neither of you owe me any. We’re competitors now. Perhaps we should all keep our distance from one another.”

“No.” Dane didn’t want to separate. “Tell us what you want, and we can work it out.” He sent an angry gaze to Butler, daring him to contradict a possible solution.

Annabel took another step away from them. “If we’re going to continue this conversation, I’d like to be sitting down, preferably at a

very private table where no one can hear us.”

“Fine. Let’s at least all share a meal together.”

She looked from one to another and shook her head. “This is a bad idea. I’m never going to be able to choose one of you over the other. I just can’t, so don’t even bother asking.” Eyes getting a little watery, Dane certainly didn’t want to make her cry.

Garrett cleared his throat. “Larsen is right. Let’s go have a meal together. We can discuss private things later. For right now, I’m just hungry.” He held out one arm, and after hesitating only a moment, she tucked her hand into his elbow. Dane offered her an arm as well, and she took that one, too.

“Thank you. A meal would be lovely.”

Dane escorted her into the hotel with Butler tagging along. He pondered how to get Annabel alone to discuss a future. And he knew Butler was doing the exact same thing.

* * * *

Annabel wiped her mouth after a very civil breakfast and tried to gain the courage to initiate the conversation the three of them needed to have. She had missed Dane, more so now that he was here in person. He obviously hadn’t meant to stand her up for breakfast, although a part of her had been relieved not to face breakfast with him several days ago. But she *had* missed him.

And then two days later, Garrett blasted his way into her heart and rescued her from a fate worse than death. She owed him her life. She’d shown him her gratitude in a very carnal way, never expecting to see him again. At least not until this shooting competition was behind her.

Now she tried to keep the licentious vision of being with both of them at the same time out of her mind. It was too scandalous to even think about, let alone say the words out loud. Given the rivalry already between them, that scenario would remain in the far reaches

of her private mind, never to be revealed. But the more she tried to push it out of her thoughts, the more the visions intruded.

“What made you want to enter the shooting contest, Annabel?” Dane asked.

She smiled. “My father was the first winner of the competition twelve years ago.”

“Alistair Wallace is your father?” Garrett’s surprise was evident in his expression and tone.

“Yes. He taught me everything he ever knew about guns, shooting, and being a gunsmith.”

“You’re a gunsmith?” Dane sounded equally surprised.

“I’ll likely never be as good as my father was, but I love to craft weapons. I’m much more at ease with pistols than rifles in the workshop, but I’ve worked on both and crafted both.”

“How good are you?” Garrett asked.

“As a gunsmith or a shooter?”

He smiled and leaned forward. “Either. Both. I want to know everything about you.”

She shook her head. “You’ll find out how well I shoot starting tomorrow. Let’s not ruin the surprise, shall we?”

Dane looked over at Garrett. “That means she’s planning on whipping our pants off.”

She wanted their pants off all right. Cheeks heating yet again, Annabel changed the subject. “What is the story between you two? I sense the rivalry. How did that come about?”

Garrett leaned forward and put his forearm on the table. “I won the last two years of this shooting match, and Larsen here won the previous two years before I competed in the event.”

“So if one of us wins this year, he will be the first three-time champ of this competition.”

“And if I beat you both, then the rivalry will continue until next year.”

Dane laughed. “Oh, I imagine the rivalry will live on until forever

between us, regardless of the outcome of this contest.” His gaze found hers, and she thought he looked like he was already pining for her.

“That might be a very great shame.” Annabel didn’t want them fighting over her, either. She looked away from Dane.

Garrett’s beautiful gray eyes narrowed. “Why’s that?”

Annabel glanced around the nearly empty dining room to ensure her words wouldn’t be overheard. “Because I have feelings for each of you, which developed very quickly on this trip. I won’t choose between you regarding any personal matters.”

“I certainly wouldn’t expect you to choose.” Dane leaned back in his chair and eyed Garrett closely. “But I care for you and I’m not going to stop wanting you just because of a little competition.”

“But that’s just the problem. I don’t want there to be a competition for my affection.”

Garrett crossed his arms and leaned forward on the table. “So basically you want us both to agree to share you?”

Annabel tilted her head to one side, very surprised to hear one of them voice her very desires. “I wouldn’t be opposed to that.”

The men exchanged glances. Dane heaved a sigh. “I’m not willing to walk away.”

“Neither am I.” Garrett leaned back and crossed his arms. “But I’ve never been very good at sharing, especially women.”

Dane grinned. “I have no problem sharing, especially a woman as incredible as you are, sugar.”

“What about sharing me at the same time?” The words came out of Annabel’s mouth before her brain could stop the inflammatory query. She smashed her eyes shut and put her hands over her heated face. How could she have said that out loud?

“Now that’s an interesting proposition.” Garrett’s low voice carried through her embarrassed personal admonishing of herself. She lowered her hands and glanced at his quizzical face.

Dane cleared his throat. “I’m not opposed to that if it means I don’t have to give you up. The only problem I see is location. Where

would we *consummate* this new arrangement? The hotel wouldn't be a good choice because it has too many contestants roaming around for privacy. And I don't want to give the judges any reason to boot you out. You know they'll be looking for any reason to oust you throughout the contest."

Annabel nodded in agreement. "You're right. The hotel wouldn't work. However, I'm staying in a small cabin near my friend's home two miles south of town during the tournament. It's beautiful, small and rustic, but there is a good sized bed and lots of privacy. Surrounded by a large copse of woods, no one would bother us or even know we were there."

"And your friend wouldn't have a problem with this...arrangement?"

"I don't think so. She and I are like family."

"Close enough that she already knows about us?"

Annabel smiled. "She doesn't know you both showed up at the contest...yet. But I don't imagine she'd be upset if we all met there. She told me to treat the place as if it were my own."

Garrett asked, "Where is this cabin in the woods, and what time should we all meet there?"

* * * *

Annabel walked slowly around the circumference of the cabin's small space one last time, checking to see that everything was in place for tonight's carnal *arrangement*.

A colorful bundle of wildflowers picked from a meadow fragrancd the room from a large pitcher of water resting in the corner on a small stool. A little bottle of whiskey rested on the shelf below the flowers along with three glasses, should the occasion arise to celebrate anything.

Lodged in the opposite corner from the flowers and drink was a large rough-hewn wooden bed. Built by her friend's husband long

ago, but left behind when her friend chose a brass bed for her new home, Annabel thought the bed fit perfectly with the rustic charm of the little cabin. The quilt atop the plain sheets had been stitched with love and *that* elusive feeling was what Annabel wished for tonight.

Love.

After her fiancé had passed so unexpectedly, Annabel hadn't searched for love. She settled down with her father's gunsmith business and applied herself to the task of learning everything her father could teach her. The satisfaction she derived from the process of crafting a firearm was surprisingly addictive.

A part of this journey to the shooter's competition was her way of saying goodbye to her father properly. She certainly never intended to find love on this trip but she had. Twice.

It was difficult to believe how much passion she'd experienced on this journey to fulfill a long-sought dream that hadn't even started out to be hers. Her father always intended to enter the contest again, but obligations and then poor health had subdued his desires. She wanted to do this for her father, to pay tribute to the man who had taught her to love the gunsmith craft as much as she loved to shoot.

Once upon a time, Annabel's biggest hurdle had been to overcome any entrance restriction into the annual sharpshooter's contest. After meeting Dane and Garrett, her second was explaining her romantic feelings for not one but two men. She hadn't expected them both to want to see her ever again after they'd shared a meal this morning.

She'd expected her spontaneous declaration to share both men at the same time to quash any further desire for contact, but she'd watched their faces as she spoke. Each man exhibited a look of intrigue and not the slightest hesitation or disgust had registered.

Dane and Garrett, while reluctant at first, seemed at least willing to give this arrangement a try. And Annabel couldn't wait. Wearing her filmiest nightgown beneath a serviceable cotton robe, she couldn't wait to share a sexual experience with both men.

Even after an intimate night with her two strongest competitors,

Annabel expected to be treated as an equal once the games began, a point she intended to instill before anything else transpired.

Whatever else happened, Annabel wanted a modicum of respect once the bullets started flying towards the target's centers. From what little she knew about each man, Annabel didn't expect it to be a problem. Unless she won. Then she imagined she'd discover their true colors. Would they change their attitude if either of them lost to her?

Hopefully not.

The sound of hoof beats approaching saved her from the depressing reverie. She pinched her cheeks to add some color and peeked out the front window.

Two horses approached, and she was surprised and delighted to discover they'd arrived together.

Moments later, they dismounted and tied the horses up at the side of the cabin. She opened the door before they had a chance to knock, so eager to get the night's festivities started.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

Dane stepped inside and removed his hat. His gaze swept the interior of the cabin quickly until he spied the bed in the corner. His grin seemed to say that he approved. "Cozy."

Garrett entered, hat already in his hand, but his focus was completely centered on her. "You look beautiful." He passed by Dane and took her into a tight embrace. She slipped her arms around his neck as he lifted her a few inches off the ground. Face nuzzling her neck, he kissed a tender spot below her earlobe and whispered, "I've been looking forward to this since our last night together."

Dane cleared his throat. "My turn to ravish our hostess."

Garrett glanced over his shoulder but didn't relinquish his hug. "You had your chance when you high tailed it in here first. He who stutters is lost."

"And he who pounces is an ass. Get off of her."

Annabel wondered if she needed to referee. "Boys, boys. Be nice."

She extracted herself from Garrett's amorous hug and crossed to Dane. He took her hands and kissed the back of each one before allowing them to fall to her sides. He then took her face in his hands and kissed each corner of her mouth with a tenderness she didn't know existed in the world.

Dane slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck, and his third kiss started with a lick to her bottom lip before he pressed his open mouth across hers. Annabel leaned into him, unable to halt the warm sensations running in her veins from his tender expression.

Garrett, clearing his throat with a harsh grunt repeatedly, broke the tension and momentum of Dane's kiss. They moved apart but not before Annabel had to catch her breath. His grin also caused her heart to flip over in her chest. She'd missed him. But Garrett was also hard to resist. Somehow they'd have to find a way to make this work. She truly couldn't choose one man over the other. It would be all or nothing tonight.

"Oh my. I can already see this will be an interesting evening with each of you trying to one up the other one." She turned away from Dane and crossed to sit in one of two spindly wooden chairs facing slightly away from the fireplace and adjacent to the bed.

"You can't expect us to warm up to this as fast as you have, Annie." Garrett took a couple steps forward and crossed his arms. "You've had time to think about this, and we haven't."

Dane moved next to Garrett. "But I'm certainly willing to entertain whatever you have in mind, sugar. I've missed you something fierce since we parted. And had I known you were headed to this competition, I would have accompanied you. Maybe you wouldn't have been kidnapped."

"Or maybe you'd be dead." Garrett gave Dane a sideways glance.

Dane fisted his hands and twisted to face Garrett. "Which would solve more than one of your problems, right Sheriff?"

"Stop it. Both of you."

"If you have something to say, Larsen, get it off your chest."

“Someone knocked me in the head on my way here, which is why I wasn’t able to accompany Annabel on her trip. Who might have had a reason to do that? I know, maybe it was someone in the shooting contest who didn’t want me to attend.”

Garrett shook his head. “Not me. I’m the one favored to win this coming contest.”

“Or perhaps you thought you’d eliminate your only true competition.”

Each man had turned and now faced each other. Gazes sparking in fury, Annabel knew she needed to diffuse the situation.

“Or maybe you’ll both be sucking hind tit when I blow both of your asses off the target range in this coming challenge.”

As if planned in advance, the two men turned to her with the glimmer of a smile residing on their handsome faces.

“Having spent some intimate time with each of you, my guess is you are both honorable, and if there is any mischief afoot, neither of you have a hand in it.”

“I haven’t had any misfortune along this trip. And who says whatever happened to you several days ago has anything to do with the shooting match coming up?” Garrett dropped his fierce crossed-arm stance and rolled his shoulders as if stretching his muscles for a coming battle.

Dane huffed. “Because nothing was stolen. But my gun was out of the holster and on the ground next to my gear. I discovered someone bent the firing pin of the pistol I used in last year’s competition. Good thing I brought a spare gun, or I’d be screwed. And since it’s my lucky pistol that’s damaged, I may still be.”

Garrett shrugged. “Still, that could simply be a coincidence. Maybe your attacker tried to steal your gun and dropped it on his way out, and the firing pin was a casualty of the attempted robbery.”

“But if not, you should both be careful during the coming match. I’d hate to see either of you hurt again.” Annabel wrapped her arms around herself.

Garrett shrugged. "Just make sure and keep your weapons close and test them before the day's shooting."

"Want me to look at your firing pin? I might be able to fix it."

Dane grinned. "I'd love for you to look at my firing pin. Although, I've been told it's more of a firing bar. And if you fix my gun, it'd be a bonus."

Sexual innuendo wasn't one of her strong skills, but Dane's response made her laugh out loud. Even Garrett cracked a smile.

"Well, why don't you come over here and I'll take a look anyway."

They exchanged a quick, speculative glance at each other before Dane moved over to where she rested in the chair by the fire.

Annabel knew what she wanted, knew what she needed, and decided it was time to get the evening's festivities moving along. He stopped just out of arms reach in front of her.

"Closer," she murmured. He obliged and moved so close he blocked the heat of the fire with his own warmth. Annabel reached up to his waist and started to unfasten his pants. Dane grabbed her hands and stopped her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying something out that my friend says men really love."

"And that is?"

"I thought I'd put your cock in my mouth and suck on it." The way his eyes glazed over in sudden desire made Annabel believe her friend was absolutely correct. Men loved this.

Garrett strolled over to the other chair and sat down. "And I'm supposed to watch this decadent display?"

"No, you're just waiting for your turn. You don't have to watch if you don't want to, but I plan to put on quite a show." Garrett and Dane once again exchanged glances and must have come to some sort of agreement that she didn't see.

"What if you came over here and sat on my lap while you pleasure Larsen with your mouth?"

"Good idea." Annabel stood and shifted to sit on Garrett's lap.

She pulled Dane along with her. Once seated on his lap, Annabel felt Garrett's stiff cock against her buttocks. He reached around to fondle her breasts as she looked up into Dane's eyes.

Hands on his hips, Dane sucked in a deep breath and said, "I'm at your mercy, sugar."

Annabel undid his pants and slid them down his thighs. Lifting his shirt, she exposed his enormous cock.

Behind her, Garrett pushed his cock against her backside with careful rhythm. Even with several layers of clothing between them, the feel of his stiff shaft anywhere close to her pussy made her wet.

She licked the end of Dane's shaft before putting her entire mouth over the tip and sucked the first couple of inches of his stiff cock between her lips.

Dane groaned and pushed his cock a little deeper. His hands slipped around her head and lightly gripped her as if he needed something to hold onto as she sucked on him.

Her friend had explained the action, the process, and what to expect as a result of this practice, but Annabel hadn't anticipated the level of her arousal to be so intense from what she did to Dane. Perhaps Garrett's touching her helped, but after a few strokes, she almost forgot he was behind her, so intently was she focused on giving Dane pleasure.

Once his cock was inside her mouth as far as she could get it, she slipped her hands around to his butt and held on so she could maneuver better.

The moment her hands hit his butt cheeks, he fairly growled and sped the movement of his hips, sending his cock in and out of her mouth at a steadier speed. The thought of having his cock in her mouth sent spasms of delight straight to her gushing pussy. She grew wetter with each thrust of his thick cock inside her mouth.

Garrett plucked at her nipples through the two layers of nightgown and robe. She didn't want to stop but intended to disrobe for the next round.

The popping and crackling of the fire beside her was the only sound in the small space, with the exception of the loud panting coming from all three of them. This initial sexual interlude excited her beyond what she expected. The anxious space between her thighs throbbed with desire. Annabel had much more planned for tonight.

Dane slowed his hips and muttered something about stopping, but Annabel was determined to give him the most pleasure she could. Instead of slowing down as he did, she reached between his legs, brushed her fingers along his ball sacks and pushed her finger into the flesh between his cock and anus. Dane immediately stiffened, growled out a curse, and released his cum down her throat. After she'd swallowed all of it, she slid his cock carefully out of her mouth. Dane staggered backwards and plopped into the open chair. The sound of his bare butt cheeks smacking the seat was accompanied by his fervent voice, "Jesus Annabel, I never expected..." He was breathing so hard he didn't finish his sentence but trailed off. He leaned his head back and whistled.

Garrett hugged her from behind and whispered in her ear. "Is it my turn yet?"

Annabel laughed. "Yes. It is, but let Dane recover a bit. I want him beneath me when it's your turn."

"Unquestionably, that had to be the sexiest thing I've ever watched in my life."

Dane laughed. "You've never seen anyone get their knob polished before?"

He shrugged. "Once, when I was chasing a bandit through a whorehouse, I burst in on a couple and briefly saw them before she stopped, but that wasn't nearly as exciting as tonight."

"Makes a difference if you're personally involved." Dane winked at Annabel. She returned the smile.

Leaning against his back, Annabel moved forward, losing his warmth. "Help me take off my robe and nightgown, won't you Garrett?" She'd be very warm in a few minutes.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She shrugged the robe off of her shoulders. Garrett pulled it from her as she rose from his lap and turned to face him. Beside them, Dane had his glazed-over eyes focused on her. Garrett stood as she did. He quickly bent over, grabbed the hem of her dress, and lifted it off of her body. A cool brush of air rushed over her skin, and her nipples distended with the chill.

“That’s the only thing I would have changed about our previous interlude.” Dane rocked back in his chair. “A naked Annabel would have been a premium view.”

“Well, this time I’ll sit on your lap, and you can be naked, too. Will that make up for it?”

Dane nodded, stood slowly, and removed all of his clothing, never once moving his gaze from her body.

Now completely nude, she noticed Dane’s impressive erection and couldn’t wait until they were connected skin to skin. He sprawled back in the chair again and asked, “What if my cock accidentally slides up inside your pussy when you sit down on me?”

“All the better,” she murmured as a thrill rode up her spine.

Annabel walked slowly over to Dane and twisted around before seating herself on one of his out-stretched legs.

Garrett moved forward. He’d removed his shirt, showcasing the fine muscles of his abdomen, but kept his trousers in place. She assumed he wanted her to remove them as his “turn” ensued.

“I don’t think I’ve ever participated in such a decadent experience before.” Garrett moved forward when she motioned for him, but his expression seemed pensive.

Dane put his hands on her hips and shifted her over his lap until his cock rested at the entrance of her pussy. Her inner muscles clenched in anticipation of being pierced.

“I recommend it,” Dane said. His tone as awe-filled as his expression had been when she’d put her mouth on his cock. “But let me get situated inside of her first.”

Dane lifted her hips slightly, and his cock thrust easily into her pussy. The creamy moisture she had expelled while sucking on his cock eased his way now. Annabel moaned as he pulled her down all the way on to his wide, stiff shaft until her bare butt rested against his warm, naked lap. The sensation of having her pussy filled before she filled her mouth with another man's cock made this second experience already more exciting.

Annabel opened her eyes and motioned for Garrett to come over. He approached slowly until he stood before her. She tilted her head back to look into his eyes. He watched her unfasten his pants and pull them to his thighs. His wide, swollen cock emerged from a thick nest of dark hair between his muscular legs. He looked even bigger than she remembered.

She slid her hand around his girth, unable to get her fingers to meet. The moment she touched him, a groan escaped his lips. The second she put her lips around the end of his cock, he nearly growled in what sounded very much like pleasure. Annabel put as much of his substantial length into her mouth as would fit and sucked hard on his cock.

One of Garrett's hands slipped along side of her face. His fingers threaded through her hair, while the other hand was fisted at his side. Annabel thought Garrett's reactions were sexy as hell.

The three of them together was intimate and had Annabel's heart stammering at a double time beat. Dane's legs spread apart to accommodate her on his lap. From behind her, Dane began to move his lower body, shooting his cock a little deeper into her pussy with each rock of his hips. One hand slid around to finger her clit, and she almost cried out in passion, except Garrett's cock filled her mouth. She sucked him in and out and extracted the most glorious sounds from his throat.

The arousal building in her body from being so intimately engaged with both men made Annabel's heart hammer in her chest. Her pussy stretched to accommodate Dane's cock as he rocked his

hips against her bottom. Her mouth was filled with Garrett's shaft. Her tongue curled around the head of his cock in a rhythm to the sound of his vocal appreciation.

"Oh Jesus, Annie," he whispered at the end of a long, deep groan. His cock pushed deeply into her mouth, and he climaxed with a blast of cum, which escaped down her throat. She swallowed twice before he disengaged. Hand lowered to one thigh, Garrett bent over and then staggered back to the other chair and sat down hard.

He slumped back in the chair and watched as Dane continued to stroke his cock gently inside her pussy.

"Watch this, Butler."

From behind her, Dane picked up the pace and power of his thrusts. Hands securely fastened on her hips for guidance, his cock pushed deeply into her body.

"Touch yourself, sugar. Go slow, and let Butler see you enjoy it."

Annabel smiled and put her hands to her own breasts. She thumbed her sensitive nipples as Dane sent his cock upward faster and faster between her pussy lips.

"Now rub your clit. He needs to see you come."

The thought so scandalous she felt heat leap into her cheeks, Annabel still lowered one hand from her breast to the hot space between her legs and stroked her own clitoris.

Garrett watched her, eyes glittering with lust as she touched her nipple and stroked her clit. His cock rose in full erection in mere moments, and his gaze never left her body.

"Are you about to come, Annie?" Garrett's low whisper barely penetrated the cocooned sound of her heavy breathing. The meaning of his question sank in and ramped up her arousal. She was nearly at the pinnacle where complete gratification was a flick of her finger away. She wanted to climax and shriek her orgasm to the heavens. The idea of two men here in the cabin, her own hands plying her nipples and clit for an orgasm, accelerated her arousal.

Dane's cock slid deliciously in and out of her pussy. Each stroke

of his wide shaft went deeper than the one before. The core of her body clenched signaling that her climax was imminent.

She nodded at Garrett slowly, barely able to speak. "I'm so very close."

With the help of his hands lifting her hips up and down on his cock, Dane thrust particularly deep, and the feel of his thick cock sliding in her wet pussy was enough to push her over the edge. She pinched her nipple, brushed her finger across her engorged clit, and climaxed hard as Garrett watched.

Her toes curled against the wood planked floor as the most blissful feeling of satisfaction traveled through her pussy, radiated outward to her body, and sped along her spine. She arched her back and screamed as Dane's cock buried deeply inside her pussy one more time. His hands released her hips and wrapped around her waist, holding her against his lap. His fast breaths brushed down her back. They stayed melted together for a long while.

"That was amazing."

"It was pretty amazing to watch, as well," Garrett said.

Dane's arms loosened from her waist. He kissed her back and released her. She stood on wobbly legs, unsure if they would hold her up. Garrett also stood and pulled her into his arms the moment she faltered. When her legs gave out completely, he lifted her into his arms and carried her across the room.

He placed her on the bed and climbed on top of her. His hard cock pushed against her thigh as the weight of his warm body pressed her against the cool sheets.

Dane still reclined in the chair near the fire, watching them. The smile on his face warmed her.

Garrett kissed her lips. "I want to make love to you, Annie." He turned his head and nodded at Dane. "And I want Larsen to watch us."

Annabel also turned to see Dane, elbows resting on his knees, watching them very intently.

“I can’t wait to see you come, Annabel. This time, Butler will feel you squeeze his cock, and I’ll see you arch your back as you scream and climax.”

Garrett burrowed his face against her throat and nibbled a path along her jaw. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. He pulled back to look deeply into her eyes. She noticed what she’d wanted to see tonight. The love in his gaze was hard to miss.

He pressed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss before trailing more kisses down her chin and chest. He soon captured one nipple in his warm mouth and sucked with delicate pressure. His hand cupped the other breast and thumbed her nipple. Rapturous sensations traveled straight to her pussy from his attention.

His cock pulsed against her thigh with each pull of his mouth suckling her breast. She wanted to feel his cock buried all the way to the end of her pussy.

Annabel widened her legs, and his hips fell into place between her thighs. This movement allowed his cock to penetrate the entrance of her slick, wet pussy in seconds. A moment later, he groaned and thrust his shaft deeply inside her body, all the way to the hilt.

“Christ, you’re tight,” he whispered against her ear.

He lifted up onto his forearms, giving her more room to move against him.

The walls of her pussy stretched to accommodate his wide cock. The rhythm of his cock pushing inside her pussy sent zinging pleasure from her core to her limbs. She grabbed his shoulders with each hand, fingernails digging into his skin with each thrust. The pleasure building inside her body was exquisite.

Annabel shifted and wrapped her legs around Garrett’s hips. Now, each stroke of his cock thrust deeper. She was about to climax again.

“I love you,” Garrett whispered. His cock plunged deeper yet, and she came in a shattering rush as he roared her name. Ripples of decadent pleasure sped across her body the second his words penetrated her mind. She screamed inarticulately as gratification

consumed her once again.

A feeling of gratitude soon encompassed Annabel as she drifted down from the height of pleasure. She was grateful for finding these two men along her journey to fulfill a dream. And she was grateful they had been able to come together in mutual bliss and harmony tonight. Undoubtedly, this experience could become one she got very used to.

Her future never looked so perfect.

Chapter Eight

Bright and early on qualification day, Garrett woke from the short slumber he'd been able to get in his hotel room, stretched and reminisced about the surprising evening before. He and Dane had opted to leave Annabel alone after all the carnal activities, although she invited them to spend the rest of the night in her bed. They both agreed it was better for all three not to come from the direction of her temporary home the next morning.

Dressed and ready to leave his hotel room before dawn broke over the eastern plains, Garrett focused his attention on the coming shooting event. Each of the contestants had to qualify to even participate in the contest by hitting a target set twenty five feet away with a pistol. A rifle was optional but most opted for a pistol.

Almost all of the contestants qualified, but occasionally, a shooter with more hot air than skill showed up. Those less accomplished with firearms got weeded out early as a precaution to other shooters.

After a hearty breakfast, Garrett headed to the end of town where the competition was being held. A small hill served as natural backdrop to the targets, and any stray bullets were therefore less likely to hit any spectators.

A regulation target was set up for qualification, and a single line of shooters took turns as their entry number was called to approach and fire a shot. If the bullet fired hit the target, the line moved along. If not, the shooter was asked to leave sans any refund of their fee money. Early on, contestants learned not to waste money on poor skills as the judges never budged on refunds. It didn't matter where on the target a shooter hit, as long as the bullet hole made it inside the

outer ring.

Target scouts called *runners* had to run and check the results after each shooter, so it was time consuming and took the better part of the morning. The only time they'd ever stopped was due to a rain storm, and that singular event had happened before Garrett had ever been associated with this contest. Even having been in this contest for only two previous years, he'd heard all the interesting stories from years gone by.

Last year, a bar brawl had broken out one night during the middle of the annual contest, and a man in the ensuing battle was hit over the head hard enough that he died. No one ever knew which broken chair or flying bottle ended his life, but he was buried in Pine Haven's small cemetery on the opposite side of town. His tragic death served as a lesson to rowdier men not to cause trouble in the saloon and gave the sheriff an excuse to end drunken arguments quickly by any means necessary.

Dane was already at the end of the town when Garrett arrived. He nodded once in greeting, and Dane nodded once in return, just exactly like they'd done for the past two years. However, this year was shockingly different due to the sexual activities from the previous evening. They had agreed to keep things the same during the competition as they rode from Annabel's hidden cabin late the night before.

Garrett hadn't ever shared a woman before, but his love for Annie, and his admiration of Larsen as a competitor and as a decent man, made the sexy experience one he definitely wanted to repeat. No future date had been set for any further contact, but his mind flashed repeatedly on several carnal memories from the night before. Like a drug, Garrett found it difficult to think about never having Annabel Wallace in his bed again.

With or without Dane, Garrett desired a future with Annie. Before the end of the competition, he hoped for a glimmer of hope from her in that arena.

He searched the growing crowd for Annie but didn't see her. She had until the stroke of nine o'clock to show up for the qualifying round. Surreptitiously, he kept an eye out towards the south edge of town for her to arrive.

"Looking for me?" came her voice from behind him.

"Just making sure we didn't keep you up too late last night." He kept his voice low. "Speaking of which, are you okay with folks here knowing we're acquainted? I feel like I should pretend we don't know each other to keep up appearances."

She shrugged. "It doesn't really matter, since several of the stagecoach passengers are here for the competition as spectators. They certainly already know we're acquainted. It would look foolish to act as if we don't know each other, given that you saved my life."

Garrett stuck his hand out. In a louder voice he proclaimed, "Then I wish you the best of luck in the competition."

She took his hand in hers. The smile she gave him could have lit the world in a warm glow. "Good luck to you, as well, Sheriff."

* * * *

Pistol loaded and ready to fire, Annabel waited patiently for her turn to qualify. She didn't plan to do any fancy shooting. She just wanted to hit the target. With nearly forty entrants and the time to check shots in between each, she was grateful to be closer to the front of the line. Riding from the cabin this morning had given her time to expend the nervousness of seeing Dane and Garrett again. The day after all the decadent things they'd done the night before kept sexy thoughts in her head for the entire duration of the trip.

The excitement of the moment was second only to her satisfaction of accomplishing the first of her goals. *Persuade them to let me into the contest. Check.* The second goal was to get into the final five finalists, and of course, her third and final goal was to win the twelfth annual Wyoming Territory's Sharpshooter Contest.

Memories from the night before intruded, even though she'd promised not to think about either Dane or Garrett during the course of this competition.

She'd made her desires clear to them the night before regarding any contact during the match. She didn't want any. Didn't need the distraction. As sharp shooters, they had understood and readily agreed.

Annabel's intentions to ignore them crumpled like fallen leaves underfoot the moment she saw Garrett get in line to qualify. His tall, strong body was very fine-looking, with or without clothing.

He didn't stare openly, but the second she caught his eye, he smiled. Of course, as the only woman shooting in today's qualifying round, she was getting the full gamut of looks all the way down the long line. From open hostility to leering stares, Annabel knew whatever happened in the contest this year wouldn't soon be forgotten by virtue of her simply being there.

As each shooter made his way forward to take his shot, Annabel watched and contemplated where to put her bullet. She had the skill to hit anywhere on the target but wanted to temper her level of prowess. Confident she could easily put a bullet in the center, no one needed to know her exact skill level, yet it seemed like cheating not to try her best to hit the bull's-eye if she could. And she knew she had the skill.

Cletus motioned her to approach the shooter's line. Having just dabbed the back of her neck and face with a handkerchief to remove the excess perspiration, Annabel quickly tucked the cloth into her sleeve and advanced towards Cletus.

"All right, missy, take your best shot. Your bullet hole has to be inside the largest ring on the target for you to continue."

"I understand. Thank you." Annabel raised her pistol, closed one eye to sight the target, and put her finger against the trigger. The very second she pulled the trigger, expecting a center hit, someone in line fired his weapon in the air and startled her as she fired.

Oh God, she was well off her mark. Had she even hit the target?

She didn't have the courage to look quite yet. Face pointed at the ground, Annabel cursed inwardly and wondered if the ruckus from a rude contender would allow her a second qualifying shot.

Cletus yelled over her head. "Bodine, what the hell were you thinking? Only one shooter at a time. You know that. Besides, it's inconsiderate to startle the shooter."

A man a few steps away laughed. "Well, she was takin' too long. I was just showing her what she was supposed to do with that gun in her hand."

Annabel lifted her head to finally look at the target. In the upper left section of the ring, her bullet had edged the line on the inside of the ring. At least she had hit the target. A breath of anxiety she hadn't realized she'd held released in a long, slow sigh of relief. She wasn't disqualified. At least not yet.

Virgil, the man from the day before who initially voted for her *not* to compete, and next shooter in line, muttered, "Does that shot even count? Her bullet hole is touching the ring."

Cletus looked over at the target. "I say the shot qualifies as it's inside the ring. She's in the contest. Or I can allow her to take another try at it because of Bodine's rudeness."

The grumbling which ensued from the rest of the contestants made Annabel think no second shot would be desired, if it was even allowed.

Cletus handed her a number. "You qualify. Tomorrow is the quarter finals. Each shooter will get ten shots. The top ten closest to the center of the target move on to the next round.

Annabel walked away, trembling in fury over almost being disqualified before the first round. She didn't know why she expected the men in the contest to play fair. It was obvious she'd have to keep her guard up.

"Annie," Garrett's familiar voice called out from near the platform next to the line of men still waiting to qualify. She marched past and pretended not to hear him. Her temper was up, and she didn't

feel up to any polite conversation.

Besides, she was afraid he'd feel obligated to placate her, or worse, he'd down play her justified anger. She wasn't in the mood to be soothed. She wanted to remain angry for a while longer. Perhaps embracing her wrath during the competition would help her shoot better when the contest actually started.

She marched all the way to the stable without a backward glance.

Before she could call a stable hand for her horse, a hand closed over one shoulder and squeezed. Annabel whirled around in surprise with a caustic word on her lips and fully prepared to initiate a fist fight if another cross word about her participation in the contest was uttered.

Dane removed his hand and backed up a step. "Whoa, sugar. Don't shoot me."

"Can I help you with something?" The words came out in a harsher tone than she'd intended. She was angry at the men at the contest but not Dane in particular.

"Perhaps you can, but I'd like to ask a favor without the likelihood my head will get bitten off."

She pushed out a long sigh. "I'm sorry. I'm not angry with you. The resistance and antics from the other competitors wears on my good nature."

"I know what you're mad about, and you have every right, but right now I need help with something else." He looked over his shoulder at the lessening line of men left to qualify.

Annabel thought he was still in line when she left. "Did you already shoot the target to qualify?"

"No. I wanted to use a particular gun. I thought I'd fixed it, but the firing pin must still be bent on my favorite pistol. When I went to practice early this morning, I couldn't get it to fire. I guess we know *I'm* not a gunsmith. It might not even be the firing pin. Anyway, I was sort of hoping you might take a look."

"Do you really think I'm capable of fixing your gun?" He knew

about her father being a gunsmith because she told them about her skills, but she hadn't expected to be asked for help with any gun repair.

"I sincerely hope so. I mean, I can use my other pistol, but this one is the one I've used the past four years. I guess I'm a little superstitious about changing this year." He pulled his pocket watch out and glanced at the time. "Not to rush you or anything, but I only have less than an hour left before I have to shoot with something, unless you don't want to lend a hand to a fellow competitor. Perhaps you plan to use my superstitious nature against me?"

"That wouldn't be very sportsman like, now would it?" She was just so surprised that anyone would ask her for help.

Annabel glanced over her shoulder and into the stable. No one was visible in the immediate entrance. "Come in here where I have my tools, and I'd be happy to take a look."

He followed her into the cool shade of the stable's entry. The scent of fresh hay and horses, with an undertone of manure, permeated the air. He handed her his pistol butt first and waited with hands on his hips for her to disassemble the firing mechanism. Luckily for Dane, she had a gun kit in her saddlebag ready in case one of her own weapons had been damaged somehow during the competition. She didn't mind using her tools to help out a friend.

"When was the last time you fired this weapon before this morning?" Annabel walked over to the stall where she'd left her horse and saddle. She retrieved her leather gun kit and opened it up on the top of a wooden barrel next to the gate keeping her horse in his stall.

"Before I left Colorado. I shot up a few targets to get ready for the competition. I thought I'd fixed the pin myself the day I got clobbered, but I guess I'm not as skilled in gun repair as I'd thought. Early this morning, I went to do some last minute shooting to make sure my sights were accurate, but the damn thing wouldn't even fire. It looks like someone bent it again. I could also qualify with my rifle today, but I'll still need a working pistol for the competition. And as I

mentioned, the broken one is my favorite.”

Annabel used a tool to reposition the firing pin into a straighter configuration for firing and reassembled his pistol. Without looking up from her task, she asked, “Who do you think hurt you back in Colorado and disabled your gun?”

He cleared his throat. “Well, now that is the distressing part. It could be anyone from the competition. What are there, twenty-five or thirty guys who entered? Any one of them could have decided to take me out of the running this year.”

She glanced up. “Including me.”

“But you didn’t even know I was in this contest, did you?”

Annabel shook her head. “No, but I also don’t believe Garrett would do anything detrimental to you for the sake of a shooting contest.”

“I wouldn’t have thought so either, but no one else has been near my things.”

“No one? What about the other members of this contest? There’s probably a bunch of them staying in your hotel.”

“Except that my gun has been on my person since I left Colorado after that *incident*.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You didn’t bring them in with you last night.”

Dane crossed his arms. “True. But that would mean someone rode out to your house in the woods last night. I only left my weapons unattended on my horse in the small stable next to your house.”

The implication of that scenario made heat rise in her cheeks and a sour burning feeling erupt in the pit of her stomach.

“Someone could have sneaked into your hotel room, later on while you slept.”

His eyebrows went straight up to his hairline. “I doubt it. I’m a light sleeper.”

“But you were very tired last night.” She didn’t attempt to hide her satisfied smile. “Besides, I didn’t hear anyone skulking around

outside the cabin last night, did you?”

“No, but I was preoccupied most of the night. I certainly didn’t have my thoughts on sabotage. The truth is, it could also be as Garrett said and completely unrelated to the contest. Perhaps someone was trying to steal it and dropped it instead.”

Annabel finished her quick repair and put her tools back in the leather pouch. She spun the wheel and locked the chamber into position. “This should work, but before you attempt to compete with this weapon, I’d like to test it first. Why don’t you use your alternate gun to qualify right now, and we’ll test your favorite for competition later on.”

Dane leaned closer. His scent caressed her with memories from their intimate time together. “Could we test it tonight?”

“I guess so, but you’ll have to arrive well before dark and bring a target.”

“I can do that. Not a problem.” He took another step closer. If anyone came in, there wouldn’t be any doubt as to their intimate knowledge of each other.

She put a hand to his cheek, relishing the smooth, recently shaved skin and stared deeply into his eyes. “What if I want Garrett to come with you?”

He leaned in and kissed her lips gently. “Also not a problem.”

“Good. I’ll expect you to invite him along, if you wish to see me tonight.”

* * * *

Virgil Smith fumed all afternoon over that *woman* being allowed in the annual contest. He’d goaded Bodine the whole time they were in line to start a ruckus when she got ready to shoot, so she’d be disqualified. He called him a lily livered coward and a son of a bitch if he didn’t try to fuck with the girl’s qualification round and keep her out of the match.

His exact words were whispered directly before the offending shot, “Bodine, you don’t have a hair on your ass if you won’t liven things up by firing off a round as soon as she aims,” *and most importantly, make her miss the target so she’s out of this competition.*

Even as startled as she had obviously been, she’d still hit the damn target well enough to barely qualify for the contest. Fucking impertinent female. Someone needed to show her a woman’s place.

Larsen and Butler, the two leading contenders for this annual marksmanship contest, had lost his respect when they cow-towed to her initial demands to be allowed to shoot in the first damn place. Maybe she promised to spread her legs for them, and that’s why they’d smiled and let her enter a sharpshooters contest when everyone knew such events were meant only for men. He’d seen the three of them eating together yesterday at the hotel dining room. Virgil knew from gossip around town that Miss I Want to Shoot a Gun was staying at a friend’s place south of town.

Maybe he’d follow her home and find out for himself what she was up to. He knew one thing for damn sure, women did not belong in shooting competitions, and he’d do everything in his power to see that she didn’t stay long enough to get to the final round.

* * * *

Annabel didn’t stay in town very long after the qualification round. Her attitude improved dramatically after speaking with Dane and repairing his gun. She calmed down and was able to do a little shopping. She bought a few essentials at the local mercantile and rode her gentle mare back to Mary’s home. After a lovely afternoon visit with her friend with tea and cakes she’d bought in town, Annabel arrived back at her cabin in the private copse of woods and readied for another visit from Dane and Garrett.

She thought perhaps a nice steaming bath would improve her mood. There was a small wooden tub in the corner near the fireplace.

It was placed behind the changing screen next to the bed. Annabel spent a considerable amount of time readying the water.

Once she thought she heard a horse approaching right before stepping into the bath, but when she peeked out the cabin's only window by front door, not a soul appeared.

She slid into the rose scented water and decided it wouldn't be a horrible disaster if Dane and Garrett came calling before she finished her bath. She left the door unbarred just in case. She leaned her head back on a small towel folded over the rounded wooden edge and turned her head so she could see the front door.

Annabel soaked and relaxed in the fragrant water for only a few minutes before the sound of horses' hooves cantering into the yard sent her heartbeat racing.

Their deep, sexy voices intruded into the serenity of the cabin. A light knock came, but before she answered, Dane pushed the door open and poked his head in the opening. "Annabel?"

"Come in. I'm just finishing up my bath."

His searching eyes soon found her in the corner, and his eyes widened. "Need any help, sugar? I'd love to wash your back." Dane entered with Garrett following close behind.

"I'd be so grateful for your assistance."

They shed their jackets and set a few packages on the table, including a bunch of wild flowers one of them had obviously picked along the way.

"The flowers are lovely," she said softly. "Thank you."

Garrett's gaze radiated with what genuinely looked like lusty interest the moment he saw her and where she waited. "But your beauty rivals even the fairest of blooms."

Both men crowded the small bathing space behind the screen, and each squatted down on either side of the tub. Garrett stuck a hand beneath the surface, scooped up warm water, and dribbled it over her breasts. "While Larsen scrubs your back, perhaps I could occupy my time washing between your legs. I seem to remember you enjoyed it

the last time I helped clean that particularly sensitive part of your anatomy.”

Dane’s brows furrowed. “You two bathed together?”

Annabel smiled. “No. Not exactly. He agreed to be my guard while I bathed, and I enticed him into helping me reach the hard to wash places.”

“As I recall, my clothes got a little bit of a rinse during the experience. Perhaps Larsen and I should take our clothes off this time, so we don’t get drenched in the process.”

“Works for me.” Dane stood and quickly stripped until he was completely naked, shucking clothes, boots and everything near the foot of the bed. He returned to the tub and grabbed the small bar of soap, rubbing it between his large hands. She watched as Garrett took his time undressing. Meanwhile, Dane began to smooth suds over her breasts, paying careful attention to cleaning her nipples until they peaked. Her earlier fury over nearly missing the target at the qualification round melted away with each touch of Dane’s hands on her body. He kneaded the muscles of her arms and legs with gentle strokes. He didn’t miss a single spot. Head resting back against the edge of the tub as Dane massaged her intimately, Annabel watched Garrett take his clothes off.

By the time Garrett was nude, Dane had thoroughly cleaned her breasts and shoulders and had worked his hand beneath the surface of the water to stroke between her legs. His wide fingers entered her pussy, enabling his thumb to stroke her clit. Garrett kneeled next to the tub and put both hands on her breasts, stroking his thumbnails over her nipples. A wave of arousal traveled straight south to her pussy and squeezed Dane’s fingers embedded there.

Garrett lowered his head and kissed her lips with gentle pressure. She lifted her hands from the water to cup his face and keep him there. She felt him smile against her mouth.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. His hands squeezed her breasts gently. He trailed kisses to her

throat. Each touch of his lips sent a pulse of desire through her body.

Annabel opened her eyes and glanced down her body. The visual of seeing two men touching and stroking her body was powerful enough to almost make her climax.

Dane shifted his fingers against her sex. One digit carefully slipped between her butt cheeks and penetrated her rear hole. Her pussy clenched, and pleasure soared through her veins, all the way up her spine.

Garrett leaned over and pressed his mouth across hers again. His tongue swept between her lips, devouring her breath in a powerful, arousing kiss as Dane's fingers catapulted her to the brink of a strong orgasm. Both men working in tandem, caressing her, kissing her, stroking her until she exploded to the very pinnacle of satisfaction.

Garrett slid his mouth from her lips to nibble a path to her earlobe. Waves of pleasure from the release encompassed her, and as her pussy clenched around Dane's fingers, she let loose a gratifying scream from the depths of her soul as the orgasm swelled and crashed through her body.

"You're so enthusiastic when you climax. The sound of your passionate scream likely made it all the way back to Pine Haven," Dane joked.

Garrett nodded in agreement. "Let's hope no one comes to investigate."

"Stop it. I'm certain I wasn't *that* loud."

Dane pressed his lips to her mouth, nibbled her bottom lip and murmured, "I'm not complaining, sugar."

"Let's finish this bath and retire to the bed."

Each took turns washing, rinsing, and licking just about every inch of her skin. By the time she stepped out of the tub, the skin on her fingers and toes had begun to wrinkle.

The late afternoon sun sent shafts of warm orange light onto the quilt. They dried her off and escorted her to the bed. She climbed into the center, rose onto her knees and brushed her fingertips down her

body, across the tips of her breasts to rest on her belly. Lifting her gaze, first to Dane and then to Garrett, she murmured, "You both understand what I desire now, don't you?"

Dane smiled, kissed her shoulder, and slid onto the bed. His cock, warm and hard, pushed against one butt cheek as he settled behind her. "Of course."

Annabel motioned Garrett forward and watched his enormous cock grow even bigger the closer he got. She bent at the waist and took him into her mouth before he even climbed onto the bed. He released a groan and stroked one hand over her damp hair. Fingers threading through the wet locks, he alternately gripped and released the strands in one fist with each pull of suction she exerted on his cock.

Behind her, Dane's hand stroked the opening of her pussy, scooped a measure of creamy orgasmic juices onto his fingers, and spread it generously across the crack of her ass and especially her rear hole. She sucked in a sharp pleasurable breath as two of Dane's fingers penetrated her rosette, readying the tight passage for his wide cock.

* * * *

Garrett pumped his cock slowly into Annie's mouth. The rhythm of her repeated suctions nearly drove him out of his mind with pleasure. His eyes slid open part way. He watched as Larsen worked his big cock carefully into her backside. That was a sight he never expected to see while getting *his* knob polished, but it certainly heightened his pleasure to a new level.

Annie's tongue slid across a sensitive spot at the end of his dick, and his knees almost buckled with the intensity of the pleasure. Larsen grabbed her hips with both hands and drove his cock all the way to the hilt into her ass. Annie sucked especially hard on his shaft the moment her ass was full. Garrett had to focus his attention

elsewhere from the carnal visual for a moment or risk losing it and spraying her throat with cum.

He wasn't ready to climax just yet. He wanted to push his cock into her pussy. With Larsen's dick filling her ass, her pussy would become excruciatingly tight, and Garrett wanted his gratification to come as he fucked her tight pussy hard.

The other night with Annie and Larsen was the first time in his existence he'd ever shared a woman. That evening also qualified as the best sex he'd ever experienced during the whole of his conservative life. He wondered, and not for the first time, how the three of them could continue this interesting relationship once the shooting contest ended.

Annie sucked his cock deeply into her mouth, and his balls tightened. He pulled his shaft from between her swollen lips and climbed on the bed.

"I want to come inside of you, Annie."

Her hands slid around his neck as he maneuvered his cock between her slick, hot pussy lips. "Lean back. Let me get some room to thrust."

"Damn, her ass is so tight," Dane whispered to seemingly no one in particular.

Garrett pushed his cock into her wet slit a few inches. The titanic grip of her slick heat sent pleasure all the way to his spine. He paused halfway through this first push to recover and not spill his wad with a single thrust.

"Her pussy is just as tight."

"Wait till you get all the way inside." Dane pulled his cock out of her ass halfway, and Annie gasped in pleasure.

Garrett sent his hips forward, finally pushing his cock all the way into her taut pussy. Seconds later, Dane filled her ass again. The sensation was uniquely gratifying, but he wanted to ensure she enjoyed it, too. He slid his hand between them and rubbed her clit as his cock began a steady thrust in and out of her wet heat.

Her head fell against Dane's shoulder as he stroked her clit faster and faster. Each thrust of his cock into her body became a test of his weakening stamina. She started panting. Dane's cock slid out of her ass until each of them took rapid turns thrusting a shaft into her soft body over and over again.

Garrett cupped her breast and thumbed her nipple with his free hand, and she arched against Larsen and came apart screaming. As if her pussy wasn't already constricting his cock with delicious pressure, her climax sent waves of additional pressure against his shaft. Four more rapid thrusts and Garrett fairly growled his release. Larsen stiffened seconds later, gripped her hips even tighter, and groaned loud and long.

Panting hard, Garrett watched Annie's eyes open. The love he saw there touched his very soul. He wanted to marry her. Wanted her to be in his life from now on. She turned her head, broke the sultry gaze, and glanced over his shoulder at the fading light coming in from the cabin's only window.

She sucked in a sudden panicked breath and screamed. This time not in pleasure. One hand lifted and she pointed at the window. Garrett looked over his shoulder in the direction of her angst, but didn't see anything. "What's wrong?"

Her panicked expression penetrated through the warm glow of his post-orgasmic frame of mind. "There was a man's face in the window watching us."

Chapter Nine

Dane stopped breathing for a second when Annabel pointed a finger at the window and announced some man had been watching their uninhibited sexual activities. He hadn't seen anyone there, but he'd been very preoccupied having the best orgasm of his life to notice his surroundings. The three of them froze together, barely breathing, as if not moving would keep anyone from seeing the very candid position they currently shared.

"Are you positive, sugar? I didn't see anyone."

"He was there. I saw him." She trembled between them. "Oh my heavens, who would be sneaking around out here? How did he know the cabin was here?"

Dane wasn't convinced of an intruder, until the sudden sound of departing hoof beats suggested that someone *had* been near the cabin. By the time they separated their bodies and went to look, no one could be seen through the dense trees.

"Did you see who it was?"

Annabel bounded off the bed and grabbed her robe. She shook her head as she slid the garment in place, covering her beautiful body.

"No, but what if he high tails it back to town and tattles on me?"

"Who would he tell that would care?" Garrett asked, but they all three knew the answer. He pulled his pants on, grabbed a gun, and exited the cabin. "I'll go take a look around."

Dane didn't think their relationship was anyone's business. He tried to comfort Annabel, now pacing back and forth next to the bed. "Don't worry, sugar. I'll go talk to Cletus tomorrow and tell him to ignore—"

“No!” Annabel put her hands to her face. “For heaven’s sake, don’t tell anyone.”

Dane sighed. “Then what can I do?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry.” She tightened the ties on her robe and sat on the bench at the end of the bed. “It isn’t anyone’s business what I do, but I don’t want to get kicked out of the contest.”

He wandered over to the bathtub where he’d shed his clothing earlier. He cleaned up using the still warm bath water, pulled his trousers back on, and returned to her side. Garrett came back into the cabin seconds later. “There are some boot prints next to the window outside, and someone left a horse tethered on the far side of the yard because there’s some horse manure there. It’s entirely possible someone was outside watching through the window and ran off soon after.”

Annabel, already hunched over with arms crossed over her stomach, sunk a little lower on the bench seat.

“Could it have been your friend or her husband?” Dane put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed.

She shook her head. “No. I saw someone with dark hair and a beard. Mary’s husband is blond and clean shaven. Besides, she knows I might be entertaining gentlemen. She’d never come up here unannounced.”

Garrett walked over and tilted her chin up with one hand. “Then don’t worry about anything until you have to. If someone says something to you tomorrow, deny it. The three of us will simply rebuff any stories told out of turn. It’s no one’s business what we do together, and it shouldn’t have any impact on the contest.”

Dane nodded in agreement. “Tonight, on our way back to the hotel, we’ll circle around and enter town from the north to deflect any suspicion of being here.”

Annabel expelled a long sigh. “You’re absolutely right. It’s nobody’s business, and I won’t borrow trouble.”

“Great, now before it gets dark will you let me test fire my

favorite gun?”

A smile formed at the corner of her mouth. “Yes. Let’s go make sure you can fire your beloved gun. Not that it will matter.” Her brows arched as if in smug assurance. “I hope you understand that I intend to win this contest.”

Dane and Garrett exchanged amused gazes. “I love that you’re so confident.”

“Will you still love me if I beat you?”

“I will.” Garrett reached out and traced a finger along her hairline from the center of her forehead to one ear. The look in his eyes was filled with utter love. Dane recognized it because it was the same feeling he experienced every time he looked at Annabel. He loved her, too.

Dane kissed her cheek. “I will, too, sugar. May the best shooter win. No hard feelings either way. Right, Butler?”

Garrett flashed a smile at Annabel. “Of course not. May the best shooter win.”

A full-fledged smile finally appeared on her lips, and Dane didn’t do or attempt to say anything to change her sudden good humor, but secretly, he was very worried about who had been lurking around outside the cabin watching them.

Was tonight’s secret watcher the same person who’d conked him in the head and sabotaged his gun?

* * * *

Annabel took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and mentally prepared herself to shoot her first bull’s-eye in this contest. The gentle breeze ruffled the hem of her recently repaired blue gingham dress, but she ignored everything around her and focused on the target twenty five feet away. No one would distract her today.

Arms extended straight out in front of her, gun comfortably nestled in her hands ready to shoot, Annabel lined up her shot with

the target's center and squeezed the trigger.

Grateful that no one had fired off a shot this time, Annabel lowered her weapon and narrowed her focus on the center of the target to ensure her bullet had hit dead center.

"Step back, please," Cletus said to her as he waved at the runner whose job it was to go check the target, report the score, and re-set for the next contestant. She could already see that she'd hit exactly in the center of the bull's-eye, but the verity of her shot was confirmed by the gasps of shock all around her from the other men waiting to compete or who'd already made their first shot.

"She got a bull's eye!" called the runner now standing before her target.

"How close to the edge?" Cletus yelled back.

The man didn't even look again, but his awestruck tone carried all the way to where she stood. "It's dead center. A perfect shot."

Cletus turned to her with what looked like admiration or perhaps shock in his eyes. The satisfaction in the skill of her marksmanship warmed Annabel's insides considerably. She *did* belong here. She did have a chance to win this match.

"Good for you, Missy."

"Beginner's luck." Annabel heard mumbled more than once as she passed the many of the other contestants milling around to sit and wait to find out who the top ten shooters were for the quarter finals. Dane, as one of the very first shooters for this set, had already fired his "favorite" pistol and gotten a bull's-eye, as well. Three more contestants waited for their chance and then Garrett would take his turn as the final contestant in the first round of shooting because he was last year's champion.

Having witnessed his skill with a rifle in the canyon last week, when he saved her from the kidnapers, Annabel had little doubt as to his expert ability with a pistol. The fact that he was a well-known sheriff added to her confidence in his proficiency with any weapon. And, of course, he *was* last year's champion.

While she had every assurance in her own skill with a pistol or a rifle, secretly, she rooted for both of her lovers to make the cut. She'd love nothing more than to stand beside them in the final round.

Annabel glanced around the crowd for Dane, wondering if he'd seen her shoot. Before she scanned through the majority of the folks milling around watching, someone sat down next to her on the bench very close. By the sour alcohol saloon stench wafting from the person, she knew immediately it wasn't Dane.

She breathed through her mouth and looked up at Virgil, the man who'd been so vocal about her not competing in this contest. He looked like he'd been drinking non-stop for days. Perhaps he had.

"I seen you the other night at your cabin with Larsen and the sheriff. I seen you fuckin' the both of them. I knew you was a whore," he whispered in her ear. The vile words came out in a singsong voice as if he remarked about the fine weather they enjoyed.

Annabel's stomach turned over hating that someone so despicable had witnessed their private love scene. She kept her face from betraying her volatile emotions. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said in a steady voice much calmer than she felt.

Virgil huffed. "I seen you with my own eyes. Now, I'm willing to keep quiet, but the thing is...I'd like a taste of what you're offerin' so freely to the other two." He grabbed her hand and squeezed. She wrenched her fingers from his vile grasp and stood up. Virgil leaned in closer and whispered, "I'm stayin' in room four at the Pine Haven hotel. I'll expect to see you on my doorstep tonight just after dark."

Dane appeared through a throng of the crowd, and Annabel called his name. The smile on his face disappeared the moment his gaze settled on Virgil. Her blackmailing accuser pushed closer. The pungent scent of his unwashed body made her turn her head. Annabel shoved at his arm, trying to push him away, without much success.

"Night fall. Don't forget." Virgil deserted her in a hurry just as Dane came within an arm's length of them. He started to chase after her tormenter, but Annabel stood and caught his arm. She trembled so

badly she had to sit down again.

“What did he say to you?” Dane sat down next to her on the bench but didn’t touch her. “Tell me what he said, Annabel. You’re positively pale.”

Annabel glanced around at all the townsfolk still too close for private conversations. “Not here. Not now.”

“Where and when?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

The next shooter in the competition fired his weapon, and a cheer went up in the crowd.

“Tell me, or I’ll go beat it out of Virgil myself.” His voice rose above a whisper.

Annabel turned to him and murmured quietly, “He saw us last night. He wants me to join him in his hotel room tonight, or else.” She then glanced all around to ensure no one else heard her speak. No one seemed to be paying attention to their whispered conversation.

Dane’s concerned expression darkened. “That bastard.”

Before she could respond, Garrett walked into her field of view, followed by a hoard of well wishers slapping him on the back and congratulating him on his recent bull’s-eye. She’d missed his shot.

The moment Garrett’s gaze caught hers, his expression also shifted to one of concern. He turned to face the crowd following him, thanked them profusely, and waited until the group drifted away before turning back to join the hellish conversation.

Annabel rose from the bench. “Congratulations, I’m sorry I missed your shot.”

“What’s wrong?” Garrett’s gaze shifted first to Dane before returning.

Annabel pressed her lips together, not wanting to say the ugly words again. Dane leaned forward and saved her from speaking. “I’ll explain the details later, but we need to go have a conversation with Virgil. He was disrespectful to our girl.”

Our girl? Annabel couldn’t help but melt a little inside at the

unexpected endearment. Did Garrett feel the same way?

“You don’t have to do that. I can fight my own battles.”

“I have no doubt about your abilities, Annie, but Dane and I are also involved in this matter. Guess how *I* feel about fighting battles?” The amused expression on his face was hard to resist.

“I would guess that you go in to a situation with your guns ablazing to save your girl even before you’ve met her.”

“You’ve got that right.”

Annabel pushed out a long breath. “Fine. He wanted me to meet him in room number four at the Pine Haven hotel tonight after dark. The two of you can go handle this, but don’t make it worse.”

Dane shrugged. “What could be worse?”

“Anyone else hearing the lurid details of what he witnessed at my cabin last night.”

Garrett’s eyes closed as if he clearly understood the entirety of the dismal situation.

Annabel hesitated to bring up the next difficult conversation topic but had already rehearsed her thoughts on the way here earlier this morning. “There’s something else I want to discuss. I think we need a short retreat from this arrangement. A break, if you will.” She looked at Garrett first and then Dane to gauge their reactions.

Dane’s eyebrows furrowed. “What kind of break?”

She cleared her throat. “I’ve already agreed to spend the day with my friend and generous hostess, Mary, and her family. Tonight, I’ll be riding back to the cabin with them. Alone.”

Garrett nodded. “Then we’ll see you tomorrow morning at the competition.” He walked away without another word. Dane sighed, offered her a half-smile, and followed him.

Her heart felt like it sank all the way to rest in the turmoil occurring in her stomach. She’d likely hurt their feelings, and *that* was the worst sensation of all.

Damn Virgil and his prying eyes. She had half a mind to show up in his room tonight with *her* favorite gun and tell him how she truly

felt about his threats.

* * * *

Dane followed Garrett all the way to the hotel before stopping him. "Where are you going?"

"Virgil's room."

"He's not there yet. She's supposed to meet him after dark."

"Do you expect me to wait until tonight to set him straight?"

Dane shrugged. "I'm just telling you he probably isn't there. Likely as not, he's still over at the crowd waiting to find out if he's in the next round."

"Fine. Let's go make sure he understands our resolve to keep our personal lives private."

They marched back over to the competition in time to hear the names of the shooters qualified for the next round of competition. Annabel, Garrett and Dane had made the list. So did Virgil and Cletus. Most of the other names, Dane didn't recognize. There were lots of new comers this year, including one very beautiful sharpshooter he already had very heightened fondness for.

Virgil was nowhere to be found. He and Garrett banged on the door of his room several times throughout the evening but never saw him or heard from him. Dane bribed a local at the stable and discovered Virgil's horse was still inside, so they retired to the bar for a few drinks. He was probably out looking for a convenient woman since Annabel didn't show up.

With no trip out to the cabin scheduled for tonight, Dane and Garrett decided to gamble and drink lots of whiskey for entertainment. Evenly matched in both, they discovered they shared similar views on many aspects of life and a similar hearty work ethic, along with a few pastimes such as target shooting.

After several rounds of whiskey, and once they were sure no one else could over hear them, they both admitted to incredibly strong

feelings for a certain beautiful brunette with a wicked gun arm and a nice aim.

Alone in his bed that night, Dane thought long and hard about his future and whether he could fit a secretive female sharpshooter and a well-respected sheriff in his life.

The answer being a resounding yes prompted the next question. How would he accomplish such a feat? How could all of them possibly reside together? If Annabel was willing to move and Garrett was willing to give up his post as sheriff, Dane was sure he could make a place for them on his brothers' ranch. However, their personal lives wouldn't be completely private. Folks always talked. His brothers loved him, but might not appreciate or support the way he wanted to live his private life

He'd always wanted to start his own ranch, not that he didn't enjoy working with his brothers, but as the youngest of the three he'd never be in charge of his family's ranch. He was okay with that arrangement, but perhaps it was time for him to consider moving to a place of his own. Maybe he could find land near where Annabel lived, if he could ever get her to tell him where she lived.

He fell asleep with no specific answer but a powerful need to let Annabel know his permanent objective to include her in his life as soon as possible. One night away from her proved difficult, more than that would drive him completely crazy.

Tomorrow, Dane planned to ensure she understood his intentions to marry her.

* * * *

Annabel spent an agonized evening all alone, first wondering if Virgil was spreading lurid details of her love affair with two men all over town after her failure to show up in his room. Hopefully, Dane and Garrett had spoken to Virgil and convinced him to keep his big mouth shut before he told anyone.

Her second concern was whether Dane and Garrett missed her as desperately as she missed them. She had certainly fallen in love with them on the trip here, to some extent, but together the three of them were an experience she would treasure forever. She didn't want to ever spend her time without them. After this competition, once they'd gone back to their regular lives, she wondered how they could be together, but no obvious answer revealed itself.

Steering her mare, Buttercup, to town on the well-worn, deeply rutted dirt path the next morning, Annabel tried to focus on today's shooting match. The next round consisted of a speed round. Five shots had to be fired in less than twenty seconds using the shooter's choice of a pistol or rifle. Those ten shooters with the highest score on the target moved on to the semi-finals round later in the day. Only five from today's top scorers moved on to the finals.

She arrived in town early, but lots of folks were already milling around the competition area. She stabled her horse, grabbed the bag with her guns inside, and approached the growing crowd of spectators. Her stomach flipped over a few times as some of the men competing gave her looks of disdain. She just hoped it was because she was the only female quarter finalist and not because her private life had been heralded across the town via Virgil's gossipy mouth.

The minute she approached the area next to the shooting range, she saw Virgil in a heated conversation with Cletus and another judge on the dais constructed for announcements outside of the saloon. Her stomach roiled, and she hoped her breakfast stayed down. *Please don't be talking about me.*

Cletus leaned in close, whispered something to the judge who nodded and walked away. That left only Virgil and Cletus. More whispering ensued, and although she watched their lips, she couldn't tell what they were saying. All of a sudden, they stopped speaking. Virgil turned away and walked down the handful of wooden steps to the dirt ground.

The moment he looked up and saw her, a sneer appeared on his

narrow face. His gaze poured over her body with entirely too much interest. She looked away from his searing regard in time to see Cletus waving her up to the platform.

She didn't want to go.

Mostly because she'd have to pass Virgil to get up the steps.

"I'll walk you up there," Dane said from over her shoulder.

Startled, she turned around and saw both Dane and Garrett side by side, arms crossed as if ready to do battle on her behalf. A smile shaped her lips before she could stop it. Delighted to see them, she relaxed a notch. "No. I'm fine."

By the time she turned to go up the steps, Virgil had disappeared into the crowd. Maybe he didn't want to talk to her men and would stop bothering her. She'd forgotten they were supposed to have a chat with him. Perhaps they had persuaded Virgil to leave her alone.

Time would tell. She'd have to ask them later when there weren't so many people around within earshot.

Annabel climbed the stairs and stood before Cletus, unsure of what to expect.

"There you are. What weapon will you be using for today's speed match?"

That was not the question she expected. "What?"

He pushed out a long sigh. "Pistol or rifle?"

"Pistol. Are you asking everyone or just me?"

"I already know what everyone else is using. You're the only new comer that made the quarter finals."

Annabel waited for him to ask a second question about her prurient love life, but he turned away, made a mark on the paper and gave her a look over one shoulder like he had finished with her.

"Is that all?" Wasn't he going to kick her out for inappropriate relations with two other competitors?

Cletus scrunched his eyebrows as if in confusion. "What else do you want?"

"Nothing." Annabel scooted away and raced down the steps as

fast as her legs would carry her.

Dane and Garrett had migrated to the shooter's area. Annabel walked over to join them as Cletus made an announcement. He read the list of finalists' names again and asked for acknowledgement that everyone was present and ready to shoot.

After everyone had been identified, Cletus came down off the platform and lined everyone up. The judge he'd been talking to earlier walked over and got the first shooter ready to fire. Cletus took his place in the center of the line as a finalist, and the speed shooting round commenced.

Annabel was third from the last, with Dane and Garrett behind her.

It was a long morning waiting for her turn. She used her monogrammed handkerchief to dab at her forehead and the back of her neck several times before it was her turn. Each shooter had twenty seconds to shoot five rounds into a fresh target twenty-five feet away. Then runners would go down, fetch the board and bring it back for the judges to measure and score.

Once it was finally her turn, Annabel banished every unimportant thought from her head, raised her arms, found a comfortable grip, and concentrated on the target.

The judge said, "Go." She planted every shot in the center in less than ten seconds for another perfect score.

She even garnered a smattering of applause once she lowered her pistol and backed away from the shooter's mark.

Likely started from her two generous lovers, but it was encouraging nonetheless.

Dane approached and took his turn as she watched from the sidelines with the other spectators. He also hit all five of his shots in the center. Garrett, as final shooter of the day, also registered a perfect score. Annabel also figured he'd done it in the fastest time, too.

Confident that the three of them were about to make it into the semi-final round, Annabel let her worries go. Perhaps she'd invite

them back to the cabin tonight. It had certainly been lonely the night before without them there.

Cletus climbed the steps again and shushed the crowd. “We’ll score these and read the names of the semi-finalists tomorrow morning, instead of later today. The ten who make it should be ready to shoot immediately. Tomorrow’s round one contest will consist of shooters aiming at targets fifty feet away with rifles. Best of luck to everyone.”

Annabel knew tomorrow’s challenge would be the hardest for her. Fifty feet was a long way, and she was better with a pistol, but she had practiced all last month. One shot was all she got, just like in the first round. The top five scores from tomorrow’s rifle match determined the finalists.

Tonight she *should* go back and practice. However, if she could persuade Dane and Garrett to join her, she might cut practice short.

Chapter Ten

Garrett cursed under his breath for the hundredth time that day after being unable to find Virgil for a second day in a row. The sun was an hour away from dropping behind the horizon, and he'd been thwarted yet again from explaining to Virgil what private business between lovers meant. He also wanted to warn him from ever speaking to or upsetting Annie ever again.

Dane took one end of town, Garrett the other, and they searched everywhere once the day's competition had finished, but couldn't find hide nor hair of his miserable body.

Before she left, Annabel had met them at the stable. Her mood had improved dramatically since apparently Virgil had kept his trap shut and hadn't tattled to Cletus or the shooter's club judges. All three confident they'd made it safely into the next round, they discussed discreet plans to meet out at the cabin tonight.

Annie mentioned that she'd missed having company. He was grateful because he'd truly longed for her the night before as well. Tonight, he planned to discuss a possible future.

Dane had already ridden out an hour ago to ensure Virgil hadn't left town, but since his horse was still in the stable, they figured he was holed up somewhere. Perhaps he was hiding in his room.

Garrett also retired to his hotel room, said hello to everyone he met in the lobby and in the hallway next to his room, and then snuck out of the back of the hotel confident no one had seen him exit. In the western sky, the sun had dropped a little further towards the line of mountains. The blazing orange disk currently nestled between two peaks as he rode quietly out of town to the south.

By the time he made it to the cabin, the sun had all but disappeared behind the mountain range, leaving a vibrant and colorful sunset. Dane's horse, already tied up out front, whinnied softly as he dismounted.

He knocked on the wood frame beside the entryway, and a sultry voice beckoned him inside.

Garrett smiled, pushed the door inward and wasn't sorry he'd come.

Annie rested on her back at the center of her quilt covered bed completely naked.

Dane, still dressed, approached and shut the door behind him with a slam. "It's about damn time you got here. She wouldn't let me touch her until you arrived. I've been salivating for the better part of an hour."

"Good for her." Garrett walked to the side of the bed to behold her beauty. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, lick her, stroke her, and love her all at the same time.

He caught her gaze and murmured, "I missed you last night, Annie."

"I missed both of you," she responded quietly. In the dim light cast by the candles flickering in the room, her magnificent breasts seemed to call to him.

Without warning, he bent at the waist and sucked one nipple into his mouth. Dane, now on the other side of the bed, did the same thing.

Garrett licked the tip of her breast which pebbled in his mouth and slid his hand down her smooth belly to the hot space between her legs. He pressed a finger against her clit and smiled as she arched her back moaning.

"Before we lose ourselves, I'd like to suggest a new position." Dane rose and started removing his clothing.

Garrett was game for changing things up. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'd really like to get my mouth between her legs. Want to let her

rest against you while I do? Or perhaps your cock would be happier embedded in her pussy while I feast.”

The mere visual in his mind made Garrett’s cock throb. He nodded and also removed his clothing as quickly as possible. Sliding beneath Annie, Garrett lifted her hips and centered her pussy over his cock. She sank down, moaning all the way. Her back rested against his chest, her breasts were displayed within easy reach for him to play with as Dane climbed between her legs and bent to taste her clit. His chin rubbed against Garrett’s balls, but the feeling wasn’t unpleasant. He also felt Dane’s hands slide beneath Annie’s ass and rest against his groin as he licked and sucked her clit.

Garrett stroked her nipples and found a comfortable rhythm pushing his cock into her pussy with small, satisfying strokes given the limited mobility of his hips.

Annie writhed against him as Dane pushed his face between her legs, licking and sucking enthusiastically if the noises she made were accurate. The moment her orgasm claimed her, Garrett knew it because her pussy clamped down repeatedly on his cock. Clench after clench sent his arousal level into the sky. He wanted to come but forced himself to wait and enjoyed Annie’s moans of pleasure in her completion.

“I love the sounds you make,” Dane said and kissed her belly. Garrett still cupped her breasts and stroked her nipples while she recovered.

Annie held out a hand to Larsen. “Help me up.”

Dane grinned and grabbed one hand, lifting her off of Garrett’s chest.

“Are you taking my cock with you?” Garrett felt the pressure on his shaft as she moved.

“No. I’m just going to spin around.” She twisted around carefully until she faced him with her back to Larsen. Over one shoulder she said to Dane, “Now you can join in.”

“And I intend to.” Dane reached over to the night stand, grabbed a

tin of lubrication, and busied himself behind Annie, readying her for his rear penetration.

Legs straddling his hips, his cock was buried to the hilt in her pussy. Annie rocked forward and elicited a hiss from Garrett's lips. Her unbound hair caressed his chest, and her pert breasts teased his vision. Garrett thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known.

She bent down until her breasts pushed into his chest. He pushed his fingers into her hair, massaging her scalp until she kissed the inside of his arm.

Larsen dropped the tin back on the night stand and soon Garrett felt the pressure of his entrance between her butt cheeks. The sensation made Garrett close his eyes as the pleasure was unbelievable.

Annie began to move her hips up and down slowly. Garrett found a rhythm and pushed his hips upward, his cock sliding into the wet heat of her tight pussy with each stroke. Each movement brought him closer and closer to a spine curling release. Palming her breasts in his hands, Garrett pushed one last time into her tight body and came with a force he'd never experienced since the last time he was with her.

His cum blasted out the end of his cock as he fairly growled with more pleasure than he'd ever felt in his lifetime before now. Annie kissed his chest as Larsen thrust into her backside a few more times. Soon he also released a very vocal and loud sound of pleasure, followed by lots of murmuring about love.

Garrett kissed the top of Annie's head as Larsen finally got it together and retreated off the bed. In the corner, Garrett noticed the bath had been set up again. Larsen headed in that direction and soon he heard a splash of water.

Still connected deeply, since his cock hadn't yet softened, Garrett whispered, "I love you, Annie."

She lifted her head and smiled. "I love you, too."

He cupped her face one-handed and kissed her lips with gentle

pressure a few times.

Larsen had finished washing up and returned to sit on the side of the bed. He stroked a hand down her back and caught Garrett's eye with a serious gaze. "Before we leave tonight, I want to discuss our future. The three of us need to find a way to be together."

Annie lifted up from Garrett's chest. "I'm not opposed to that, but although we all live in Colorado, we *are* quite a distance from each other."

Garrett added, "We'll figure it out, but I need to know that you *want* to have a future with the two of us."

Larsen nodded. They both sent gazes to Annie.

She grinned. "I do want a future with you both. Will you still want one with me when I thrash you both in the shooting contest?"

Garrett laughed out loud. "The question is, will you still love me if I beat the both of you and garner a triple championship?"

"I won't," Dane said.

Garrett rolled his eyes. "I don't care if *you* love me, just her."

"It's been said before, among the three of us, but I'll say it again. May the best shooter win this competition."

Annie rolled off of the bed, and Garrett followed.

Once they'd bathed and redressed, the three of them sat on one side of the bed.

"Where do you live, Annie?"

"Colfax, Colorado. It's a small town north of Denver."

Seated on the other side of Annie, Larsen perked up. "Colfax? That's only two day's ride from my ranch."

"And two days from Outpost in the other direction."

"So again, I'm right in between the two of you. Just where I love being." She laughed, and the sultry sound of her voice warmed Garrett's soul.

* * * *

“Okay, I’m gonna read the list of finalists now. If you hear your name called, move on up to the front. Let folks get a look at ya.” Anticipation was in the very air around Annabel the moment Cletus climbed the few stairs and stood on the recently constructed raised platform to announce the semi finalists.

Her heart raced with expectation. She knew she was on the list. She had to be. All five of her speed shots hit dead center.

A few feet away, Dane leaned one shoulder casually against the outer wall of the saloon. He noticed her gaze and winked. Her heart raced at his subtle gesture. She looked around discretely to ensure no one else noticed them staring at each other.

The judge next to Cletus handed him a list. Cletus started reading names off the parchment. “Hank Smith, Martin James, Jeremiah Morgan...”

Cletus read three more names, including his own, as Garrett strolled into view on his way through the crowd. He seemed to be looking for someone as his gaze searched among the throng of townsfolk listening to the list.

“Annabel Wallace, Dane Larsen, Garrett Butler...” Annabel moved forward towards the platform where the finalists gathered. Dane lifted his torso from the wall he leaned against and walked up, too. Garrett strolled in the direction of the dais as he continued looking here and there through the crowd.

“All righty then, the last name is Virgil Dunlop. If I didn’t call your name, better luck next year. If I did, come on up to the front. We’re gonna start the next round in just a few minutes.” Cletus made his way down the steps of the platform as Garrett positioned himself at the end of the line of shooters.

Annabel looked around and only saw nine contestants. Glancing up and down the line she realized that Virgil was the only one not present.

Cletus walked down the line and counted. When he got to the end he turned to the crowd. “Where’s Virgil?”

A man from the spectators called out, "No one's seen him today."

"That blame fool probably drank himself to sleep last night and is still sawing logs in his hotel room." Cletus approached a man standing nearby and sent him to Virgil's room.

Beside her, Dane stuck his hand out. "Congratulations."

She took his hand and held on for longer than she should have. "And to you, as well."

Garrett left his place at the end of the line and approached them. "I was hoping to have a word with Virgil last night, but I never got a chance."

"Me either," Dane remarked.

A commotion broke out near the front of the hotel. A woman screamed, and the man Cletus sent to fetch Virgil came running out of the hotel like his pants were afire, shrieking, "He's dead! Virgil's dead!"

Dane and Garrett exchanged worried glances, and Annabel felt the first stirrings of big trouble on the horizon.

* * * *

As a well-known sheriff from another state, Garrett was invited to the scene of the unpleasant death of Virgil Dunlop by Pine Haven's Sheriff Barnes. On the floor next to the nightstand lay a bottle of whiskey on its side. Was that what had done him in? A poisoned drink? He didn't see a shot glass anywhere. Perhaps Virgil had forgone the pleasantries and simply guzzled from the bottle.

Dressed in the clothes he wore the day before, resting on the center of the bed with arms drawn up to his chest and hands shaped like claws, was the man Garrett had searched for endlessly the night before. Virgil's eyes were still open, and his facial expression was one of agonizing surprise.

Blood and vomit coated his chin and neck. The vile contents of his stomach had dripped onto the pillow beneath his head and the

surrounding bed sheets. The pungent undertones of urine and shit also permeated the air.

Garrett cleared his throat and started breathing through his mouth as the sour stench of a bad death surrounded him like a cloak in the small room. He was no expert, but with his skin the color of a cemetery stone, it looked like Virgil had been dead for awhile.

“He’s been dead since probably right after the competition yesterday afternoon.” The local doc, still hunched over Virgil’s lifeless body, confirmed Garrett’s silent assertion.

No wonder he and Larsen never found Virgil. He’d been long gone when they started their search the evening before. Garrett sighed inwardly as he remembered all the people he talked to all throughout the small town and how many times he’d asked about Virgil’s whereabouts during his search yesterday and the day before.

Eventually, someone would remember his queries and cast suspicion his way. Garrett shoved his personal worries aside and asked, “Anyone hear anything or see anything? Any witnesses?”

“Nope,” Sheriff Barnes replied. “You’d think given the way he suffered, someone mighta heard him thrashing around in here.”

Garrett nodded but then added, “Unless it was late at night and everyone was asleep.”

The doc sniffed the contents of the whiskey bottle. “He was likely poisoned given the severe vomiting, but I can’t smell anything in here. It’s possible he killed his self, but since I don’t see any container from the poison, I’ll assume that either someone did this to him or the poison was in the whiskey bottle.”

“Let’s ask Cletus if he knows anything.”

Garrett turned to the sheriff. “Why him?”

“Virgil is from a town only a couple day’s ride from here, but he came to the contest every year for the last five or more years. Cletus is the one who knows him best as he runs the annual shooter’s contest.”

Garrett nodded. He remembered seeing Cletus chatting with Virgil at the match yesterday right before the competition began. He just

hoped Cletus hadn't heard any gossip from Virgil. Barnes stuck his head out of the door and had someone fetch the contest coordinator.

His hopes were dashed the moment Cletus entered the room. When he saw Garrett, his gaze went to the floor as if he was embarrassed.

Shit. Had Virgil spilled the beans? Garrett looked over his shoulder at Virgil's body. Perhaps he was merely squeamish about death and bodies.

"Cletus, what do you know about Virgil? Does he have any enemies?"

Cletus gave Garrett another once over but then sounded surprised when he finally spoke. "No. Not any enemies. Unless you count all those broken hearts he leaves behind."

"Broken hearts?" Barnes asked.

Cletus crossed his arms and his eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. "Oh yeah. Virgil usually had a different woman every night while he was here in town each year. Maybe one of them got jealous."

"Do you know of anyone specific who might want him dead? Anyone he was having a dust up with or anything?"

Cletus glanced at Garrett first, then shook his head. "Can't say as I do. Well, with the exception of the female shooter in our contest. Virgil was pretty mouthy, wanting her to be kept out. Maybe she finally took offense and did him in."

Garrett took a step towards him. "You think she did *this*?" He motioned to the bed beside him.

Cletus glanced at Virgil's body and looked away quickly. His face turned almost green, and his eyes widened. "I didn't say that, but she coulda had someone do it for her."

"She wouldn't."

Sheriff Barnes scratched his chin. "How do you know, Butler?"

Garrett turned back and realized he should calm down very quickly. He lowered his tone. "Because I know her. She wouldn't do something like this."

The doc spoke up, "If it was poison, the perpetrator wouldn't even have to be here. Probably his whiskey is spiked."

Cletus shrugged. "So it could still have been her. I mean, Virgil was quite the ladies' man. There are some pretty colorful stories out there about how far he was willing to go to get a woman into his bed. Downright sinful in some ways."

Garrett's first thought was that maybe Virgil had blackmailed more than one female into his bed.

"Perhaps they had an affair, and she was angry that he had a new woman." Cletus kept his eyes averted from the bed. He was obviously uncomfortable being here.

Sheriff Barnes asked, "Who was this new woman?"

Cletus turned red as a beet. "Well, I heard tell he was with one of the saloon girls the other night."

"Annabel and Virgil didn't have an affair." Garrett wanted that fact to be clear. "He harassed her repeatedly about being entered in the contest. She did her best to ignore him. That was the extent of their relationship."

Cletus huffed. "But the sheriff asked me if anyone was fightin' with him and I answered. Even *you* have to agree she was scrapin' with him since right before she entered the contest."

"No. I came after she was already in. I agreed she should be allowed to compete. Why are you trying to throw suspicion on Annabel?"

"I'm just saying she had a beef with Virgil from the first."

Sheriff Barnes stepped between them which Garrett thought was a very good idea. "Cletus, do you have any reason to think Miss Wallace killed Virgil?"

"Well, maybe. You see, Virgil told me he had a big secret about her."

Barnes leaned forward. "What was it?"

Cletus shrugged, and an irate expression crossed his features. "He never got around to tellin' me what it was. He wanted to wait and see

if she made it to the finals in the contest, then he was going to tell me something to get her kicked out of the final round.”

“What could he know that would get her kicked out?”

Cletus threw his hands in the air. “How should I know? We aren’t at the finals yet.”

“Are there any other suspects who might have wanted Virgil dead?” Garrett wanted to interject a new theory that didn’t involve Annabel.

“Nope, but with him gone now, someone else moves up the list of semi-finals.”

Everyone in the room turned to Cletus with varying expressions of distaste and disdain.

He shrugged. “Well, it’s true.”

“But you only read the names half an hour ago. Virgil was already dead, and no one knew he was on the list.” Sheriff Barnes rested his hands on his hips.

Garrett tilted his head to one side. “Except you. Did Virgil’s untimely death help bump you onto the list?”

“Hey now, I was already on the list with Virgil. It’s someone else that’ll move up now, and no one but me and the other judges knew the names. The other judges aren’t even in the competition.”

“That’s right. How is it that you get to be in the contest and also run it, Cletus? I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Color raced into Cletus’ cheeks. “My daddy started this contest twelve years ago. He’s sponsored it each year since with the understanding that I get to run things. Anybody don’t like that, they don’t have to enter.”

“Enough.” Sheriff Barnes sighed and looked at Garrett. “But he’s right. No one knew who was on the list.”

“Can we continue with the contest now? I mean, I’m sorry about Virgil, but do we have to delay?” Cletus gestured to the crowd out the window of Virgil’s room. “We’re running behind schedule, and everyone’s waiting.”

Garrett looked at Sheriff Barnes and shrugged.

“I guess you can continue with the contest.”

Garrett gave Cletus his sternest look when he turned to walk away. And he didn’t believe for a minute that Virgil hadn’t told him at least a hint about the secret he held.

* * * *

Annabel wiped a bead of perspiration making its way from her temple down to her cheek with her favorite handkerchief and quickly tucked it away before stepping up to the mark for her turn to shoot. In her arms she carried her favorite rifle. It was the one her father had lovingly crafted especially for her long ago. Standing on her mark, she closed one eye, sighted her rifle in on the target, put a finger on the trigger, pushed the air out of her lungs, and fired.

Bull’s-eye.

There was a smattering of applause as the runners went to get her target. This perfect shot should guarantee her placement in the final five for the last round of competition. She hadn’t had time to worry about being nervous during the contest. After the initial qualifying round, where she’d almost been eliminated, she’d put lots of effort in to pure focus on her task when it was her time to shoot. Her increased concentration had paid off.

With only ten contestants left, the shooting rounds were completed much faster. Once all the shooters had finished, the five finalists would be announced, and the final round would commence after the lunch hour. Garrett was next up to shoot, and once again, he was the final shooter for this round. Conversation was subdued throughout the crowd, and lots of whispering and murmuring could be heard when each shooter readied to fire.

The discovery of Virgil’s untimely demise delayed the contest this morning, but the shooting round hadn’t been cancelled. Annabel thought the murder might have put a damper on the festivities, but

apparently Virgil hadn't been very well liked among the townspeople, especially the female population.

Annabel certainly hadn't wanted Virgil dead, although it was not lost upon her that she had a good reason to be grateful he couldn't threaten her any longer. She dearly hoped he hadn't told anyone, especially Cletus, about her clandestine love affair with two men. It was no one's business but her own, anyway. With a tinge of guilt, she rested a little easier knowing she wouldn't be publicly embarrassed or have her lovers exposed.

Garrett didn't share any details about Virgil's death, but from whispers in the contest's waiting crowd, she overheard some horrific details regarding the agonized way his body looked and that he had suffered before his death. Vile blackmailer or not, no one including Virgil deserved to die suffering in agony.

Annabel watched as Garrett took his mark on the shooting range and readied to fire. Muscles bunched along his shoulders as he sighted the target. Much like as his skill as a lover, he was careful, precise, sexy in his stance. Well, perhaps only she thought he was supremely attractive just standing there holding a gun at the ready to shoot.

Garrett pulled the trigger, and the bang of the shot sent a ripple of desire down her spine. He was certainly not hard to watch. It looked like he hit the middle of the target, but she couldn't see how centered his shot was. Thus far, it looked like she had the best score. A part of her didn't believe she had come so far in this competition. Having the two men she'd fallen in love with support and encourage her during the shooting match only heightened her attachment to them. Her thoughts lingered on her future after the competition.

She considered what a life with Garrett or Dane or both would be like, and the idea appealed to her more and more. She wasn't tied to the town she lived in any longer. Not really. With her father gone, she had no family left. The town she lived in was very quiet and beautiful, but she truthfully hadn't missed the place since being gone from there this trip.

Beyond the bother of moving her lifelong possessions to a different location, she relished the idea of moving closer to Garrett. Dane had already talked about finding a large parcel of land just outside of Outpost to start his own horse ranch separate from his brothers' lucrative business. Garrett agreed to be his silent partner, and they invited her to join them.

Why couldn't she join them and start her life over? Merely watching Garrett added fuel to her desire. She deserved to be happy. Dane and Garrett made her very happy. After this contest, she *would* make plans to join them wherever they decided to go. Decision made as to her future, Annabel smiled and settled back to enjoy the rest of the shooting tournament.

It didn't take long for the judges to determine the finalists, and after only a few minutes, Cletus climbed the stairs on the platform to read the names. The ten shooters waiting to hear if they'd advanced into the finals stood at the front of the crowd.

"I have to say it was a very close match this year, and there's a surprise or two. I'll read the names." He lifted the paper in his fingers to eye level. "Hank Smith, Jeremiah Morgan, Garrett Butler, Dane Larsen, and Annabel Wallace are this year's final five shooters."

Annabel was surprised Cletus hadn't made the list of final shooters. He'd been doing well during the rounds. Likely that was the other surprise. The first of course being that for the first time in contest history, a woman was a finalist.

Now, all she had left to do was win.

* * * *

Cletus lowered the paper with the five finalists' names and fought the urge to rip it to shreds. This was the first year since he'd been associated with this contest that he hadn't made the final five shooters. Number six on the list of ten, if only someone were to be taken out of the contest, he'd be back in. If that were to be even a

remote consideration, it needed to happen soon.

His best bet was Miss Wallace. Although, ousting Butler and Larsen out of competition had satisfying benefits, as well. How could he hope to accomplish his goal and keep someone out of the final round so he could step up?

Stupid Virgil. He swore he'd take care of Butler and Larsen before they even got near the contest this year, but they'd showed up just in time. After last year's defeat, Cletus wanted to do something himself but didn't want any pall to fall over his prestigious position as contest coordinator. He liked the power.

As soon as A. Wallace had entered, he'd held hope another might shake things up, but when it turned out to be Alistair's daughter, Cletus prepared to boot her out. Then he saw the way Larsen had looked at her and an idea took root. Once Butler showed up and gave Miss Wallace the same sappy look, Cletus figured having a woman in the contest might just give him an edge. With the two top contenders making moon eyes over her, perhaps they'd slip up. Cletus relished the idea that he might finally bring home a victory in this damn contest.

Cletus had never won a first place in all the twelve years he'd entered. Thus far, his big win was second place and even *that* had been ten years ago.

He decided that even if Miss Wallace managed to shoot well enough and made the score with the first few rounds, by the time they got to the final round she'd be out shot. Lo and behold, she was the best shot he'd seen yet.

Damn Virgil. He'd assured Cletus he had sordid information that would keep Miss Wallace out of the final round, only he hadn't shared the damn secret. Then he'd up and got his self murdered before revealing the information.

Cletus fisted his hands and tried to calm down. As he pondered what Virgil's big secret might be, another notion occurred to him. What if Miss Wallace really *did* murder Virgil to ensure he kept the

confidence? He'd be remiss in not mentioning it to the sheriff but didn't want to come across as a nosy parker. Everyone might figure out his true motivation to get in to the finals.

However, if Cletus talked to the sheriff and "accidentally" shared the one piece of secret gossip Virgil *had* mentioned regarding Miss Wallace, then he'd be in the clear.

* * * *

Annabel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was it. Her final and ultimate chance to prove her skill in this competition. She had to shoot first with a pistol and then with her rifle to win. And each shot had to be perfect.

Favorite rifle in hand, she marched to the mark with a confidence she wasn't sure would continue for long. She raised her weapon, tucking the stock against the inside of her shoulder with a practiced ease. The countless number of times she'd practiced with this rifle near her father's workshop back home flitted through her mind.

She could do this.

One eye slid closed to line up the shot. Her body, strung taut and rigid, was as still as frozen water. Annabel breathed slowly until she got the target sighted in just like she'd done a hundred times before.

Tuning out the crowd, Annabel focused on her breathing.

In and out. In and out. Focus on the target.

She extended her forefinger and placed it against the trigger. Remember, squeeze it. Don't jerk up. Relax.

Annabel pushed the air completely from her lungs and squeezed the trigger.

Everything happened as if in slow motion. She swore she watched the bullet travel all the way to the center of the target, exactly where she wanted it to go.

Bull's-eye.

She almost forgot to take a new breath as she looked at her perfect

shot displayed in the target fifty feet away. Next up was a single shot with her pistol at twenty-five feet.

Shaking off the triumph of her first shot, Annabel went through the same tune out sound and focus on the target routine that she'd done with her rifle.

A second shot and another perfect score.

Garrett and Dane each shot very well during their rounds, but both of their bullets from the rifle fire were slightly off center in the very middle of the target. Hers was exactly in the center of both targets.

The other two finalists didn't even come close. Neither hit the bull's-eye with either shot from rifle or pistol.

In her mind, she'd won. Garrett and Dane definitely tied for second place and another round between them would determine second place and third place. The only question became would they allow her the official first place win.

"Looks like you did it, sugar," Dane whispered as she stood on the platform with the other four finalists. "You whipped our pants off but good."

She stifled a giggle that rushed up and sent her gaze to the wooden planked platform to get herself under control.

On the other side of her, Garrett also leaned in and whispered, "Congratulations, Annie."

Annabel fought a rising surge of excitement and blinked back tears threatening to erupt.

The judges spent an enormous amount of time discussing the targets. All of them, including Cletus, crowded around the table, discussing it in low tones. Annabel figured they were trying to figure out a way to keep her from claiming the first place prize.

After several minutes, Cletus finally stood and ambled over to the where the five contestants waited. He turned to the crowd milling around and shouted, "If you'll all gather around, we're ready to announce the winners and award the prize money and plaques."

"Fifth place goes to Hank Smith." There was applause from the

folks standing at the base of the platform as Cletus handed him a plaque and a small leather satchel.

“Fourth place goes to Jeremiah Morgan.” After he’d received his plaque and bag of coins, Cletus cleared his throat. “We have an unusual situation here with the next prize award. The judges have talked at length, and we’ve come to a decision.”

Annabel froze in place. Were they about to award first place to either Dane or Garrett because they never expected a woman to win?

“There won’t be a third place plaque this year as both Dane Larsen and Garrett Butler have tied for second place.”

Both hands shot to her face. Dane and Garrett each put a hand on her back in congratulations.

“And that means Annabel Wallace has won first place and for the first time in the Wyoming Territory’s Sharpshooter Contest history, a woman has won that honor. With two perfect shots in the final round, she shot a near perfect score every time she faced off with the target. Congratulations, Annabel.” Cletus looked almost sincere as he handed her the first place plaque and the hefty leather purse.

“Thank you very much.”

She barely had time to get used to the weight of the coins in her hand when Sheriff Barnes forced his way through the crowd, climbed the few stairs of the platform and strode over to stand in front of her. His facial expression bordered on reluctance. With the sound of resignation in his tone, he said, “Annabel Wallace, you’re under arrest for the murder of Virgil Dunlop.”

* * * *

“What?” Garrett asked as Barnes muscled Annabel off the stage. “Why in God’s name would you arrest *her*?”

At the same time, Dane muttered, “What the fuck?”

Barnes didn’t answer. The two of them followed a pale, silent Annabel as Sheriff Barnes propelled her across the street and through

the door of the small jailhouse.

Garrett put a hand on the sheriff's shoulder to get his attention once they all were inside. "Barnes, you didn't answer me."

He stopped and turned to Garrett. "This is my town, and while I don't owe you any answers, I'll just say that we found evidence that she was there in the room."

"I was not!" Annabel turned to the sheriff. "I would never have gone to his room."

"Well, now someone's come forth that said you had a *liaison* planned with Virgil the night before he died."

Her eyes widened. "Whoever told you *that* is a liar." Annabel's crimson cheeks displayed the high level of her anger.

"Well, that's what Virgil told the witness, and I can't discount it, whether or not I believe it."

"Don't I at least get a chance to explain and defend myself?"

Barnes shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Virgil tried to blackmail me, but I ignored him. I did *not* go to his room."

Sheriff Barnes scratched his chin and looked interested for the first time. "What did he know about you for any blackmail?"

"None of your business," she answered quickly.

"Not exactly a convincing explanation for why you wouldn't go to his room."

Garrett figured he better say something or settle things down. "Sheriff Barnes, could we have a private word?"

"Sure, just as soon as I lock up my prisoner." He grabbed Annabel's arm again and turned her toward the open door where Garrett knew the jail cells resided.

"Is that really necessary?" Dane asked.

Sheriff Barnes pushed her along two more steps before he paused. Turning, he let out a long sigh. "If it were entirely up to me—and it ain't—I wouldn't have even arrested her. But I answer to the mayor and he's got his back up over Virgil's death."

“Why, is Virgil a friend of the mayor?”

“No, but this is the second year in a row where one of the contestants in the Annual Shooter’s contest has died. The mayor wants me to find Virgil’s killer. Cletus was already madder than a walloped hornet’s nest over not making it in to the final round. He and Virgil were friends, and he complained to the mayor. This town depends on the annual contest to bring folks in each year to spend their money. Guess the mayor figures no one will want to come if folks keep getting killed.”

“Which still doesn’t explain why you arrested Annabel.”

“Like I said, I have evidence she was there.”

“What is this evidence?” Annabel asked.

“A personal belonging of yours was found in Virgil’s room.” He grabbed her arm again and pushed her towards the jail cells. “And that’s all I’m willing to say for now. The judge will convene court early tomorrow morning. The evidence will be presented, and you’ll have your say.”

“Annabel,” Garrett called. She turned, and he could see in her eyes she was worried. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure this out and have you out of jail in no time.”

She nodded but didn’t look convinced. Garrett could hardly blame her.

* * * *

When Barnes returned, Garrett pulled him aside out of earshot of the others. “I want to know what evidence you have.” Barnes’ lips flattened as if he sealed them from the inside, afraid to reveal information. “As a fellow sheriff, I was invited into Virgil’s room, and I didn’t see anything. Don’t cut me out of this. I need to know, so I can find out who really killed Virgil. It wasn’t her.”

Barnes sighed and rolled his eyes. “We found one of Miss Wallace’s handkerchiefs in Virgil’s room. The exact same kind of

cloth she used to wipe the back of her neck and forehead just before she shot in each round of the shooter's competition. Everyone saw it. Everyone knows they had a battle from the first. Are you sure she didn't have anything to do with Virgil's death?"

"Positive." Garrett didn't say out loud that she'd been intimately in his and Dane's arms the night before Virgil's death, but that was the truth. Although, she would have had plenty of time to put a bottle of poisoned whiskey in his room and still meet them, Garrett knew she didn't have it in her to kill. He wondered who else did.

Garrett's first inclination was Cletus. He had no doubt as to the identity of the "witness" telling tall tales after Virgil's death.

"You being a well-respected sheriff might help her case tomorrow but only if you were with her during the time in question. I happen to know you were asking just about everyone in town where Virgil was the day before his death was discovered."

"And yet you didn't arrest me? I'm touched." Garrett glanced over his shoulder at Dane. He looked antsy and ready to bolt out of the jailhouse.

"Well now, poison isn't the most common way men settle disputes. Would you agree?"

Garrett shrugged. "Perhaps, but it still doesn't mean Annabel did it."

"No, but the method of death is another factor I had to consider. And you would have done the same, if you weren't personally invested in the suspect's life." Barnes crossed his arms and his expression revealed a knowledge of just how invested he was in Annabel's life. Their intimacy likely wasn't as secret as he'd like to believe.

"If I can prove she didn't do it, will you let her go?" Garrett decided his best bet was to corner Cletus and persuade him to talk.

"I'd pretty much need another suspect to put in custody."

Garrett pushed out a long breath, wondering just how long it would take him to discover the true murderer. "Then I'll return as

quickly as I can.”

Outside in the street, Larsen followed Garrett as they walked several yards away from the crowd of contest spectators milling around and still whispering about Annabel’s arrest.

“We need to find out who really murdered Virgil.” Garrett scanned the throngs of townsfolk looking for a viable suspect, although he wanted to spend some quality time with Cletus to find out if he was the big mouth witness Barnes was referring to earlier.

“Fine. You go do that, and I’ll figure out a way to break Annabel out of jail.”

Garrett, so enthralled in his own plans, didn’t hear what Dane had said at first. He took a step away then turned back. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me. She doesn’t belong in there. She didn’t kill Virgil. And before they decide to string her up in front of the same crowd who watched her win the contest, I believe we should break her out of jail and take her as far away as we can get.”

Garrett sent him a very incredulous look. “I can’t do that. I’m a lawman.”

“Don’t you love her enough?”

He didn’t even have to think about his answer. “As a matter of fact, I do love her enough, but surely we could consider a lawful approach first.”

“No. I want her out of jail right now.”

“If we break her out, won’t that just make her look even guiltier? And where will we run to? Colorado’s out. We all live there, for Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t know but somewhere else besides here. Maybe up into the mountains.”

“Use your brain and not your heart, Larsen. Let’s go talk to Cletus and find out what lies he spewed to get her arrested before we do something we can’t take back that only makes the situation worse.”

Larsen’s expression tightened. “I’ll give you an hour, and then

with or without you, I'm getting her out of jail."

Garrett certainly sympathized with his gut reaction to blindly and boldly break her out of her confinement and spend the rest of their lives running from the law, but he tried to be more practical. He'd been associated with the law for long enough to know he didn't want to be on the wrong side of it.

Before they took a step in the direction of where Cletus stood by the platform, Mrs. Edna Dempsey, baby clutched to her chest, hurried across the street with a worried expression on her face. Garrett hadn't spoken to Edna since a few days before the contest when he'd rescued Annabel from the bandits. He wasn't exactly sure he wanted to now.

"Sheriff Butler, why would they arrest poor Miss Annabel for Virgil's murder? She couldn't possibly have done such a terrible thing." The baby stirred against her and made a small fussing noise. Without changing her expression of worry, she automatically started rocking her child to soothe it.

"Don't fret, Mrs. Dempsey. We plan to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible."

She cast a curious glance at Larsen before returning her attention to Garrett. "Please call me Edna. What in the world could have made them arrest her? I just don't understand this at all. Miss Annabel is the sweetest of people."

Garrett sighed. "Apparently they found her embroidered handkerchief hidden in the bed where they found his body. They think she was in his room sometime before he died. She's a suspect because of Virgil's animosity towards her before and during the shooting competition."

Edna's face went blank, and her eyes narrowed a moment as if she tried to recall something. After a few seconds, she brightened. "But she's sweet on you, Sheriff. She wouldn't have any reason to go to Virgil's room."

The baby started crying in earnest, and Edna shifted her wiggling bundle into the crook of her arm. "I've got to get my little Charlotte

back to the hotel for a nap. She's so sleepy." The blanket opened, and Garrett got his first peek at the baby. The combination of dark hair and coloring with bright blue eyes was very striking. She'd break hearts one day. Charlotte was a beautiful baby. And looked so familiar, Garrett leaned in to take a longer look. He'd never really paid attention to her child's features before now.

"Charlotte is very pretty." Garrett looked at Edna and added, "I think she favors her father in coloring."

Edna frowned. "Did you know John?"

Garrett traded a glance with Larsen and nodded. "Yes, I did. John Dempsey was a regular competitor in the annual shooting contest. And also the man who died last year in the brawl at the saloon, am I right?"

Larsen glanced at the child, and his eyebrows went straight to his hairline. Apparently, he saw what Garrett did.

Edna lowered her head. "Yes. It was a terrible tragedy. It happened so late, he had to wake me up to tell me John was dead. I cried for a long time that night," she said in a quiet voice.

"Was Virgil the one who came to tell you John had died?"

Edna nodded and looked down at the baby. "They buried John in the cemetery just outside of Pine Haven. That's one of the reasons why I came back this year. I wanted to visit his grave." The baby hiccupped and grinned up at Garrett. He remembered John Dempsey as a freckled-faced red head with vibrant green eyes.

Edna had light brown hair, a fair complexion and brown eyes. Charlotte, with her darker coloring and bright blue eyes, was the spitting image of Virgil Dunlop, right down to the cleft in her small chin.

"Maybe we could go have a chat in the hotel, Mrs. Dempsey."

She turned to look back at the jailhouse building with a worried expression. "I really need to go talk to Sheriff Barnes."

"What will you tell him?"

"I'll tell him that Miss Annabel couldn't possibly have poisoned

Virgil. I just know she could never do such a horrible thing.”

Dane startled. “Virgil was poisoned?”

Garrett hadn’t told either Annabel or Larsen how Virgil had died. And he suspected very few other people knew the cause of death beyond the sheriff, the doctor and maybe Cletus.

“How did you know he was poisoned, Edna?” he asked quietly.

She lifted her tear-filled eyes and stared at him for a long while. “It was an accident.” She blinked and tears escaped from her lower lids and trailed down her cheeks. “Honestly, I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Garrett and Larsen steered a resigned Edna over to the hotel for a more private conversation. They ended up in her room because she wanted to put the baby down for a nap. She got Charlotte settled in a small bassinette resting by the foot rail and seated herself on the brass bed.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning, Edna, and tell us what happened, so we can decide the best thing to do.”

She nodded and started talking in a low tone. “When Virgil came to the hotel last year to tell me what happened to John, he also stayed behind to comfort me. I cried so hard, I could hardly catch my breath.” Her eyes mashed shut, and she sobbed. “I let him hold me and hug me and kiss me. I shouldn’t have had relations with him. It was very wicked of me, but I was so sad, I barely knew what I was doing.” She paused for so long Garrett thought she might not finish her story.

“It’s understandable,” he murmured to reassure her. If Virgil weren’t already dead, Garrett decided he might want to kill him again. Preying on a woman an hour after her husband died was the most despicable thing he could think of. “Please continue.”

“John and I had been married for almost seven years. We’d never had any children, so when I got back home and found out I was carrying a child, I thought it was a blessing from God. My own little miracle. A baby that John and I had always wanted.

“And then Charlotte was born, and it was obviously not John’s baby. Even as a newborn, she looked exactly like Virgil, down to the dimple in her chin. His family was furious. They kicked me out of their home and told me to find the bastard’s father and never darken their doorstep again.”

“So you came back to Pine Haven this year to let Virgil know he had a child.”

Edna gave him a wan smile. “Yes. I came all this way to let him meet our beautiful Charlotte, and he didn’t even care. He dismissed me on the first day I arrived. I showed him our child, and he scoffed. Said he refused to believe he was the father of any bastard girl child and then he accused me of having sexual intimacies with other men.

“He said I probably slept with every man in town right after my husband died.” Tears spilled down her cheeks again. “He called me horrible names. Worse even than what John’s family had said.”

“I’m sorry, Edna. That was unkind.”

She wiped her face again with both hands. “I decided that if I stayed this week for the competition and allowed Virgil to spend time with Charlotte, he’d discover he loved her, too, and change his mind. Maybe he’d even want to marry me and make a family.”

“But Virgil wasn’t interested.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “After three days of trying to follow him around and having him run from me, I decided to wait outside of his room. When he finally showed up, he was angry. He hit me in the face.” She put her fingers up to the eye with the fading bruise. “He dragged me into his room and told me the most vile thing.”

Larsen murmured, “What vile thing?”

“Virgil told me he was the man who started the saloon brawl last year where my John died and...and...” She interlaced her fingers in her lap and studied them as she spoke, obviously trying to calm down enough to finish the rest of her story. “Worst of all, Virgil told me he was the one who killed John.”

Garrett and Dane exchanged glances again. Virgil has just leapt to most vile bastard of all time in Garrett's book. "Why did Virgil kill him?"

Her lips quirked, and she sobbed. She shook her head and seemingly tried to get hold of herself. "Virgil wanted to sleep with me. He bet someone that he could get into my bed and between my thighs easily, even if he had to kill my husband to do it. So he did. He cracked John over the head with the spittoon and killed him. So then he could come and comfort me and win his bet." She started sobbing again. "And I let him."

"He told you this himself?"

She sniffed and nodded. "He said no one would believe me if I repeated it. I figured he was right. I broke away from him and ran out of the room. He yelled after me not to come back unless I wanted to open my legs and fuck him." Her cheeks turned pink as she finished.

"Is that when you dropped the handkerchief?"

Her solemn gaze traveled to his eyes. "No. That must have happened the day he died."

"Will you tell us what happened?"

Edna suddenly got a blank look in her eyes. She stared at the wallpapered room at seemingly nothing and lowered her voice. "I wanted him dead. He killed John. He defiled me. And worst of all, he cast his own daughter aside as if she were trash. I procured a bottle of whiskey, added a large portion of some yellow powder arsenic, shook it until it dissolved, and then went to his room to leave it for him."

"Where did you get the arsenic?"

She didn't look at him but answered, "John's family owns a dry goods store in Nebraska. It wasn't very difficult." Her eyes suddenly glassy with more unshed tears, she continued, "So there I was, standing in his room and the most foolish thought crossed my mind. What in the world would I tell Charlotte about her father if she asked after him one day? She was bound to ask eventually.

"I stood there with the poisoned bottle in my hand and laughed

out loud. I think I went a little crazy, and even though he deserved it, I just couldn't go through with my ill thought-out plan. I simply couldn't kill my child's father.

"As I turned to leave, Virgil came in. At first he was spitting mad. He slammed the door and advanced toward me until he saw the bottle of whiskey. He grinned and wrenched the bottle from my fingers even as I fought him off."

Edna sat up straighter on the bed and stared at Garrett with the most earnest expression. "I swear to you, Sheriff Butler, I tried to take the bottle back, but he uncorked it with his teeth and started to take a drink.

"I told him it was poisoned, but he said something about me being one of those temperance bitches and drank half the bottle down anyway. He grabbed me and pulled me back onto the bed with him. He said I must want to be fucked since I came back to see him. I struggled to get myself free, and that must have been when I lost Annabel's handkerchief. She loaned it to me on the way here when we were in the stagecoach. I've been carrying it for several days in my pocket, trying to remember to give it back."

Edna wiped her face with both hands removing the tears. "I never meant for Annabel to be blamed for Virgil's death. It was all my fault. I won't let her take the responsibility."

Garrett crossed his arms and tried desperately to think of a way to get Annabel out of jail and keep Edna from being hanged for murder the moment her tragic story came out.

Larsen cleared his throat and sent Garrett a what-the-hell-do-we-do-now stare.

"Does anyone else know what Virgil did to your husband?"

Edna shrugged. "I don't know. No one has stepped forward since I've been here."

Garrett thought of something Cletus had said regarding the lengths to which Virgil had gone to lure unsuspecting women to his bed and seeing more than one bastard child in town resembling Virgil.

If Cletus had knowledge of who murdered Edna's husband, John Dempsey, and had never come forward, maybe a deal could be struck to save not only Annabel but also Edna.

* * * *

Dane wasn't sure if Garrett's plan of attack to free Annabel would work but agreed to give it a try. It certainly was a better alternative to roaring into the jailhouse with guns firing to rescue Annabel in a blaze of glory.

Instead, he agreed to fetch Cletus from the contest area and sternly encourage him to join them all at the jailhouse. Meanwhile, Garrett escorted Edna over to carefully explain how Annabel's handkerchief ended up in Virgil's room without disclosing the unfortunate fact that she'd added arsenic to the bottle in his room.

Both Dane and Garrett agreed Edna shouldn't tell the sheriff about doctoring the whiskey. They easily supported her contention that it had been a tragic accident. She warned him and tried to stop him from taking a drink, but Virgil didn't listen.

If they could paint Virgil as a brutal debaucher of innocent women, Garrett figured Sheriff Barnes wouldn't be too intent on seeing a widow with a baby swing in the hangman's noose. Her crime was in his mind accidental and very certainly justified.

"Why do I gotta go over to the sheriff's office?" Cletus asked in an over-loud voice.

Dane tilted his head to one side and smiled. "Apparently, you have information on some circumstances regarding Virgil's death. We'd like you to please cooperate so Annabel doesn't sit in jail for something she didn't do."

The townsfolk within earshot of their conversation began murmuring about the earlier drama. Cletus shrugged. "All right, I guess I can try and help out."

Once inside the main room of the jailhouse, Dane saw that

Annabel had been released from her jail cell and currently sat next to Edna. They occupied the only two chairs available. Barnes half sat on the front of his desk, and Garrett stood beside him, the four of them in a rough arc. He and Cletus formed the final edge of the small circle.

Sheriff Barnes put his focus on Cletus. "Is it true Virgil told you he caused a bar brawl and murdered John Dempsey last year so he could go cozy up to his grieving new widow?"

Obviously, Cletus wasn't expecting the question, if his initial wide-eyed, slack-jawed expression was any indication. "John Dempsey?"

"He was my husband," Edna said. Baby Charlotte slept peacefully in the crook of her arm.

Cletus glanced briefly at the baby and then at Edna's face. "That baby looks exactly like Virgil," he said in a near whisper.

Edna lifted her chin. "That's because Virgil was her father, but you already knew that, didn't you? You knew what he did to my husband before he came calling that night. Were you the one he had the vile bet with in the first place?"

Cletus' shoulders drooped. "No. I didn't bet him, but I knew Virgil went to tell you about John bein' dead, and afterward he bragged about fucking...I mean *sleeping* with his widow.

"When you showed up here a year later totin' a baby that looked exactly like him, it wasn't a stretch to suppose Virgil had been tellin' the truth."

"So you knew he killed John Dempsey, and you never reported it, is that right?" Sheriff Barnes asked brusquely.

Cletus wrung his hands together. "Virgil may have said that, but how was I to know if it was true or not?"

"Why didn't you report it, Cletus? A man was dead. He left behind a young wife. She was violated in the most atrocious way upon learning about her husband's death. You had the whole year to mention either incident, and you didn't."

"Why would I? It was just brag talkin' amongst a couple fellas at

the saloon late one night. I didn't know he really did any of it."

Barnes ignored his explanations. "Beyond the fact that you covered for a murderer for a year, I've had the mayor on my ass for the same amount of time. When Virgil was murdered two days ago, he told me this would be the last annual shooting contest until we could get folks to stop killing each other."

Cletus straightened up and squared his shoulders. "Well, that ain't hardly fair. We had lots of years when no one died during the shooting tournament."

Sheriff Barnes slid off the desk and onto his feet. He leaned in close to Cletus. "That's not the point."

Cletus looked at Edna. "Well, I guess considering that Virgil told Mrs. Dempsey that he didn't want any part of a bastard baby girl, maybe she had a reason to kill him, too."

"Anyone else you'd care to point the finger at? Not that your word is any good anymore for lying by omission in John Dempsey's death and covering up what happened to his widow."

"I explained that already. And besides, I thought the mayor said that you had a piece of evidence that Miss Wallace was in the room. How come she's already free?"

Dane thought Sheriff Barnes might explode in an angry tirade, but he remained calm as he said, "The only reason I arrested her was because you cast doubt in her direction, even before the item in question was found."

"To that end, Mrs. Dempsey has explained how that piece of evidence innocently ended up in Virgil's room when she went to tell him about the child he'd fathered. Miss Wallace has been completely absolved of any wrong doing in Virgil's death."

"Are you finished with your questions? Can I go now?" Cletus asked. The petulance in his tone made Dane's blood boil. He had a huge hand in Annabel being arrested and embarrassed. He ought to be publicly humiliated like she had been.

Sheriff Barnes pushed his face close. "You will get your ass

outside, get up on your platform, and tell anyone left in the area that Miss Wallace is innocent. She will get to keep her first place win, her plaque, and bag of coins. You will blame yourself for her arrest.”

“But I—”

“Shut your pie hole!” Barnes finally lost his temper and yelled. “Either do as I say or I’ll agree with the mayor and close your contest down for good.”

“Fine. I’ll go make an announcement.” Cletus then clamped his lips flat and exited the room with a slam of the door on his way out.

“I don’t expect he’ll go out of his way, Miss Wallace,” Barnes said. “But I’m convinced you had nothing to do with Virgil’s death. You may go.”

“Thank you, Sheriff Barnes. I know you were reluctant to arrest me in the first place.” She looked at Edna. “What about Mrs. Dempsey? Surely she can be spared.”

Barnes exchanged a look with Garrett. “I have a few more questions for her.”

“Will you allow me to ask them?” Garrett asked.

Dane thought Barnes looked relieved. He answered, “I’d be much obliged, Butler.”

“Edna, listen carefully to my question. Did you force Virgil to take a drink of any poison the night he died?”

She looked at him for a solid minute before she answered, “No. I did not force him to take a drink of anything.”

“Did he tell you he killed your husband last year?”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Yes. When I told him about our baby, Charlotte, he told me the whole sordid story. He gloated about when he told me he never wanted to see me or the baby again. He said not to bother repeating it as no one would believe me.”

Garrett smiled at her, straightened, and looked at Barnes. “Anything else you need to know, Sheriff?”

Barnes scratched his chin, looked at the ceiling for a few seconds, and then shook his head. “No. I’m satisfied. I’ll report to the mayor

that Virgil may have gotten a bad batch of whiskey. Obviously, it was an accidental death.”

Dane and Garrett escorted the ladies from the jailhouse and returned to the hotel.

“Thank you both for what you did.”

Garrett shook his head. “We didn’t do anything, ma’am, except ensure justice was served. I’m confident that the important truth came out. You should move forward. Make a life with your daughter.”

A wan smile shaped her lips. “You’re right. I’m not sure where I’ll go now.”

Annabel put an arm around her shoulders. “You should try a fresh start in a new town where no one knows the details of your tragic past.”

Edna snuggled her daughter close and wished them well before departing to her room.

Dane sidled closer to Annabel. “Don’t think we’ve forgotten what you did?”

Her eyes widened, and a blush came into her lovely cheeks. “What did I do?”

“You beat our pants off in the shooting contest, sugar. I hope you’re proud of yourself. Now we have to wait for a whole year to resolve our three time championship issues.”

Annabel laughed. “You’re so silly. The two of you will have to wait at least three years for that.”

Garrett’s brows narrowed. “How do you figure that?”

“I plan to beat the pants off of you at least two more times. Neither of you has a chance in this contest until I become the first three time champion.”

Dane figured she’d find a way to get their pants off more than twice in the coming years. If he had anything to say about it, anyway.

Epilogue

A year later – Priceless, Colorado

Annabel sunk her shoulders lower in the bath water and squeezed the cloth between her fingers. Soapy water dribbled first on her knee, then slid all the way down her thigh to the thatch of hair between her legs. Her clitoris twitched with desire as she waited for Dane and Garrett to arrive.

Glancing at her grimy hands, she sighed and started scrubbing the dirt from them. She wadded up the cloth and lathered the cake of fragrant soap in the folds. It took a little while, but she was finally able to wash away all the gun oil from her fingers and beneath her nails.

Gun making was often dirty work, but she loved it. She spent the better part of her days crafting guns and rifles. The best part being that she didn't have to hide what she did. Dane and Garrett had never once hindered her aspirations in this matter.

In fact, they'd allotted one of the large out buildings, near the main house, for all her gun making supplies and even provided her the means to sell a few of her designs. They knew men in the area who were willing to try out the craftsmanship and products of a female gun-maker. She'd even had a few second sales from satisfied customers.

Of late, Annabel had spent quite a lot of her time crafting two very special guns, one for each of the two important men in her life. She hoped to be finished by the end of the year to present her creations as gifts.

The over-sized specially built wooden tub she sat in was placed

strategically in the corner of her room behind a painted screen to shield her from view should anyone enter her room unexpectedly. But the truth was, she did expect somebody very soon. Actually, she expected two amazing men.

Over a year ago, after an arduous return trip to her home town from Pine Haven, Annabel found it very easy to pack up and leave the home she'd lived in since the age of five. Dane hadn't waited long before sending a message detailing his plan for her to move in with him. He found a place in a new city a couple hundred miles away, but still in Colorado. Since he and Garrett had already proposed marriage before they'd left the competition last year, she decided staying lonely but remaining close to the home she knew was overrated.

She'd missed both of them less than an hour after leaving Pine Haven.

Dane bought a large parcel of land, several hundred acres worth, and relocated a portion of his brothers' business to Priceless, Colorado. He'd sent for her before he'd even signed the papers to make the land his. Dane trained and bred horses, just as he had in northern Colorado, and grew his expanded business in southern Colorado.

Garrett gave up his job as sheriff of Outpost and arrived shortly thereafter. Initially, they'd set up their home in the old ramshackle ranch house centered in the middle of the property. But Dane promised her a new and bigger house.

The new home they'd built after she and Dane had gotten married had been completed in record time. Garrett stood up with them during the ceremony as best man, but she knew they cared for her equally. Garrett was as much a husband as Dane.

Her life was damn near perfect now.

Situated at the foothills of the mountains, Priceless, Colorado was a great name for the town an hours ride to the north. It was small, but the folks were very nice.

The climate was said to be very temperate and sunny for most of

the year. As she hadn't quite been here an entire year, she couldn't confirm a year's worth of sunshine quite yet, but she was hopeful.

These past several months had been the most blissful she'd ever spent. Garrett partnered with Dane in the purchase of land and together they formed the Sharpshooter's Range and Ranch.

Last month, after returning from the annual Wyoming Territory's Sharpshooter's contest, they'd discussed something very near and dear to her heart. Dane suggested forming their own sharpshooter's contest. She laughed and accused him of hating to travel so far north just to have his pants whipped off him for a second year in a row. He smiled, but declined to give any credence to her claim.

Because the ranch he and Garrett formed was a working one, there were lots of cowboys roaming around. They were all told that Dane and Garrett were cousins. Each lived in the main house and no one knew she was shared between them. Or if they did, they kept it to themselves.

She loved her new life as wife and lover to both men. She'd married Dane before arriving and had become Annabel Larsen, but remained equally married to both men once behind closed doors.

Annabel stroked the warm, soapy cloth over her other leg and waited, filled with anticipation, for her two favorite cowboys to return home. Tonight they planned to celebrate a year together. In truth, *each* night was a celebration of sorts. Even after all this time, they couldn't keep their hands off of each other.

The door opened suddenly. Dane and Garrett's simultaneous laughter caught her unguarded. Annabel dropped the soap in the water causing a distinct splash likely heard beyond her corner of the room.

The sound of the door closing and their instant quiet, told her they knew where she waited for them.

"My darling wife, are you in the bath?" Dane's question carried across the room and over the screen. The mere sound of his voice made a tingle run up her spine. Her pussy clenched in desire.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Annabel smacked the surface of

the water before plunging her fingers below in search of the slippery cake of soap.

Two heads, one dark and one light, peeked around the corner of the screen to discover her wet, wanting and conveniently naked. Just the way she knew they liked her best. Or so they'd told her repeatedly. It was one of a few things her husbands agreed upon. They both liked to see her naked.

Dane and Garrett regularly put up a pretense of disliking each other, but she knew they each truly shared a genuine fondness and respect for each other.

"I love it when she waits in the bath for us." Garrett grinned and entered the tight bathing space. There were two stools situated on either side of the tub. Each the perfect height to *help* wash her back...or whatever body part that needed cleaning.

Garrett rounded the tub, leaned down and kissed the top of her head before he seated himself on one stool. Dane quickly sat in the other. With elbows resting on his knees, Dane leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"That's all I get. No kiss on the mouth?"

The two exchanged an amused glance. Dane spoke first. "You have gun oil all over your face, sugar. I kissed the only clean spot."

She rubbed her face with the cloth and pulled away a sizeable grease stain. She grinned. "I guess that I need help cleaning up after all. Perhaps you'll both assist me."

"Sure. We can get you all clean and then we can all retire to bed."

"Well, it's about time. I've been waiting for quite awhile now. I already had to get out and add more hot water to the tub. Where have you two been?"

Garrett sighed. "It was my fault. Someone showed up and challenged me to shoot."

"Again? Who was it this time?"

"My old deputy from Outpost."

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "He didn't truly challenge you,

did he?”

Garrett grinned. “Not seriously. It’s sort of a joke between us.”

Annabel knew Garrett had hated to leave his deputy behind, but told her given their life together now, retiring had been worth it.

“Where is he now?”

“In the guest house.”

“Maybe we should have stayed in Outpost. Every time someone shows up from your former life, we end up giving them a job here.”

“Problem?”

Annabel sighed and gave him a half smile. “No. Not really. I guess I wish someone from my old life would show up. I’d love some feminine company for a change.”

Garrett brightened. “Well, you’re in luck on that count then. Cody brought his new wife.”

“Truly? Why did they leave Outpost?”

Garrett sighed. “Seems lots of riff-raff gunmen were showing up in town looking for me. When he refused to tell them where I was, several of them got irate. He got tired of dealing with angry gunslingers. Plus, his wife was worried he’d get shot, so they packed up everything and came here.”

“Lucky us.”

“Well, lucky you anyway. At least now you have another woman on the ranch besides Maria to talk to.”

“I’m sure she speaks English a little better than Maria, too.”

“How is your Spanish coming?”

Annabel shrugged. “Maria and I communicate well enough I guess, but it will be nice to talk about more than things being good or bad. I’m best at saying hello and goodbye. But that’s only works twice a day.”

Dane dipped his hand beneath the level of water placing it on her inner thigh. He massaged her flesh lower and lower until his fingers stroked her clit. She let out a moan the moment he touched her.

“Are you anxious for us to bathe you, sugar?”

She nodded, unsure her voice would work. She'd been waiting for quite a while in anticipation of their arrival. Now that they were here, she wanted to leap out of the water and push them both to the wood planked floor and rip their clothing off to sate her lust with each of them.

"You can't imagine how much I want you to touch me." She released another long moan when he stroked her clit again and slid his fingers inside her pussy.

"I believe I can."

Garrett took the cloth from her hand, rinsed it off in the water, and promptly washed the rest of her face. Once it was cleaned to his satisfaction, he bent down and kissed her lips. He then rinsed the cloth and started rubbing it over her breasts.

After several minutes, she asked, "Are my nipples really so dirty?"

"No. I just like touching them. That they're especially clean now is beside the point."

Dane continued his ministrations below the water and Annabel was fast coming to a pinnacle of arousal. With Garrett also stroking her nipples, climax became an ensuing conviction.

As if they knew she was about to sing in orgasmic bliss and wanted to arouse her further first, each of them stopped touching her at the exact same time.

Annabel took a deep breath and screamed her frustration. "Why did you stop?"

"Stand up. We want you sandwiched in between us with our cocks buried all the way inside your pussy and backside when you come. We really like it that way."

They looked so excited about the vision they'd described, how could she turn them down. She knew as well as they did that it was a glorious way to love each other. The best way. She took a deep breath and released it to get her roiling arousal under control. "Well, hurry up and get undressed. I'm about to explode."

She'd never seen the two of them remove their clothes so fast.

They pulled her from the bath and didn't bother to dry her off before each of them pushed their chests against her slick body. Garrett behind her and Dane facing her, Annabel practically purred in contentment.

Gracefully, they danced her across the space to the bed and before she knew it, Dane had his cock between her legs. The tip of his dick grazed her clitoris and she sucked in a deep breath on the very brink of orgasm.

"Dane, please," she begged.

"Sorry, sugar. Be patient. I don't want to hurt you."

"You couldn't possibly hurt me."

He kissed her mouth hard, sliding his tongue between her lips to take a deep taste. Meanwhile, he also pushed his cock inside her pussy as Garrett nibbled at the sensitive spot at the back of her neck. Ribbons of excitement grazed every part of her body. She was ready to burst with the need to come.

Behind her, Garrett brushed his fingers across the tight rosette of her behind. She clenched in anticipation of being doubly filled. He stroked her back hole once again, this time with lubrication. The next sensation was of Garrett inserting his cock into her tight *derrière* hole. She shuddered on the brink of ecstasy as Garrett pushed his cock deeply into her rear. The penetration bordered on painful, but was over powered by his smooth slow entrance and the sensation of his entrance only galvanized her pleasure.

The moment she was doubly filled, Dane reached between them and brushed his finger across her aching clit. The orgasm she desired slammed suddenly into her body like a surprise summer tornado. Her core stretched to squeeze both cocks as she screamed in utterly sublime and blissful release.

Dane pushed his cock deep several more times and soon stiffened against her still slick body. Perspiration mingled with the bathwater still clinging to her skin.

Garrett grabbed her hips and pumped his cock between her butt cheeks with gusto. The dark pleasure his action afforded made her come swiftly to another pinnacle of blissful possibilities. She moaned as another acute release captured her body in rapture. The sensation of this orgasm felt even more vibrant than the first.

Seconds later, Garrett fairly howled his release before sagging against her. He whispered, "I love you, Annie." His vocal adoration made Annabel tingle inside each and every time they made love.

"I love you, too." Dane captured her mouth in a deliciously sexy kiss. His tongue sweeping deeply between her lips, her face cradled gently in his fingertips, Annabel moaned her approval.

These men made her life better than she'd ever expected it to be. They supported her. She loved them with all her heart and soul.

Once they created their own private annual shooting competition, Annabel decided her life would be completely perfect.

THE END



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