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LOVE UNDER TWO GUNSLINGERS



Cara Covington

Siren Ménage Everlasting

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

LOVE UNDER TWO GUNSLINGERS

The Lost Collection

Cara Covington

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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LOVE UNDER TWO GUNSLINGERS

CARA COVINGTON

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Chapter 1

The men looked lean, mean, and dangerous.

From her position at the top of the staircase in her father's house, Sarah Carmichael Maddox could see without being seen. She needed this, needed to observe the men her husband had entrusted her safety to, who would take her from all she had ever known into a world of strange people and even stranger lands. The men who would then deliver her to her husband.

Her husband.

Sarah looked down at the simple gold band on the third finger of her left hand, still unused to seeing it there.

She didn't feel married. Who could blame her? She'd met her husband for the first time three weeks ago at her father's dinner table, became his lawfully wedded wife the very next day, and then kissed him goodbye when he left to return to his ranch the morning after the ceremony.

And now she was expected to leave the only home she'd ever known in the company of these two dangerous-looking characters? She could see their guns just under their long, weather-beaten coats, and the way they stood, as if ready to defy God himself. Why, they looked the very image of cowboy outlaws!

Sarah had been expecting Pinkerton agents in suits, gentlemen of a certain age and professional demeanor who would have perhaps contracted the services of a female traveling companion as chaperone for her.

Instead, waiting just inside the front door stood two of the scruffiest, most disreputable looking men she ever laid eyes on. Colleen, her father's housekeeper, stood ramrod straight before them, having just admitted them into the house and received the calling card they'd proffered, likely an introduction from Sarah's husband.

"If you gentlemen would please have a seat in the parlor, I'll inform Miss Sarah of your arrival."

Sarah could tell Colleen wasn't happy, not one bit. Of course, this entire situation hadn't set well with the older woman right from the start. This latest twist in the farce Sarah's life had so recently become had poor Colleen as near to stuttering as she'd ever seen her.

"Miss Sarah? I thought she was *Mrs.* Sarah?" the taller and darker of the two callers asked. His voice sounded as rough as dirt, the words more drawled than spoken.

"As you say," Colleen replied, giving no quarter.

"We don't need to be sitting. Just fetch the lady and we'll be on our way," he said.

"You'll wait here, then."

Because she'd been watching, she noticed the other man, the blond haired one, begin to cast his glance about, taking in his surroundings. Quickly, she stepped back, farther away from the railing, not wanting to be caught spying.

Indignation reverberated in every step as Colleen ascended the stairs toward Sarah, leaving the visitors to wait alone.

Under normal circumstances, Sarah would have hastened to her dressing table, so the older woman would have no evidence of her having eavesdropped.

The circumstances were far from normal.

Sarah met her housekeeper's green-eyed gaze. She thought she would see traces of temper there and instead read fear.

Without saying a word, Sarah turned and entered her bedroom. Not until Colleen came in and closed the door behind her did she speak.

"May I have the card, please?"

"This isn't right, lass," the housekeeper said as she handed her the calling card. "I don't think you should go." Though older, Colleen didn't stretch beyond Sarah's shoulder. Her red hair, braided, then wrapped into a bun atop her head, showed just a few strands of silver. Her round face carried no wrinkles despite the fact she'd entered her fourth decade.

Colleen had practically raised Sarah after the death of Sarah's mother when she'd been only ten.

"I'm going to miss you with all of my heart," Sarah said softly.

"What kind of a man would send such rabble to escort his wife into dangerous territory, I'd like to know?"

Sarah turned away, not willing to let the woman who'd been her mother in so many ways see her own distress.

Had Miranda, her stepmother, not revealed the truth of the circumstances surrounding her sudden and unexpected marriage, Sarah would be doing all she could to remain in Chicago for as long as possible.

That option had been taken out of her hands. She'd lain awake these last several nights trying to come up with an idea, a plan...something. *Anything*. But the truth had dawned with the sun yesterday morning.

She had no choice but to go to Texas and live with her husband. She wasn't wanted here, and after learning of her father's betrayal, *she* no longer wanted to be here.

These thoughts she could share with no one. Just as in some ways she'd felt all alone since her mother's passing, she understood she truly was all alone now.

“Perhaps Mr. Maddox is wise in his choice of escort. Perhaps the best candidates for the job of taking me through dangerous territory are dangerous looking men.”

She turned and gave Colleen her best smile.

“I should have made arrangements to go with you.”

“How could you? All of your friends, your sister and her family are all here in Chicago. They need you.” *I need you.* But those words could never be said.

Colleen belonged here, in this city that continued to literally rise from the ashes of its past. Her sister had lost her home and her husband to the fires that had raged just a few short years before. Colleen’s family did need her. They needed her presence and the money she brought in as housekeeper for a wealthy family. The latter was why Sarah wouldn’t tell Colleen what her father had done. The woman would quit on the spot on principle.

The time had come for Sarah to finally grow up. She’d bowed to her father’s wishes and married the man he’d chosen, not that she had any real choice in the matter. And while her belief that he’d chosen Mr. Maddox for altruistic reasons had been proven false, it did not change the very real fact that she *was* married to the man.

She would go to Texas and make the best of this new life.

Sarah reached for her hat, taking stock of her reflection in the mirror as she did. The simple brown traveling dress, a two piece plain outfit made of cotton, fit comfortably, made of a durable enough construction to wear well. Her white blouse, also cotton, featured long sleeves and a button at the neck. The camisole and petticoat beneath were of a light weight, perfect for early spring weather. The hat she’d chosen, a plain brown with a bit of beige lace, and a small cluster of feathers looked good on her. She’d fashioned her blond hair that morning into a chignon. It took only a moment to fasten her hat in place.

She’d followed her husband’s instructions and packed just enough clothing for the trip, expected to last no more than a week.

She would travel with but one valise. Colleen had been instructed to pack and ship the remainder of her clothing after her departure, and her husband informed her that the sister of his houseman, an accomplished dressmaker, could provide her with ample clothing until her own arrived.

In these modern times, travel was no longer the months-long ordeal it once had been. The improvements made to rail travel meant it had become easier than ever for people to journey farther than they had in decades past.

Sarah understood there'd be a train ride from Chicago to St. Louis, Missouri, and then a small stagecoach ride to Springfield. To better accommodate the second phase of the journey proved the reason for the limit of one valise. From Springfield, she would board another train that would bring her to within a few hours' carriage ride of her new home.

Her father assured her when he'd announced her betrothal that Mr. Maddox—*Tyrone*—was a financially successful, well-established rancher. Father had known him for years, so she supposed if there had been anything truly untoward about the man, her father wouldn't have sold her to him.

I'll likely have to beg God's forgiveness for my mean-heartedness.

Although she thought that maybe, this once, God would understand her sentiments.

She turned to Colleen with a smile on her face, determined to comfort the older woman. "This isn't forever. I'm sure I'll visit. And I will write. To father, of course, as a dutiful daughter should. But I'll write to you, too."

"Aye, I'd like that very much, Miss Sarah."

Sarah felt her heart lodge in her throat. Colleen's eyes shimmered, and she knew hers did as well. Tears pooled, and would flow, despite her earlier resolution they would not. Sarah had more to say before that happened.

"I love you, Colleen. Thank you for being a mother to me all these years. Thank you for hugging me when I cried and swatting me when I needed it. Thank you—" Sarah stopped, unable to continue without bawling like a baby. "Just thank you. For everything."

She'd promised herself last night as she'd dried her tears that today she would leave this house dry of eye and determined of spirit.

"My wee lass," Colleen whispered.

Sarah nearly lost control when the familiar female arms pulled her close, when the ever-present scent of roses from Colleen's perfumed medallion enveloped her. Colleen's arms clamped on tightly for one long moment. Then they eased, and when she drew back, Sarah straightened up.

"Well. I guess I best not keep the gentlemen waiting much longer."

Colleen harrumphed. "Gentlemen indeed. Wait until you see them up close."

"Do they stink?" Sarah asked, grinning.

"Well, no," Colleen admitted. "And their clothing appears to be clean, if worn."

"Do you remember when Marissa went to New York City with her parents to visit her uncle and aunt? She wore her favorite pink linen day dress on the train. And when she arrived, she had to throw the garment away. It had become covered with such grime. Perhaps the gentlemen are wearing older clothes for that very reason."

"Well now, I never once considered that possibility."

Sarah knew she'd nonplussed Colleen by giving the older woman her own constant lecture about putting one's best foot, and best thoughts, forward.

"Will you walk me down?"

"Aye, and I'll carry that bag. I want those ruffians to see you're a lady, unaccustomed to indelicate endeavors. Perhaps they will have a better care of you."

“I’m not. Well, yes, I’m a lady but I’m not unused to indelicate endeavors.”

Colleen winked as she reached for Sarah’s valise. “I can think of no good reason for either of those two *gentlemen* to know that.”

* * * *

Caleb Benedict didn’t want to waste time cooling his heels in the entrance foyer of this Chicago rich man’s house. He already regretted the decision he’d made to do their friend Adam a favor and accept Tyrone Maddox’s job offer. He hated being indoors. No, that wasn’t exactly true. He hated being in the city, any city.

They’d rented horses from the livery stable and camped overnight under the stars an hour’s ride out. Now he was here, and he just wanted to get on the train and get going back to where he belonged.

“Fancy place if you like that sort of thing,” his twin, Joshua, said from beside him as he rocked back on his heels, gawking at his surroundings.

They didn’t look much like twins—Joshua had the golden hair and blue eyes of their mother, while he resembled their father in both coloring and height. He’d been called dark and dangerous by more than one female. But they’d shared their momma’s womb, as they’d shared most of their lives. They’d even managed to fight side by side in the war when they’d both been young and full of themselves, certain they knew everything and were indestructible. Caleb had saved Joshua’s life during the battle of Vicksburg, but then Joshua had returned the favor in Atlanta.

He couldn’t imagine not having his brother, his best friend, in his life every day.

“The *lady* was spying on us.” Joshua said that more quietly.

No, they didn’t look much alike, but in some ways they were identical down to the bone. Not much got past either of them.

“Saw her. Pretty little thing.”

“I expected a matronly woman, seeing as how Maddox is getting on in years.”

“Well, we don’t know the man. If Adam hadn’t told us about the job offer and vouched for him, we still wouldn’t. I sure can see why a man getting up in years would want to marry himself a prime piece, though.”

“Built himself an empire and now needs to start begetting,” Joshua agreed. Sound from above caught the attention of both brothers. Together they turned to look up the stairs.

God in heaven.

She descended the steps like a queen, head held high, a soft smile kissing the corners of her mouth. Caleb’s blood heated, and his cock stirred. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to keep his arousal from flaring into full, raging need.

Beside him Joshua sucked in a breath. Caleb knew without asking his brother was having an identical reaction to the woman.

“Gentlemen, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

His momma had raised him right, drilled manners into him until they became nearly second nature, so he almost had his hand going to his hat. At the last moment Caleb made a snap decision not to show any of his momma’s fancy drawing-room manners. He realized his only salvation would be to treat Mrs. Maddox as an assignment and *not* as a female.

It was going to be difficult enough, all of them traveling in close quarters over the next week. If he gave in now and started thinking of her as a female, he would be in serious trouble before their journey was even half done.

“I’m Caleb Benedict. My brother, Joshua. Your husband has hired us to escort you to his ranch. You’re familiar with the route?”

Caleb watched as she blinked, absorbing his brusque manner without so much as a frown. Her lips lifted in another half smile. Then she looked at him, her light blue eyes sparkling, and he had to resist the urge to smile back.

“Good day to you, Mr. Benedict. And to you,” her lips twitched just a little when she turned to his brother, “Mr. Benedict.” Then she put her full attention back to him.

“No, I have no experience of the route we’ll be taking. I’ve never been to Mr. Maddox’s ranch. As a matter of fact, I’ve never actually left Chicago except for a couple of summer visits to relatives, and then in the days immediately following the fire, of course. We evacuated to a farm belonging to my uncle until the flames had been extinguished and Father deemed it safe to return. However, Mr. Maddox did mention that I would be taking a train.”

“I see.”

“Only one suitcase?” Joshua asked, reaching forward and relieving the housekeeper of her burden. As he did so, he gave Caleb a look that told him he wasn’t alone in his attraction to the lady, just in how he chose to deal with it.

“My husband requested that I bring but one.”

“Well that makes things a lot easier,” Caleb said. “If you’re ready, then? We have a half hour to get to the train station.”

“Yes, all right.” She turned and threw her arms around the housekeeper, who returned her hug while shooting a steely glare at both him and Joshua.

“Don’t worry,” Joshua said to the older woman. “We’ll take good care of her.”

“See that you do.”

Caleb noticed the tears in both women’s eyes and hoped to hell neither one of them burst out crying.

Nothing made a man feel more helpless than a woman’s tears.

He pulled open the door, and stepped outside. The morning sun still beat down on the city. The houses stood too close together and too many people scurried about. Fortunately, the buckboard and horses they’d rented from the livery were used to the city and stood placidly at the hitching post.

She smelled like a flower-filled spring meadow.

Caleb scowled, willing the unwanted thought away. Joshua pushed past him, taking the path to the street at a fast pace, setting the valise he carried on the back of the buckboard next to their two small bags.

“Oh. Is there even room for me?”

Mrs. Maddox had come up behind him, and stood so close he could feel the heat of her body against his back. Her scent surrounded him, making his blood heat and his cock begin to twitch.

“Sure there is,” Joshua answered. “You can sit on the seat beside Caleb. I’ll just hop on the back here.”

“Oh, well that’s fine then.” She went around Caleb and stood looking at the buckboard as if she’d never seen one before. Caleb approached her, and wondered just how fast the week could pass.

“Mr. Benedict, if you would be so kind?”

Caleb girded his loins even as his hands reached for her. It took only a moment to lift her and set her on the seat, but that moment burned the feel of her, the heat and the allure of her, into his soul forever.

She’s a married lady, you moron.

Caleb considered himself a man of honor. But as he rounded the rear of the buggy and prepared to take the reins, he couldn’t help but wonder if his honor could stand the test of Sarah Maddox.

Chapter 2

Liam Larson would do anything for his lover.

All his life he'd been alone and lonely with no hope, really, of ever finding anyone who would love him the way he needed to be loved, until Jamie came along.

Growing up, he'd never doubted his fate. Unattractive, sickly throughout his childhood, he'd been rejected even by his own family. If those to whom he'd been born didn't really want him, how could he expect anyone else to?

Liam had determined while still a boy that although he wouldn't be wanted, he would be needed. He worked hard, applying himself first to his parents' farm, and then to whatever job he could find. And then history stepped in and changed his life.

The war, so devastating to the country, proved to be his salvation. He'd been an excellent shot even before enlisting. Under the tutelage of the United States Army, his skill flourished, and with success came the first real acceptance and respect he had ever known. Army life suited him. He liked the rules and the regulations, the rigidness that made every man the same as every other. He liked the sense of camaraderie that facing danger and harsh conditions bred. He'd been mustered in with men he'd never met, stationed in places he'd never been. He fit in.

Under these most unlikely conditions and circumstances, while stationed in Missouri, he'd met Jamie. There existed no doubt in Liam's mind. They'd been destined to find each other and belonged together.

God had given him this exquisite creature, and Liam knew he could never do enough to be worthy of that gift. He would never take his beloved for granted, and anything, *anything* at all Jamie wanted, Jamie would get.

Liam reread the note the telegraph office had just delivered to his room. The message, succinct and to the point, announced that events had begun. Nodding to himself, he stuffed the note into his pocket.

Liam left his room in the small hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, conscious of his surroundings yet focused on his mission. His mission for Jamie.

He knew where to find the men he sought. This particular saloon, Murphy's, had its share of patrons morning, noon, and night. Some arrived early and stayed late, rarely getting up from their stools or chairs except to go piss out the back, making room for more drink. Or taking a quick trip up the stairs with one of the whores, working up a bit of a thirst, then coming back down, again for more drink. One could find places like Murphy's in every state and territory, hell, in every city in the nation. Places where, for the right price, one could buy anything at all.

Liam's first sight of Dick Morgan and his gang didn't fill him with confidence. If he'd had his way, he'd take care of fulfilling his lover's wishes personally. But in this, as in most things, his lover proved clever.

These ruffians could never be traced to Jamie. And no one would ever remember Liam Larson, as plain a man as ever walked the face of the earth. No one, save Jamie, had ever looked at him twice.

He pulled out the extra chair at the table. The smell of unwashed bodies assailed him, and it was all Liam could do not to curl his lip in disgust.

"Guess you're the dude we're waiting for." Morgan turned his head slightly to the side to spit out his chaw, just missing Liam's foot.

Liam didn't shake his head but he knew no amount of willpower would keep the look of contempt from his face. Reaching into his

jacket he pulled out an envelope and tossed it down on the table in front of Morgan.

“Half now, half when the job is done.”

“How’re you gonna know if we did it right or not?” The question was asked by another man at the table, a man who appeared to be little more than a boy, really.

No intelligence shining from those eyes.

Liam knew Morgan’s stepson ran with him, as did his brother and a couple of men he’d met during the war, all of them, of course, fighting on the losing side.

“I’ll be close by,” Liam said. He turned his attention back to Morgan. “Here’s what’s expected of you and where you’re to make your move.”

He spoke quietly, quickly. He described the target, and there could be no way even a bunch of no-accounts like Morgan and his gang appeared to be could miss picking out the target.

Morgan grabbed up the envelope, his callused finger playing over the edge of the bills that filled it. “I don’t trust paper money overmuch. Learned my lesson a few years back. Mr. Davis’s paper money turned out to be worth less than shit. I want the rest of it in gold coin.”

Liam raised both eyebrows. This was one of the reasons he’d argued with Jamie against using a man like Morgan. The man’s basic lack of professionalism would be the death of him.

Or it would be if Liam had any say in the matter.

“Very well. The target doesn’t arrive here until tomorrow. You don’t move for a day after that. Plenty of time to make arrangements for the gold then.” What choice did he have? It wouldn’t be very difficult to get the coin, as Jamie had been very generous and provided Liam with substantial property and cash. But his instincts told him the wisest course of action would be to let Morgan keep his obvious impressions, that Liam was just able to meet the financial demands on top of being an unthreatening ‘dude.’

He could see no reason to let Morgan know he could put a hole in his forehead from four hundred yards away. Farther if he had his Sharps. In fact, there existed no need to let the man know one damn thing more than he absolutely needed to.

“Then you’ve got yourself a deal. Me and my boys will get the job done. Now, just one thing we was wondering about. Any reason we couldn’t have us some fun with the...what’d you call it...the *target*, before we finish the job?”

Liam got to his feet, revulsion coursing through his veins. He tramped down the twinge of pity that tried to surface by reminding himself that when all was said and done, Jamie would be stronger and safer. And Jamie was all that really mattered.

Still, he leaned forward and braced his hands on the table. His expression must have revealed a little of the dangerous man he knew he’d become, for Morgan and his men, as one, leaned away from him.

“You can do whatever you like to Sarah Maddox,” he hissed. “As long as you leave her dead when you are finished with her.”

* * * *

Sarah shivered, the chill unexpected and inexplicable. The day had turned unseasonably hot, making the interior of the train car stifling. Opening the window any wider wasn’t an option because of the steady bombardment of smoke and hot ashes from the train’s engine. The constant clatter of the wheels on the tracks and the nearly bone-jarring and never-ending motion as the train made its way toward St. Louis were beginning to take their toll on her.

The train began to slow. Again. Sarah turned her attention from looking out the window at the endless vista of farmlands and trees to watch the door at the end of the car. She’d had no idea there would be so many stops along the way. Sure enough, the door opened and the conductor began to walk through the car.

“Normal. Approaching Normal, Illinois.”

She thought she just might hear that nasal-accented monotone in her nightmares. And then as the town's name registered, her mirth rose up and she chuckled. Across from her, Joshua joined her, his eyes crinkling at the corners, the blue of them sparkling with merriment. From beside him, Caleb shot his brother an annoyed look and then turned his grumpy-looking face back to the window again.

She honestly didn't know what to make of these two. She'd considered herself a fairly accomplished hostess as she'd acted in that capacity for her father before he'd remarried the year before. So it wasn't as if she had no experience conversing with men.

But these two seemed different than any she had ever encountered. One appeared stern and moody, the other cheery and unruffled. The fact that they were brothers was amazing enough. That they could actually be twins seemed impossible.

Yet Joshua, happy to fill the journey with chatter, told her exactly that.

Looking at them both caused an unfamiliar heat to curl in her belly. Her nipples tingled, and she felt an overwhelming need to clamp her limbs together tightly. These sensations shocked her, being totally foreign to her, but she knew what they meant.

She'd never in her life felt any kind of stirring toward any man, and now she felt it toward *both* of these two dissimilar brothers.

"Can't say as I'd want to live in a place called 'Normal,'" Joshua mused. "And if I did, I don't expect I would go around telling anyone."

"Leastways it's a town and not a goddamned city," Caleb said.

Sarah's eyes widened as her gaze snapped to Caleb, who seemed to immediately realize his blunder. He shot her a fast glance, and she could have sworn he blushed.

"Beg pardon, ma'am."

He appeared completely embarrassed, which to Sarah's mind constituted a huge improvement over looking stone-faced. She cast a fleeting glance at Joshua who looked as if he was going to choke.

“My Great-Aunt Maude used to say that the devil himself hid in cuss words,” she announced primly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Caleb replied, still obviously miffed with himself.

Now that’s interesting. He seems willing to submit to a well-deserved tongue lashing when I would have wagered he never took any rebuke from anyone.

As much as she enjoyed seeing this new facet of Caleb Benedict’s personality, she was far too fair minded to let him dangle on the hook for long. She looked out the window at the gradually slowing scenery. “Of course, that damn woman has never been anywhere *near* Normal in her entire life. So what does she know, really?”

This time Caleb was the one to give her a quick, wide-eyed look. In response to his shock, she could only smile.

His laughter filled her with pleasure even as it entered her bloodstream and increased the sensation of attraction.

The train came to a stop and the sounds of civilization, horses and people, a dog barking and some children laughing and playing, rolled in through the window on wisps of dust. Sarah sighed with the respite from train noise and motion.

“I’m coming to the conclusion that this is your first train trip,” Caleb said.

Sarah’s lesser angel wanted to comment on how nice it felt to no longer be totally ignored by the big, dark-haired man, but she easily defeated the impulse. She liked his dry humor and the way his lip curled up at the corner. She wondered what it would be like to trace it with her finger.

The shock of that thought pulled her gaze down to her lap. It took every bit of will she had to raise her head, look him in the eye, and answer him. She hoped he thought the high color in her face was a result of the heat of the day and *not* inappropriate thoughts.

“It is. I must admit that it’s nothing at all like I imagined it would be. How long until we get to St. Louis, do you think?”

Caleb raised one eyebrow, then looked over at his brother.

Joshua shook his head. "Tomorrow afternoon. We'll be stopping for the night in Springfield, Illinois. I've heard tell that some trains do travel all night, that some of them actually have cars with cots in them, but not this one. There's a hotel with a dining room near the station in Springfield. We'll be staying there tonight."

Several hours later, Sarah found herself sitting across a dining table from her traveling companions. The hotel seemed to be doing a brisk business, thanks to so many of her fellow passengers needing food and lodging for the night. She'd never felt so tired or grubby, and, truthfully, didn't know whether she could do her meal justice, despite being famished.

The Benedicts didn't seem to be having any trouble in that regard.

Since that one stop in the unforgettable town of Normal, Caleb had become somewhat more loquacious. She'd been certain prior to that moment there must have been something about her Caleb Benedict found objectionable. She no longer believed that to be the case.

She felt a gaze on her and looked up to see both men had cleaned their plates and now stared at hers.

She looked back down at her food and forked a small bite of potato. This silence that had fallen upon them wasn't a good thing at all. In the silence her mind played games, such as telling her the brothers regarded her with the same hungry expressions they'd regarded their roast beef just a few minutes earlier. She needed to do something to dislodge these forbidden, albeit exciting, thoughts.

"Could you tell me a little about where we're going?" It seemed to her a good idea to focus on the reason for this trip.

She was, after all, a married woman. Even if she had married a man she'd only met hours before the ceremony. A man who, after the nuptials, had seemed not the least bit interested in her at all. Perhaps it would prove an embarrassment, asking these two to discuss her husband and the ranch that would be her home for the rest of her life.

But surely the conversation would keep her thoughts from straying where they truly ought not to go.

“We’ll arrive in St. Louis tomorrow afternoon, probably late. We’ll stay the night and then take a Wells Fargo stagecoach to Springfield, Missouri. There we’ll board another train to Waco. From the station in Waco it’s just a few hours to your ranch.”

Caleb’s deep voice shivered her skin. Sarah put the reaction out of her mind. She found it uncharacteristically difficult to concentrate. “Thank you, but I meant could you tell me a little bit about the ranch itself, and maybe a little about my husband?”

Caleb and Joshua exchanged a look she couldn’t read.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Maddox, but you want us to tell you about your husband?” Joshua asked.

“You have to call me Sarah. Both of you. And yes, I know it’s probably an imposition and maybe not even appropriate, seeing as he’s your boss and all but—”

“Tyrone Maddox isn’t our boss,” Caleb said quickly. “Not in the way I think you mean. He hired us solely to escort you from Chicago to Texas. We only heard of the job through a friend of ours who’s a Texas Ranger stationed in Waco and who introduced us to your husband. We’re not ranchers—well, we haven’t been since we left home to join the Union Army when we were seventeen.”

“Oh.” Which meant once she arrived at her husband’s ranch, she’d likely never see the brothers Benedict again.

That was probably for the best. It wouldn’t do to have these kinds of strange feelings for the two men while being married to another. Inhaling deeply, she pushed those thoughts aside and tried to ignore the tightness in her chest. “So if you’re not ranchers, what are you?”

“I thought you knew. At least the look you gave us from the top of your stairs in Chicago, when you spied on us, seemed to suggest you did.”

Caleb's tone had gone quiet with that last sentence, and oh, the unexpected teasing glint in his eyes stirred her emotions in a way she knew she should ignore—even if it did feel delicious.

"I'm not going to apologize for that," Sarah said, pitching her tone to match Caleb's. She leaned forward just a little, to help ensure their conversation remained private. "I needed to have a look at you before I came down those stairs."

"Can't blame you for that. We had a look at you, too. And we won't apologize either."

"Oh." His words, his voice, went straight to that secret place between her legs. She grew damp there, a sensation she'd never felt before. She sat back, thoroughly flummoxed by the way her body kept reacting to these men. So far her attempt to bring her body under control and her attention to where it should be, on her husband, was proving to be a dismal failure. Determined, she leaned forward once more. "So, if you're not ranchers, what are you, then?"

Joshua leaned forward and Sarah blinked, for the heat had been between herself and Caleb. With his action, Joshua claimed his piece of her attention. With his words, he sent a chill down her spine and proved he could melt her innards as well as his brother could.

"Why, *Miss Sarah*, my brother and I are gunslingers."

Chapter 3

“I’ll flip you. Heads I get guard duty, tails you do,” Joshua said the moment the door to their hotel room closed behind them. He knew his brother, knew every mood, every expression, every stance. And what he knew right now was that Caleb was wound tighter than the spring on his Colt 45. Joshua still had the double-headed coin that gambler he’d met last year in Dallas had given him. In Caleb’s frame of mind, he might have forgotten about the coin. He figured it couldn’t be called cheating when he did it for his brother’s own good.

“No, you sleep. I’ll watch. That way I have an excuse for closing my eyes on the train ride tomorrow. I might even sleep. That would help.”

While Joshua wandered over to the room’s one window that looked down on the narrow alley between the hotel and the saloon next door, Caleb took the straight-back chair and dragged it to the door. He opened the portal a crack, then took his place on the chair. His brother could be vigilant to their surroundings and talk to him at the same time.

Sarah’s room was across the hall and down one. That’s how he and Caleb had arranged things just so one of them *could* keep her door in sight, stay on guard all night.

Not that they expected trouble. They really didn’t. But when the Benedict brothers gave their word to keep a woman safe, they damn well kept her safe.

“She bothers you,” Joshua said, his back to his brother.

“Bothers me? If you call the way she gets my cock hard a bother, then yeah. Yeah, she bothers the hell out of me. *Fuck.*”

“Me, too. Been a long time since a female’s made me this horny this fast—if ever. Good thing she’s married. With both of us randy as young bucks we’d be pulling her under us, otherwise.”

Caleb chuckled, and Joshua knew there was no humor in it. “It’s not like she’s cut from the same cloth as some of the women we’ve shared over the years.”

“No kidding.” Joshua didn’t bother to kick off his boots, just dumped himself on the bed, smiling when the springs gave him a two-bounce ride. Folding his hands behind his head, he settled in, got comfortable.

“Thinking about past experiences isn’t helping here because it doesn’t take much imagination for me to see Sarah naked and writhing on top of you while I fuck her ass from behind. I have a feeling one taste of Sarah would wipe the memory of every other woman from our minds and our cocks.”

“*Fuck*. That’s a nice hot image to take into sleep with me. Thanks a lot, brother.”

“What can I say? You’re my brother and my best friend. If I suffer, you suffer too.”

“The way I see it, no matter what, we’re both going to suffer until we get to Maddox’s spread and give him his wife,” Joshua said. There could be no question, of course, of trying to see if they could talk the lovely Sarah out of her clothes and into their bed. She had chosen to marry Tyrone Maddox. She must have had a good reason. Hell, even though she didn’t seem to know much about him, she could have fallen in love with him at first sight. None of his business.

“Damn straight. Married means off limits.”

Exactly. Over the years there were some things he and Caleb had done that neither one of them would have wanted their mother to know about. But they did have their standards and poaching another man’s wife was on the list of things they’d never do.

Even the tempting young wife of a man who’d rubbed them wrong the way Maddox had.

That got his mind working. “Why do you suppose Adam wanted us to take this job in the first place?” Adam Kendall had been in their unit during the war, and the three of them had become good friends. If Joshua needed a man at his back and for some reason Caleb wasn’t available, he’d want Adam there. Unlike them, Adam didn’t have any difficulty settling down in one place in the years since 1865. He’d become a Texas Ranger and rose to the rank of Captain of the Waco troop.

He looked over to find Caleb frowning at him. “I don’t have the damndest idea. He didn’t give us a reason at all. At first, I thought that he asked in order to do a favor for the man, Maddox being a wealthy landowner and rancher in his neck of the woods and all.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. But now—”

“Now when I think on it, it seems strange because there’s no way I can picture Maddox and Adam as friends.”

“No way in hell,” Joshua agreed, closing his eyes. It didn’t surprise him that Caleb’s thoughts mirrored his own. They might not look like twins on the surface, but under the skin they often thought as one. “And since we both know the way Adam’s mind works, you have to wonder if there’s another reason he wanted us here other than just giving us a way to earn some extra cash.”

“I’m not going down that road any further,” Caleb said quietly. “I’m sticking to the here and now, focusing on what we know for certain and on what we have on our plates, not what looks good on the sideboard. We’ll get Mrs. Maddox to her husband because that’s what we’ve been paid to do. And that’s all we’re going to do.”

“Sideboard sure as hell holds one tempting morsel,” Joshua said. Caleb didn’t respond, and Joshua let it go. His brother was right. No sense in trying to bend speculation just to suit their prurient needs.

On the other hand, it made no sense to *not* pay attention to their instincts, either. Maybe his instincts hummed because he was drawn to Sarah Maddox, because the sight of her and the scent of her went straight to his cock. And maybe another reason existed altogether for

this strange sense of alertness. So while he didn't specifically expect any trouble between here and Waco, he'd keep a sharper eye about him anyway, just as he knew his brother would do.

Just in case.

* * * *

Smoke hung heavily in the air, the space illuminated only by the gaslights set on the wall and the Tiffany lamps placed around this upper-floor private game room in the Old Ranch saloon. Tyrone Maddox had his cigar clamped securely between his teeth, his cards tucked confidently into his hand as he eyed the rest of the players around the table. He'd known every man there a decade or more. A couple had been born in Waco, the others newcomers of a dozen years or so. He knew every important fact about each and every one. And he trusted not one of them.

Poker was poker.

"Adam? Your turn to open."

Bob Kramer acted as dealer tonight, a role the man seemed to enjoy.

Might as well, since he was a piss-poor gambler.

It never seemed to bother Bob that he couldn't keep a poker face or read a hand of cards or any of the other players. He came each month and cheerfully lost his stake and always came back the next month for more. Strange bastard.

Maddox flicked his gaze over to Adam Kendall, a man whose friendship he'd deliberately courted over the last few years. It never hurt to have the law in one's corner. As the man in charge of the Ranger post in Waco, Kendall was the most visible symbol of the force in the entire county. Despite his efforts, though, Maddox hadn't managed more than a "friendly acquaintanceship" with the man.

Fine.

Adam *had* found him two gunslingers, a couple of out-of-work former army buddies of his to fetch Sarah, and that had been an enormous help. In fact, Adam's act of kindness had been the perfect gesture at the perfect time.

"Yeah, I'll open. A nickel," Adam said, tossing the coin into the pot.

Downstairs in the main saloon stood tables where men bought in and used chips when they played cards. Any time, day or night, if a man wanted a little game, the chance to win just a little coin, then those tables would suit. Upstairs the table awaited real money and real men. Maddox could never see the point in prettying the game up with chips, trying to give it an air of respectability, as if sitting down and anteing up constituted a harmless diversion. Why not call things what they were?

Gambling was gambling.

"Hear you went and got yourself hitched a few weeks back, Maddox. But I ain't seen hide nor hair of a wife. You keeping her chained up out at your place? Or did she already run off?" Gareth Peterson of the big mouth and small cock—according to Mandy here at the Old Ranch—never failed to irritate the hell out of Maddox. Despite that, Peterson's decision to attend tonight's game had figured prominently in Maddox's presence. He wanted to win every damn cent the bastard had on him.

Gareth Peterson always seemed to be just one step ahead of Maddox, scooping up the best bulls at auction, the best opportunities for investment, just as Maddox reached for them himself. But a new deal was blowing in the wind, a new opportunity that Maddox determined would be the making of his fortune, his future, *and* his name. Something that would make him the richest man in all of Texas.

Discovering the opportunity and knowing no one else hereabouts knew about it yet resulted in Maddox scrambling for every penny he could lay his hands on. Quietly, arrangements had been made. Soon,

he would be in possession of enough money to buy hundreds of acres of East Texas land. It would be his before pecker-head Peterson even heard word of the new gold rush about to be unleashed in the land: oil.

Competition was competition.

Maddox planned to grind Gareth Peterson into the dust. When he finished with him, the man would wish he'd never been born. Now, however, he only said, "I'll be having a huge party to introduce my wife once she arrives. She's on her way here now, from Chicago, even as we speak."

"You sly dog, Ty," Silas Jones, the final member of their game said. "All those times going up north to negotiate for your beef. It wasn't just the beef that drove you. It wasn't all just business, was it?"

Maddox felt little respect for Silas, a man he considered a fool. But fools sometimes had deep pockets and, as in this case, could sometimes prove to have other uses.

"A smart man knows never to close himself off to whatever opportunities may arise. Sarah is the daughter of the man I've been doing business with for years. I first set eyes on her a couple of years ago, but I had to wait until she came of age. Her father kindly gave his consent during my most recent visit, and I didn't want to risk his changing his mind. I am a very lucky man."

"Take 'em to your bed young, then break them in right. That's the way, Maddox. Too bad you had to leave her behind, after finally nailing her and all. Poor bastard, had your wedding night rut and then took off? Must be hard to do without, once your cock gets to dip into that fresh young cunt." Peterson said. "These last few weeks must have been hell."

The other men around the table tensed. Silas looked as if he would swallow his cigar. Adam made a subtle move that alerted Maddox the lawman could easily grab his gun, and would, if necessary. Kramer fidgeted in his seat.

There existed a basic code of behavior, one understood by gentlemen even in as rough and tumble a place as Waco, Texas, and Gareth Peterson had just crossed it. Maddox's own cross draw thirty-caliber Remington lay on the small table by the door but that was all right. Bullets weren't his preferred ammunition where Gareth Peterson was concerned. Bullets would only wound his flesh. Maddox knew his adversary, knew the financial coup he planned would be a far more hurtful wound. And then, when the man lay bleeding, he'd see to it that certain people knew certain things, and his name, his reputation would be destroyed.

The silence drew out and only he and Peterson sat perfectly still, gazes locked, each perfectly attuned to the other.

"I assure you I had no trouble heeding the urging of my better angel, allowing my wife a little extra time to bid farewell to family and friends. I'm certain that under similar circumstances, you would have done exactly the same."

Kramer snickered at that because it was a well-known fact that Peterson's wife wore the pants in that family, and if her pussy saw any action, it sure as hell wasn't from Peterson's shriveled up old cock.

"I'll see your nickel and raise it to two bits," Maddox said, easily keeping his tone pleasant. He tossed the money into the kitty, then turned to give Captain Kendall a steady look. After just a moment, Kendall nodded and relaxed.

As far as any of the men seated in that room were concerned—Peterson included—Maddox had simply let those unfortunate words roll off his back.

But inside, Tyrone Maddox seethed. Peterson was an ass, but he couldn't allow that insult toward his wife to goad him to action before he was ready, not under any circumstances. Instead, Maddox added that insult to the list of crimes his adversary had committed. Just one more mark against a man who had sealed his fate years before.

Revenge was revenge. Tyrone Maddox planned to have his soon.

Chapter 4

Sarah thought it just might be possible she would never forget the sound of metal wheels on rails or the sensation of the rocking sway of train travel. In fact, she wondered if she would ever willingly submit herself to this torture again. She turned her attention to one of her traveling companions. Across from her, arms folded on his chest, hat pulled down over his face, Caleb Benedict slept as soundly as a babe in a nursery.

When she awoke that morning, Sarah gave herself a firm talking to. She was on her way to join the man she had married. Yes, it was an arranged marriage, and no, Tyrone Maddox wasn't a man she likely ever would have chosen on her own. But the marriage had taken place, it *was* fact, and she'd determined before ever laying eyes on her escorts that the proper course of action for her to follow would be to simply make the best of the turn her life had taken. She reminded herself there could be worse fates than marrying a man she didn't know, that other women had entered into arranged marriages down through the ages, and many of those unions had proven successful, even happy. Before she opened the door to her hotel room, she felt renewed in her determination to do her duty with a whole heart.

They'd been traveling for just half an hour, and Sarah already could feel her grip on that resolve slipping.

It took no effort to recall the short amount of time she'd spent with Tyrone Maddox three weeks ago. He came to dinner the evening before the ceremony, and seemed polite, if distant. He kissed her hand, told her she looked lovely, and saw her seated at the table. He

complimented her stepmother, Miranda, in the same offhand manner. And then he spent the rest of the evening in conversation with her father. He'd barely paid her any attention after the first few moments.

He kissed her when the priest directed him to at the end of the wedding ceremony—a not unpleasant brush of his lips on hers. But their wedding night...thinking about it, even now, weeks removed from the event, Sarah felt her face color in embarrassment and shame.

Men had never flocked to her. Likewise, she'd never felt any kind of attraction to any man before yesterday when she met the Benedict brothers. That was one of the reasons Sarah went along with her father's decree that she marry Maddox. She wanted to be married, to have children. And while the man was older than she would have liked, he was well established, financially secure, and those were important considerations.

She knew what to expect on her wedding night, for Colleen had, with a great deal of blushing and stammering, told her.

What she hadn't expected was to kiss her husband goodbye the next morning, virginity still intact.

Against her will, her mind conjured the time spent so far with these two gunslingers. They had paid her more attention than the man who had taken her to wife. And they had inspired more tingles and excitement in her body than she'd believed herself capable of feeling.

In that instant, Sarah understood that in doing her duty she would be sentencing herself to a life without passion or pleasure, excitement or romance.

“Are you all right?”

Sarah blinked and looked up. She'd been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't noticed that Joshua had moved from his seat across from her to sit beside her.

“I don't mean to be presumptuous, Mrs.—Sarah. You just looked so very sad all of a sudden.”

He looked at her with more attention, more concern, than Tyrone Maddox had. He saw her, where she doubted her husband had seen her at all. "I'm fine, thank you for asking, Joshua."

Oh, Sarah, you must stop these thoughts!

Searching for something else to say, her gaze wandered to Caleb, still held in the depths of sleep.

"Is *Caleb* all right? He fell asleep before the train even left the station."

"He's fine. He stayed awake all night, keeping watch. So now he's catching up."

"Keeping watch? Keeping watch for what?"

"Not what, whom. He kept an eye on the door to your room all night. Guarding you."

"Oh." Sarah had nothing to say to that. She didn't think, in all her life, anyone had ever gone to such effort on her behalf. Well, no, that wasn't right. Colleen had stayed by her bedside once when, at eleven, she'd been sick with a bad ague.

She let her eyes rest on Caleb. He had exhausted himself watching over her. She felt something soften inside her. "I guess I never considered that beyond being escorts, you're guards. I...thank you."

"I'm going to be presumptuous again, Sarah." Joshua pitched his voice low. The car wasn't crowded. Barely a dozen other souls occupied space with them this morning. That might change as the day wore on and they pulled in to more stations, but for now, no one sat too near, and no one seemed to pay them any particular attention whatsoever.

"You don't seem very eager to join your husband. Now, I'm not condemning you for that. I think it's strange, in the first place, that a man would leave his bride behind. And strange that you appear more like a woman heading to the gallows than one destined for connubial bliss. What's going on here, Sarah?"

She should have realized that beneath Joshua's happy-go-lucky exterior lay a man more sensitive to his surroundings, and the moods of others, than most.

How should she answer him? For he had been right when he'd announced he was about to be presumptuous. He'd asked an extremely intimate question, the sort of question one might expect only from one's closest confidante.

Oh, God.

Tears threatened, and she blinked once, fiercely commanding them back. Reality rose up and slammed into her. She was miles from home, miles from all she had known and loved, thrust into a situation she never could have imagined just one month ago. Her future loomed, completely uncertain, and she felt more than alone. She felt *bereft*.

These men, at this point in time, were her *only* friends in the world. Her conscience began to protest, albeit faintly. She silenced it with brutal force.

If Mr. Maddox didn't want me to trust these two, he should not have sent them to fetch me like some...some left behind package in the first place.

"Connubial bliss? Oh, no, Joshua. I doubt very much there will be any of that in my future. I'm married to Mr. Maddox, quite simply, because my father sold me to him."

* * * *

"Aw, come on, Adam, I didn't mean nothing by it. Me and Spence just had us a bit of a disagreement, is all. You don't have to go arresting me."

Adam shook his head as he led a handcuffed Walter Pritchard to one of the cells in the back of the Rangers' office.

"Now, Walter, we've been through this before. The townsfolk don't take too kindly to having a man, drunk and disorderly, swinging

at another man and calling him a son of a whore, a godforsaken heathen, or a donkey fucker. I know it sounds all prissy and such, but it seems mothers especially object to their children hearing these new words because children will, of course, repeat them.”

“Aw, *damn*, Captain.”

“So you have yourself a little sleep here as our special guest. I’ll have Virgil ride out and tell your missus you won’t be home until dinner time.”

“No, Captain, no, please, don’t let Verna know! That woman has a tongue sharper than a whip. She’ll flay the skin right off my ass.”

Adam nearly laughed at the irony. A fist fight didn’t do much to sober up old Walter, and neither did being handcuffed and dragged off to jail. Mention the man’s wife of some twenty years, and he sprang from falling-down drunk to sober as a judge in the blink of an eye.

“Should have thought of that when you decided to stop off at the saloon.” Adam opened the cell, then un-cuffed Walter. The man stumbled, fell on the cot, and mumbled indistinct sounds as the volume of alcohol in his body took over and dragged him back to total inebriation and then blessed sleep.

Or not so blessed as Walter tended to snore louder than a frightened cow’s lowing.

Adam went back to his desk, trying to work the kinks out of his back, his mind wandering even as his gaze tracked to the front window.

Warren Jessop, attorney at law, exited the court house and paused on the sidewalk as he scanned his surroundings as if looking for something, or someone.

“Damn town is getting lousy with lawyers,” Adam said aloud. Then he grinned. He’d said that very thing to Warren on the day they’d met, nearly two years before.

His sore back and Walter forgotten, Adam grabbed his hat, then headed out into the hot Texas sun. He did his best to keep the smile

off his face and the eagerness out of his stride. He'd long ago become accustomed to hiding his emotions.

"Lawyer Jessop," Adam greeted when he approached Warren.

"Captain Kendall," Warren acknowledged with a nod. He stuck his hand out, and Adam grasped it. The tiny voice of disquiet that had rumbled within him these last many days stilled with the strong, familiar touch.

"I see you made it back from Kansas City without your scalp becoming forfeit."

"I did, late last night. I was fortunate in being able to travel with a cavalry regiment the last part of the way. They escorted me right to my door."

"Good. I was just heading over to Mary's for a cup of coffee. Care to join me?"

"Coffee sounds good, thanks."

They'd kept their voices cordial, friendly but not too much so. Anyone watching them, Adam thought, would hardly take notice. Adam had a reputation for being amiable to most everyone, making friends easily and often. He was, he knew, the sort of man that women—God bless their fragrant, curvy bodies—always flirted with and men wanted to call friend.

He'd more than flirted with beautiful women in the past, and knew he would again. He liked women. He liked the smell of them, the touch of them, the way their soft voices and sometimes softer hearts could stir a man to varying degrees of chivalry or lust. He really liked fucking them.

He liked men just as much and for many of the same reasons. He liked Warren Jessop, in particular.

Well that's only a half truth. I'm in love with the man.

It had taken nearly dying during the war for Adam to come to terms with the duality of his nature. Since then, he'd felt more at home in his own body and more attuned to those around him. He

regretted the necessity for subterfuge, for this game he and Warren had to play in front of the world.

Their activities together could get them the death sentence in some places.

Thank God, Warren had purchased a parcel of land outside town. His small spread lay right next door to the one Adam had acquired and worked during that three-year forced retirement he had to take when the Rangers had been temporarily disbanded not long after the end of the War.

Mary's Place was one of three restaurants to spring up on The Square in Waco in the last few years. Mary's specialized in breakfast and lunch, and, as Mary had a fine hand with baking, the place often featured fresh pies and cakes. She did a good business mid morning as some folks—and Adam knew he could be counted guiltier than most—liked to treat themselves to coffee and sweets before lunch.

Today the eatery didn't appear to be crowded. Warren led the way to a corner table, the one furthest from other patrons. Adam knew that if anyone gave the matter any thought, they'd just figure the two men, a lawyer and a lawman, needed to discuss confidential, legal matters.

"I missed you," Adam said once Mary had delivered their coffee and pie.

"I missed you, too. It was a very long month."

"I wish you'd come and woke me up when you got home," Adam said quietly.

"If I hadn't been so tired and had been thinking clearly, I would have. But that army Major insisted on seeing me safe to my door and I had become a little concerned. I wanted to get behind that locked door as soon as I could."

"He didn't try anything, did he?" Adam's heart tripped in alarm. Sometimes men like him and Warren were targeted by other stronger, meaner men. Times when they stood at real risk of being beaten or raped—sometimes, both.

He knew Warren had endured some hellish experiences back east before he'd come to Texas, and had suffered one near miss here as well. Adam felt his ire building. Warren diffused it quickly.

"No!" Warren leaned forward, lowered his voice. "No. I just had the feeling...you know how it is sometimes. And then when they rode off, I was so exhausted I just fell into bed."

Adam did know how it could be sometimes. Men like him and Warren seemed able to recognize others of their kind, often on first sight. Like often recognized like.

"I'm glad you're home. Perhaps we could have dinner tonight?" Adam asked.

"I'd like that. I can tell you about the lady I met while staying with Gwen and Carl."

Adam smiled. "Yeah? You have any luck there, Lawyer Jessop?" Adam loved teasing Warren, loved the way he would squirm sometimes. Of course, the other man often teased him right back.

They each, from time to time, spent the evening with a woman, if she was willing to indulge in a little fun of the naked variety. The occasional tryst with a female didn't change what they were to each other, or how they felt about one another.

It might even come to the point, some day in the future, that one or both of them would have to marry. Marriage would not only bestow an air of respectability on them, it would diffuse and divert the attention of any who sought to have them charged with sodomy.

The irony of the situation didn't escape Adam. An officer of the law, sworn to uphold the statutes of the great State of Texas, under cover of darkness and behind closed doors he became an unrepentant lawbreaker.

Adam brought his attention back to his companion. Warren's eyes fairly danced with laughter.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Gwen's good friend, Daphne, kept playing the coquette. She was quite persistent and quite...buxom. I confess, I gave in to temptation."

Adam laughed. “Good for you. Perhaps you’ll be kind enough to share details with me later tonight?”

“I’d be happy to. I meant to ask you, did your friends ever come to visit? The ones you told me about from your soldiering days?”

Thoughts of the Benedict brothers and their current occupation brought back images of the poker game the night before. He was still trying to process the nuances of all that had occurred during the early part of the game when Maddox and Peterson had gotten into that pissing contest.

“Yes, they did. But then an opportunity arose. They’ll be back, likely in a week or so. You can meet them then.”

“What opportunity?”

“Tyrone Maddox found himself in need of a couple of good men to travel to Chicago and safely conduct his bride back here.”

“*Bride?* Tyrone Maddox? Isn’t that rather...sudden?”

“That’s what I thought.”

Warren sat forward, his coffee now forgotten. “I wonder what he’s up to?” he asked, almost to himself.

“Time will likely tell,” Adam said.

Out on the street the good people of Waco went about their daily business. Mixed in were drovers and other itinerants who, thanks to the town’s proximity to the Chisholm Trail, maintained a constant presence, and near-constant source of work for a lawman.

Made it hard sometimes, Adam thought, to keep tabs on some of his own.

Chapter 5

Caleb had to give Sarah credit. He knew she was exhausted, and if the way she moved as she got off the streetcar was any indication, sore as hell. But she'd yet to utter even one word of complaint.

I'm married to Mr. Maddox, quite simply, because my father sold me to him.

It had taken every ounce of will power he possessed to remain unmoving, to allow the pretense of his being asleep to continue after he'd heard those words.

Caleb hadn't set out to eavesdrop. He'd desperately wanted to sleep. Not only had he been tired, he'd figured sleep would be the only way he could escape the hunger that had been gnawing at him.

Hunger for Sarah.

They got off the horse-drawn street car that ran down Olive Street between the rail station and the Regency Hotel. One look at Sarah's face and all Caleb wanted to do was pull her into his arms.

He couldn't, of course. But it was getting harder and harder to remember why. He flicked a glance at his brother. Joshua, he could see, fared no better in that regard.

Sarah was a married woman, and they'd respect that. But knowing she didn't love her husband served to shade the line between black and white, between honor and desire.

After making that emotional confession this morning, Sarah had seemed embarrassed—as if having given in to her emotions somehow made her weak.

“But then, women often have little say in the course their lives are to take,” she’d said to Joshua after a long pause. And then she’d changed the subject.

His brother had let her off the hook, because it simply wasn’t in his nature to make any one uncomfortable.

“It’s just shy of four. Why don’t we get you settled into your room so you can rest before dinner?” Caleb said. He looked over at Joshua. “I’ll head over to the Wells Fargo office and verify our travel arrangements for tomorrow.”

“Good. I was going to suggest that myself.” Joshua said.

His brother’s words told Caleb that he understood him completely. They were supposed to book themselves on the coach leaving the next day. For seasoned travelers like them, that would have been no problem. For Sarah, making her first journey of consequence, the pace so far had to seem brutal.

Caleb could see no reason not to delay the next part of their trip for a day.

“Dinner,” Sarah sighed. “I don’t know if I have the energy to eat. I wish—no, never mind. Perhaps a bit of a nap is the very thing that will restore my energy.”

“What do you wish?” Caleb heard the edge in his voice. He couldn’t help it. Sarah had no way of knowing that he’d overheard her that morning, or that he felt frustrated as hell there was nothing he could do to make her situation any better. If there was something he could do to make her feel better now, he’d do it.

“Oh, just me being fanciful. A nice hot bath would be wonderful.” Sarah’s tone held such wistfulness.

“I don’t think wanting a bath is fanciful at all, especially after two long days of travel.” He led the way into the hotel. Joshua touched his arm as he moved ahead to the front desk and Caleb knew his brother would take care of it.

They had comfortable chairs scattered about the lobby, and Caleb saw Sarah seated in one. Her sigh when her bottom hit the cushioned seat made him smile.

“If I had known how hard the train seats would be, I’d have brought a cushion,” she said. She looked up at him, a slightly crooked smile on her lips, as if she thought she should have somehow known better.

That smile did something to Caleb. Very similar to the way he felt sometimes when it was just him and Joshua together. He always had figured that sense came from having shared their mother’s womb, a sense of having been meant to be together.

Damn, I’m in deep trouble.

He would have to take extra care to hold on to his good intentions. A part of him could over look Sarah’s wedded state because of the circumstances of her marriage, but he’d be putting her in danger by doing so.

She could end up in jail—or worse. Divorce wasn’t an option in most cases, and desertion of a husband by a wife was against the law nearly everywhere.

Joshua returned to them.

“We’re across the hall from you again, and your bath will be arriving in a half hour.” He said.

Her look of gratitude had the same effect on his brother, Caleb saw, as it did on himself.

He needed to get her settled in that room with a locked door between them, fast.

* * * *

Sarah sighed, every muscle in her body groaning in delight from the heat of the water. She’d been in her room—a much larger and more richly appointed one than the night before—barely that half hour when there’d come a knock on her door.

Joshua stood guard as two burly men brought the tub in and set it down. Then came a parade of people, carting heavy buckets of steaming water which they'd poured into the tub. The last two buckets they'd set beside it, with a ladle.

"If you need anything, I'll be across the hall with the door open," Joshua had said just before leaving her to her bath.

If I need anything? Oh, she needed something, though she wasn't sure just what. She needed a cure for the emotions swirling through her. She needed a release for the tension in her body simply being near Caleb and Joshua caused.

Simply thinking about them made her innards quiver and her feminine flesh *ache*. She never would have guessed she could ache. Colleen had mentioned body parts, and where they went, and the fact that babies came of what she called the 'marriage act'. She hadn't said one word about aching, about a belly that could tremble and breasts that could yearn.

Daring, shocked by her own boldness, Sarah reached down, stroked herself, let her fingers trace back and forth over the over hot, swollen flesh between her legs.

Oh! A delicious shiver pebbled her skin. Her hips tilted up, seeking more. She repeated the back and forth motions, her pleasure increasing when a tiny nubbin seemed to reach up from inside a hidden fold to touch her fingers.

Sarah shivered, feeling a deep tingling in her belly and a tiny gush of moisture from within.

Somehow, she knew there had to be more—more pleasure, more sensations. Shame forgotten, she moved her hand some more, catching that small, hungry bud of flesh, rubbing it lightly. When her hips surged again, she obeyed an unfamiliar urge and pressed a finger against the opening just below that piece of flesh until her finger sank inside her canal.

This must be what it will be like. Rubbing, delving, Sarah closed her eyes, tried to imagine what should have happened on her wedding

night. But it wasn't the face of Tyrone Maddox her imagination conjured. As urgency filled her, as excitement clutched her belly and deeper inside in what she instinctively recognized as her womb, it wasn't her husband she imagined touching her, pleasuring her.

No, images burst like fireworks behind her eyes, images of a starry night, the scent of a fire, and a hard male body on either side of her, of two men kissing her, touching her, making her shiver. Making her burn.

Sarah took control of the image, made it her own, made it whole as she allowed herself to pretend Caleb and Joshua Benedict touched her, excited her, *loved* her.

"Oh, God!" Something burst inside her, something hot and rapturous beyond her control. The amazing sensations flooded her, and she gave it mastery over body, letting it consume her completely.

As the shivers ebbed, as the excitement palled, a great desolate emptiness yawned open inside her. Her course was set, her future determined. Society dictated what actions she must take, and it didn't care one whit if those actions suited her or not.

Lying back in the tub, Sarah let her tears fall as she acknowledged the sad truth. Heartache and loneliness littered the road ahead, and there was nothing at all she could do to avoid them.

* * * *

Riding in the stagecoach turned out to be just slightly worse than riding a train. *Guess that will teach me to complain, even to myself.* As rough as the journey was proving to be, Sarah couldn't protest overmuch. She suspected that extra day between train and coach had been Caleb's idea. She'd worried that he'd taken her exhaustion on their arrival in St. Louis as sign of weakness, but she'd seen no evidence of that. In fact, it felt as if he regarded her with even more respect than before.

He'd bought her a cushion for the ride, too.

The landscape had begun to change yesterday. By the time they'd reached the inn where they were to spend the night, the terrain seemed more rocky, less flat. In the distance she could see dark shadows rising high into the sky. She'd never seen mountains before and wondered how close she'd get to them.

She'd not slept well at the inn and not because of the rustic conditions, either. The room she'd been given was clean—all she really required. No, sleep had been elusive because every time she closed her eyes, forbidden images came to play in the field of her imagination.

The sun beat down hot and merciless, warming the inside of the coach. The young couple who'd ridden with them from St. Louis had been met by family at the inn last night, a relief to Sarah. She doubted either of them had seen soap and water in some time. On top of the olfactory irritant, the woman had been a chatterbox.

"Sure is quieter in here today," Caleb said. His dry rejoinder speared through her thoughts, and Sarah snickered.

"Smells better, too," Joshua said.

Sarah couldn't hold back her laughter. "I was actually just thinking the same thing myself."

"You'll get a chance to cool off in an hour or so when we stop to change horses," Joshua said. "I'd raise the flap on the window, but the dust would be worse than the heat."

"I'm surprised one of you isn't riding up top," Sarah said. Yesterday, Joshua and Caleb had taken turns sitting beside the driver.

"Henry's got a fellow driver up there, one who's only going as far as the next way-station. Then we'll trade off again like we did yesterday." Joshua said.

"Not because we don't want to spend time with you. Because we prefer it when one of us is on guard." Caleb explained.

"That's what I figured."

Sarah rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes. She only intended to take a moment to try and relax, but the next thing she knew, the coach was coming to a stop.

She blinked her eyes open and realized she'd fallen asleep and slid down until her head rested on Caleb.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Sarah straightened up quickly. There wasn't a great deal of room on the seat, but she tried to scrunch herself against the opposite side of the coach. What an overly forward thing to have done!

"I'm not," Caleb replied. His voice came out low and quiet and strummed the threads of attraction inside her.

"Lucky man," Joshua said, his voice affecting her the same way his twin's had.

"I...need some air." She needed air and maybe a convenient horse trough to soak her head in and cool off. The heat that held her now had little to do with the sun and everything to do with the way the brothers Benedict looked at her.

Sarah wasn't certain, half an hour later, if she was pleased the two had backed off or not. *Sarah Louise Maddox, you're slowly but surely taking leave of your senses.* Sarah shook her head and settled back in the seat. Joshua sat across from her while Caleb took the first turn topside.

Despite the dust, Sarah raised the window flap. The scenery had changed again since yesterday. Gone were the flat grasslands she'd been seeing since St. Louis. Now, on either side of her, the land rolled and dipped. Looking out slightly, and ahead, she could see what looked like more mountains rising up in the distance.

"The Ozarks," Joshua said.

"They seem so big," Sarah said. "I've never really seen mountains before."

"You're not seeing them now. Maybe someday you'll get a chance to see the Appalachians, or the Rockies. Now *those* are mountains."

“Maybe. But I have to be honest with you. This traveling is wearing me out.” And mostly, Sarah thought, because of where she was going and why.

A gunshot rang out, followed by a sharp ping that made Sarah jump.

“Shit!” Caleb said from atop the coach.

Joshua had Sarah’s arm and was pulling her. “Down, sweetheart. Get down on the floor and stay down. Caleb?”

“Four of them. Armed and on horseback, waiting for us as soon as we crested that last rise.”

A second shot exploded, and to Sarah’s untrained ears it sounded as if it came from another direction.

“Damn, and another one coming from behind!”

Joshua already had his gun out. He reached over her and with one hand pulled the cord so the flap she’d raised came down.

“You need to stay still and quiet, and on the floor. Will you do that for me, sweetheart?”

Terror gripped her, but she nodded. Her hat had come askew, so she yanked it off and clutched it in both hands.

“Go left.”

Caleb’s voice, quieter, didn’t make any sense to Sarah.

“Here now!” This was a strange voice and seemed to be coming from the front of the coach. “We ain’t after killin’ ya if it’s not needed. Just pass us down your cash box, and hand over the woman ya got inside the coach there. You do that and you two fellers can be on your way.”

“Ain’t got no cash box on this wagon,” their driver Henry said, “This is a passenger coach only.”

Joshua eased his way to the left side of the coach. Slowly he lifted the flap, peered out. He nodded once, then looked at Sarah.

“Stay down, stay quiet. I’ll be right back.” With that, he opened the door and practically slithered out.

He'll be right back? *Oh God, Caleb said there were five of them, and they're all armed!* Before Sarah could think another thought, someone yelled, and gunfire filled the air.

The coach jerked as if the riders on top had jumped off—which they must have done. She covered her ears, the shots coming fast and furious. A bullet hit the coach, just above her head, and she could have sworn she felt the air move as it passed her. Horses screamed, men swore, and one gave a horrible cry that caused Sarah to convulse in fear. Death had claimed at least one man, and she prayed as she had never prayed before in her life that it had been one of the bandits and not one of her men.

Her men.

"Go, go!" Then she heard the sound of horses galloping away, chased by a gun fired very close by.

"Oh, damn it. Damn it to God damned hell!" That was Henry's voice and it sent ice through her veins until she heard other voices.

"Sarah?"

"Sarah!"

They spoke at nearly the same instant, but before she could answer, the door opened and strong arms dragged her out of the coach.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt? Oh, God!" Caleb's strong arms surrounded her, and Sarah thought it funny that she shook so hard it felt as if he was shaking, too.

"I'm fine. I'm ok. Not hurt. You? Joshua?" her voice didn't sound all that steady to her own ears. She couldn't seem to stop shaking. She'd never been shot at before.

"We're all right. Here, now." Joshua pried her out of Caleb's arms to give her his own hug. Then he set her back and kissed her square on the mouth!

"Good girl. You stayed down and saved your life." He gave her another squeeze on her arms, then let her go. When she stumbled, Caleb steadied her.

“Here, sit a moment on the running board. Henry?”

“Damn glad to have you fellers along,” the driver said as he came toward them from the front of the coach. “Been driving this route three years, and nothing like this has ever happened before. Damn crazy bastards. Oh, beggin’ your pardon, ma’am.”

“Cuss away,” Sarah said. “I just might join you.”

“Well, hell,” Henry said as he reached out to finger the hole in the side of the coach. By Sarah’s estimate, the bullet must have been less than an inch from her body as it sailed through the coach and out the other side. Sarah shivered, the visual evidence of how close she’d come to dying making her heart thud in her chest.

“Henry, you sit with Sarah. Josh and I will take care of the bodies.”

“B...bodies?”

“These two got three of the bastards,” Henry informed her, sounding proud of the fact. “Two of ‘em got away, but three of ‘em got sent straight to hell. Beggin’ your pardon again, ma’am.”

Sarah looked up in time to encounter Caleb’s concerned gaze. “Please stay here. You don’t need to see them, Sarah.”

“All right. Yes. I’ll stay right here.”

She was more than happy to do as they asked. She figured it would take her a little time to be able to get her limbs under her again. In the meantime, Sarah didn’t mind letting the Benedict brothers do whatever they had to do to deal with three dead bandits.

Chapter 6

“She’s hardly said a word since the holdup,” Joshua said tightly.

Caleb eyed his brother, noted the barely leashed anger, and couldn’t fault him for it. They stood in the hallway outside Sarah’s room at the Lyon House Hotel. They’d made it to Springfield, Missouri, without further incident. Caleb had made certain that Sarah never saw the bodies of the men he and Joshua had killed. They rounded up one of the other two horses and had been able to transport the remains without difficulty.

They’d left the dead bastards at the next livery stop. The first thing he’d done upon arrival in Springfield was to report in to the sheriff. He and Joshua had met the man the last time they’d been in town.

“I know. It’s been four days now since that attack, and it’s as if she’s still in shock. I’m worried, too.”

“Maybe at dinner we can get her to talk to us. We have to do *something*.”

Caleb tilted his head to the side. “Fallen for her, have you?”

“Yes, damn it.” Josh looked distinctly unhappy about the fact. “And it’s not just that I want to fuck her, though I do.”

Caleb chuckled but kept it low. “Yeah, me, too. I’m not surprised we fell for the same woman, just pissed that she’s married and off limits. Although that line I thought so inviolate is beginning to fade some.”

Joshua smiled. “You’ve got damn fine taste in women.”

Caleb laughed. “So do you.”

Anything else he might have said he swallowed when the door to Sarah's room opened and she emerged. She smiled at them both, but as Joshua had pointed out, her smile seemed less than it had been.

"Thank you, again, for ordering that bath. It felt wonderful."

"You're welcome." Joshua's voice sounded rough, but Sarah didn't seem to notice.

"Are we going downstairs for dinner?"

"Downstairs and out. There's a restaurant in the center of town, serves the best steak this side of Texas. Murchison's," Caleb said, as he ushered them down the corridor to the stairs.

The sun hung low in the sky, and the heat of the day waned. No breeze had arisen yet, but Caleb felt the change in the air. They might get a light rain tonight or maybe a full-out storm. Only time would tell.

"This is a busy town," Sarah observed as they made their way down the crowded boardwalk. "And you've been here before."

"Springfield is a hub for rail travel going south or west," Joshua said. "And yes, we've been here several times."

Caleb waited, hoping she'd say more, but of course she didn't. They passed a dry goods store and the bank. Across the street, the Frontier Saloon seemed to be doing a rousing business. He and Joshua had visited that establishment in the past, too. A man could get whatever he wanted—a drink, a card game, or a willing female—at the Frontier.

Sarah still hadn't said another word by the time they were seated at their table at Murchison's. Caleb had asked for a corner table. He and Joshua tucked Sarah into the corner, between them. Since the attack, they'd been extra alert, taking every precaution. Sarah didn't seem to notice or mind.

When their waiter brought the menus, Caleb ordered a bottle of wine. He preferred whisky himself. The wine was mostly for Sarah. One way or another he and Joshua were going to see the lady relax and talk about what troubled her.

Their dinners were ordered, and the wine opened and poured. He took a drink, pleased when Sarah followed suit. She held the glass a bit longer, taking another sip before putting it down.

Joshua reached for the bottle and topped up her glass. Looking at his brother, he knew they'd settled on the same method for getting Sarah to loosen up. Caleb tried to figure out how to get her to talk to them. In the end, he decided on a tack that might shock her out of her silence.

"We're worried about you, Sarah. You haven't been yourself since we killed those would-be thieves. We're beginning to think you hate us now and—"

"No! Oh, God, no!"

Her expression, filled with horror, kicked him square in his conscience. As if realizing that she might have shouted, she shook her head and laid one hand on his arm and the other on Joshua's.

"No, of course I don't hate you! How could I? If not for your courage and your skill, I'd be dead. I'd be *dead*," she repeated.

"We'll never let anything happen to you, Sarah. Swear to God." Joshua said.

"Joshua's right. You can trust us to keep you safe."

"I do! That's not it. I just...I just can't stop thinking about what happened. That I could have died without...well, without having ever *lived*. I was prepared to go through with this...this farce. But why am I taking myself across the country to be the wife of a man who doesn't even really care about me, doesn't even really *want* me?"

"The man married you, Sarah. Even if Maddox and your father came to some financial arrangement first, he must have wanted you enough to pay your father's price for you."

"Five thousand dollars. That's what I'm worth." Sarah nodded. Then she picked up her glass of wine, took a good deep drink.

"I want a divorce." Sarah looked at him, and then Joshua. "I didn't want to marry him in the first place. Father told me to, and I did because I've always been a dutiful daughter. But I don't want to be a

dutiful daughter any longer. Being dutiful nearly got me killed, so I want a divorce.”

“I’m no expert,” Caleb said slowly, trying with all that was in him not to let her see how her words not only pleased him but excited him. Hers was a fine sentiment and one that he and Joshua were both delighted to hear, but practicalities needed to be considered. “I’m no expert,” he began again, “but I don’t think getting a divorce is easily done. Especially for a woman who wants to divorce her husband. Doesn’t seem fair to me that things should be different for women than they are for men. But there it is. And if you’re thinking about just running off, I have to warn you *that* action might result in your being arrested. Even if you weren’t immediately arrested, you’d be a fugitive.”

Sarah picked up her wine glass. This time, her sip appeared more cautious. Caleb grinned. Likely the wine offered here wasn’t quite the same quality as some she might have had in Chicago. Although she didn’t act as if it tasted unpalatable, a good thing under the circumstances. She didn’t seem to be one who indulged overmuch, either. Her eyes had taken on a bit of sheen, and he had to wonder if maybe she wasn’t just a little bit tipsy.

“There has to be a way out of this mess. I don’t want to live the rest of my life with a man I don’t know, a man who doesn’t even want me.”

That was the second time she’d said that. “He’d be a fool not to want you,” Caleb said.

They fell silent as the waiter served their dinners. Even after the waiter left them in peace, Sarah just stared at her plate, unmoving.

“You know,” Joshua said, and Caleb’s gaze snapped to him and the note of speculation he heard in his brother’s voice, “if your marriage to Tyrone Maddox was unconsummated, then that would change everything.”

“Unconsummated?”

“Yes, it means—”

"I know what it means."

Caleb nearly laughed. Joshua's expression looked embarrassed, but nothing compared to Sarah's. Her cheeks had become suffused with red, and she couldn't quite look them in the eyes.

"How would that change anything?" she asked her plate.

Caleb stared at Sarah for a long moment. Whether it embarrassed her further or not, he'd tell it flat out. "Sarah, without consummation, a marriage isn't really a marriage. It's not a done deal. If a marriage isn't consummated, then it's only a matter of having a priest grant an annulment."

"You mean to tell me, that all this time, I haven't even really been married to the man?"

"Sarah?" Caleb heard in his brother's voice the same hope building in himself. Sarah blushed, then took another sip of wine. She nodded to her glass.

"He had too much to drink at the party my father hosted on our wedding night. When we got up to the hotel room, he...he went to sleep."

"He went to sleep." Caleb knew he sounded like an idiot, but he couldn't help it. Everything had just changed. Not only that but he'd revised his opinion of Tyrone Maddox. The man was obviously stupid.

Sarah nodded vigorously. Whether or not this conversation would have taken place without the wine, neither he nor Joshua would ever know. He did doubt, however, that she would have been quite so specific in her next pronouncement without it.

"You bet he went to sleep. He never so much as saw me in my chemise. I'm still a virgin."

* * * *

Dick Morgan hunched over his whisky, the booze doing nothing to ease the pain and anger inside him. His boy, dead. His brother,

dead. It wasn't supposed to have been this way. They'd planned to grab that fancy bitch, take a few turns fucking her, then kill her. He and his boys had gone after harder targets for less money and been successful.

His boys were dead.

Now he only had Fredericks left. But he had friends. Oh yes, he did. Dick Morgan had friends and connections. He had allies. One of them, Willy Spoke, was keeping an eye on those two bastards and that whore. Down at that fancy restaurant eating steak. He hoped they had a good meal. He intended to see it be their last.

Morgan knocked back the whiskey in his glass and poured himself another from the bottle he'd bought. He'd get them. He'd get them good.

"You got it straight what we're gonna do?" Morgan asked Carter Fredericks. Fredericks was the last of his men. The last who'd taken an oath to him right after Appomattox. More than ten years. *And for what? To lie Goddamned dead in the dust of Goddamned Missouri.*

"I got it," Fredericks said. "I got it, all right. Going to see to it those bastards pay for Parsons. And for your boy and Bobby, too."

Morgan had thought and thought how they could get away with killing that bitch in the middle of town. Seemed to him if he killed them accidental, like, if'n he was drunk, why then no one could blame him, could they?

He'd have his revenge and walk away at the end of it a rich man. Well, richer than he would have been splitting the fee from that dude with four others instead of just one.

He looked up and into the face of Willy Spoke. Spoke hung by the door for a minute and nodded when Morgan met his gaze. Morgan nodded back and then nudged Fredericks. "It's time."

Morgan stumbled to his feet, giving the appearance of being drunk. "You want to insult me, do it outside, asshole."

"Bastard. I'll do more than that." Fredericks returned.

Fredericks gave him a shove, and Morgan shoved back. People got out of their way, and the next jostle sent them outside on the boardwalk in front of the Frontier Saloon—exactly where they needed to be. Fredericks stepped onto the street, then turned to face the saloon and Morgan. He called him a son of a whore and dared him to act like a man.

There, across the street, Morgan could see the woman and those two assholes who'd killed his kid and his brother and Parsons.

Reaching for his gun, he smiled. They only had seconds to live.

* * * *

"Maybe once he knows I don't want to be married to him anymore, he'll agree to let me go, and there'll be no hard feelings," Sarah said as they walked back toward the hotel.

Joshua smiled at her. He simply couldn't help it. He never would have believed that his life's prospects could change so drastically with just one meal, but there it was. He knew Caleb felt the same way. Now all they had to do was help her be shed of that fool husband, then figure out a way to get her to accept them both into her bed.

No problem. No problem at all.

"There's still the matter of the five thousand dollars," Caleb said gently. "He'll want that money back, Sarah, and I don't think your father would be willing to give it to him."

"I have the money. Or, I will in a few years."

"In a few of years?" Caleb asked.

"Yes. My Grandfather Gladstone—my maternal grandfather—left me a bit of an inheritance when he died two years ago. I get that inheritance in a few years, when I turn twenty-five. I don't know all the details, but I think there's at least that much there. So maybe Mr. Maddox will accept a promissory note, or something."

Joshua saw the expression on his brother's face. Before he could ask what turn Caleb's thoughts had taken, the relative peace of the evening shattered.

Across the street two men burst out of the Frontier Saloon, apparently drunk and in the midst of a fight that sounded nasty and about to turn nastier.

"Bastard, you take that back!"

"Son of a whore, why don't you make me? Why don't you act like a man!"

"I'll show you a man, you piece of shit!"

They all three stopped walking, their attention immediately captured by the spectacle unfolding. Standing between him and Caleb, Sarah gasped. Joshua felt his brother tense. Then recognition dawned and he reacted without thinking, his protective instincts kicking in.

Wrapping his arms around Sarah, he yanked her to the ground, falling on top of her as the first shot rang out and glass shattered beside them.

He heard two reports from Caleb's Peacemaker, his brother's stance half-crouched, right arm out. People screamed, some running away, obviously afraid of being caught in the cross-fire. Joshua didn't worry. He knew Caleb's marksmanship and knew those two bastards had been killed.

Beneath him, Sarah lay frighteningly still. Joshua rolled off her as Caleb made his way toward the two he'd just shot.

"Sarah, are you all right?"

"I..." she could only gasp the word, and Joshua sighed in relief. He'd knocked the wind out of her, was all. She wasn't hurt, hadn't been shot, thank God.

He helped her to sit up and rubbed her back. "It's okay. Just breathe. That's it. That's the way. Calm, slow breaths."

Others approached them then, voicing their concern over the incident, over them. The window of the dry goods store would need to be replaced as it had completely disintegrated.

Joshua had no doubt in his mind that Sarah would have been dead if he and his brother hadn't moved so quickly.

Caleb came over and squatted down in front of Sarah.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes, now. I couldn't breathe for a moment. What happened? Who..." She tried to look around Caleb to the bodies lying in the street. Caleb put a finger under her chin to prevent it. Josh continued rubbing her back, allowing his brother to be in charge.

"No, sweetheart, I don't want you looking." He shot a glance at Joshua, who nodded. Then he said, "As soon as you get your breath all the way back, Joshua is going to take you over to the sheriff's office. You wait there with him, and the sheriff and I will be there shortly."

"I don't understand. Why...why do we have to go see the sheriff?" She looked from him to Caleb, then back at him.

"Those two were the ones who attacked the stagecoach, Sarah," Joshua said.

When she didn't seem to understand what that meant, Caleb reached out, his hand gentle as he lightly stroked her cheek.

"He demanded we give him the woman, do you remember? And he had his eye on you when he pulled his gun just now. If Josh hadn't moved when he did, if we both hadn't recognized him, you'd be dead."

Sarah shook her head slowly, clearly unable—or perhaps unwilling—to accept Caleb's words. She looked to Joshua for confirmation. He hated to be blunt, but there was no help for it. She needed to understand the truth. Her life might depend on her accepting that truth as quickly as possible.

"You were the target all along, Sarah. Those men were gunning for you."

Chapter 7

Sarah knew they wouldn't lie to her, but she just couldn't quite accept what Joshua and Caleb had told her. Why would someone want her dead? Why, she'd never hurt a person in her entire life!

"It probably has nothing to do with you personally, Mrs. Maddox," Sherriff MacFarlane said when she'd said that very thing out loud. "Your father and your husband are both important businessmen. I hate to say it, but sometimes, when a man has a grudge against another man, he targets someone close to that man—someone innocent."

"I just can't imagine that my father would have such an enemy," Sarah said quietly, looking from Caleb to Joshua.

Her men—she couldn't help but think of them that way—exchanged a look and then turned to Sheriff MacFarlane. "It seems to me," Caleb said, "that whoever hired this gang had to be in possession of Mrs. Maddox's travel itinerary."

"You're right in thinking they'd been hired. I recognized them both. Dick Morgan and Carl Fredericks. Likely the other three you shot were the rest of his gang. Guns for hire, like yourselves, but not at all particular of the sort of job they took or people they worked for."

"Well, they're gone now," Sarah said. In her mind, that meant the threat had ended. The look of concern on all the men's faces told her that she was probably being a bit naïve.

"Sarah, the threat to you isn't over. Whoever hired this lot is serious." Joshua spoke kindly, and she could tell he didn't like that idea one bit.

"I see." She didn't, really. She couldn't fathom the threat. But she did trust both Joshua and Caleb. And she'd do whatever they told her to do.

"So now what?" she asked.

Caleb looked from Joshua to the Sheriff. She wondered then if males didn't have a strange way of communicating without speaking because the Sheriff and Joshua nodded their heads when Caleb hadn't even spoken yet.

"I guess you could consider it a good news, bad news kind of evening. The good news is you don't have to get on that train tomorrow."

"Well, that's a relief." For more reasons than one, Sarah thought. She didn't particularly enjoy that mode of transportation. Neither did she really want to continue her journey to Waco, Texas.

"Not much of one, I'm afraid." he said, and she knew he understood why she didn't want to continue on to Texas. She also understood he wouldn't be persuaded from whatever course of action he'd chosen. His next words confirmed it. "We're going to continue our trip to Waco on horseback. But not following the route your husband laid out for us."

"Horseback." Something in her expression made him smile.

"You can ride?"

"Yes. Not exceptionally well, and it's been a while, but yes, I can ride." She met his gaze and held it until he nodded.

"It's a long ride, but I'll feel safer going off on our own."

"What do you need from me, Caleb?" Sheriff MacFarlane asked. It didn't surprise Sarah that in any circumstance, a sheriff would be looking to Caleb Benedict for leadership. He'd shown himself to be a man who knew what he wanted, and how to get it, a man unafraid to make decisions.

"We're going to need horses and supplies. And we're going to need them tonight."

"Easy enough to do. Anything else?"

“Well, Patrick, there is one other thing. If you wouldn’t mind sending a couple of telegrams for me, I’d be much obliged.”

* * * *

Liam stepped back into the shadows when the door to the Sheriff’s office opened and four people came out. The Sheriff shook hands with both men, tipped his hat to the woman, then headed off in the direction of the railway station. Liam frowned. There were no trains due in until the morning, but the railroad kept a station master on the premises around the clock, as well as a telegraph operator.

He’d arrived in Springfield only a few hours before. He’d expected to meet Morgan here and receive proof that they’d carried out their assignment. Instead, he couldn’t find Morgan anywhere, and the woman and her two escorts were still alive and apparently walking the streets at will. Likely they’d become suspicious about something, else why go to the Sheriff’s office?

There was only one thing to do in a strange town if you wanted to know all the latest goings-on, and that was go to the local saloon.

The place appeared crowded and with a hum of excitement and energy layered over the smoky haze that told Liam as soon as he stepped foot inside the door that something had happened here tonight.

He wandered toward the bar, careful to appear an ordinary man, just like any ordinary man who found his way to Springfield Missouri and the Frontier Saloon.

He heard the voice before he saw the speaker and smiled in recognition. There always seemed to be at least one loud-mouth in any saloon who’d seen it all and knew it all, and with a little prodding and free whiskey, would tell it all.

Liam personally felt insulted on behalf of the women of the world whenever he heard men ridicule their gossiping ways. In his

experience, the male of the species gossiped far more easily and often than females could ever hope to.

"I tell you, I ain't seen nothin' like it since that day when Wild Bill gave it to that Tutt feller. That man out there tonight would have made old Bill proud, God rest his poor, betrayed soul."

The bartender came right over, and Liam ordered a shot of whiskey. He looked over at the gossip and said, "Get you a drink? I hear you had some excitement out here tonight."

"That's real friendly of ya, mister. Thanks. Name's Pruitt. Thomas P. Pruitt."

The bartender smirked and poured a shot out for Pruitt.

"John Smith," Liam said, extending his hand. "Did I hear you mention Wild Bill? That wouldn't have been Wild Bill Hickok, would it?"

"The very same. Most folks coming into Springfield don't know that Wild Bill had his first shoot-out right on these here streets, oh, musta been back in sixty-four, sixty-five. And I tell you, mister, what I saw out here on these same streets tonight put me in mind of that historic moment, yes indeed it did."

It didn't take many drinks or much prodding for Pruitt to finish his tale.

"And the Sheriff didn't arrest the shooter?" Liam asked, giving the appearance of hanging on Pruitt's every word.

"Arrest him? Hell, ought to give the guy a medal. That Morgan's been up to no good ever since old Robert E. signed over all of our hopes and dreams to that rascal, Grant. Everyone what saw the whole thing knows Morgan was gunning for that guy. Feller out walking down the street with a lady by his side, minding his own never mind! What kind of low down animal tries to shoot a feller when there's lady close by? A low down rotten one, that's what kind. My opinion, Morgan needed killing."

Liam stayed just long enough that he could slip out unnoticed after Mr. Pruitt found someone else to buy his drinks and tell his

stories to. Standing in the cooling night air, Liam cleared the scent of booze and smoke out of his head and tried to think.

Holy hell, Jamie is going to be pissed. He was supposed to send a message off, announcing the success of the venture. Couldn't do that yet. But he would. By God, he would.

All he knew about the two escorting Sarah was that they'd hired out their guns, supposedly of the same ilk as Morgan and his men. Probably these gunslingers assumed they'd been Morgan's target.

Yes, of course they would. Who would ever think otherwise? The best course of action, then, Liam thought, would be to target Mrs. Maddox from a distance and do it quickly. He was good enough to get the shot off and get away. But first he needed to locate her. He knew she'd been booked into the Lyon House Hotel over on South Street.

Thinking, Liam walked from the Frontier to the train station. He took note of the buildings and thought about the angles and trajectories. He recalled how it had been in the thick of the war, when he'd been ordered behind enemy lines to reconnoiter. If necessary, he would kill any who might prove themselves obstacles to his getting the job done.

Jamie might be even more pissed to discover that Liam had needed to step in, but it couldn't be helped. No time to hire anyone else. He'd get up before dawn, find a good spot with his rifle, and he'd await the morning train.

Best way to ensure a job got done right was to do it yourself. He felt certain that in the end, Jamie would understand and agree with his decision.

The next day he laid in wait on the roof of a building a good three hundred yards from the train station, rifle at the ready. He waited as the sun crested the horizon, waited until the train arrived, waited until it left.

The woman and her escorts never showed up.

Cursing for all he was worth, he got down off the roof, stowed his rifle in the scabbard attached to his saddle, and headed for the Lyon

House Hotel. He'd gone past the place last night on his way to his own hotel and had seen one of the gunslingers out on the boardwalk, talking to a man. They'd looked real comfy, so Liam assumed the man's charge had retired for the night while his partner stood guard.

Tying his horse to the post, he entered the building and headed for the front desk. Some sixth sense made him pause and look around. There, ensconced in a chair off to the side and pretending to read a newspaper, sat the man he'd seen with the gunslinger last night. He also saw something in the light of day he'd missed in the dark: the man sported a lawman's badge.

His quarry had escaped. He knew that for fact as sure as he knew his name. He needed to know how they had left and when. He got on his horse, rode over to the livery. A few dollars' bribery later, he had the answers he needed.

The only thing left to do was get a message to Jamie and see what his lover wanted him to do next.

* * * *

"Here, take a drink. We'll likely stop for the night in another hour or so. Will you be all right until then?"

"I'm tired but fine." Sarah said. They'd left Springfield before sunrise, the three of them each on horseback, Joshua leading a pack horse. She had no idea what time it was, but the sun looked low enough in the sky to make it late afternoon.

Sarah thanked Caleb for the canteen and took a long drink. They'd stopped and rested the horses and themselves several times during the day. She had no doubt if the brothers traveled by themselves they'd have set a faster pace.

It had been several years since she'd done any steady riding. In the summer, she sometimes visited her aunt and uncle on her father's side. They owned a farm north of Chicago and kept horses. As a

young girl, she'd loved those summer visits and her long afternoon rides.

She wished now she'd kept up the practice.

The events of last night—from her stunning realization that she really wasn't officially married to Tyrone J. Maddox, to the terror of being shot at—had done a pretty good job of keeping her thoughts quiet and her body numb. She knew she ached from riding the entire day, but compared to everything else, it just didn't feel that important.

The land seemed to go on forever. Sarah had never given it much thought before, but she guessed, growing up as she had in Chicago, she was used to the clutter, noise, and smells of the city. Even the lingering odor of old smoke that hot or damp weather could coax out had become familiar to her and made up a constant part of her life.

Here, though, everything seemed different, as if the hand of mankind, with his structures and his customs, was impossibly out of reach.

Here lived nature, raw, untamed, and unstoppable.

Another ache increased, one that had begun days before, an ache that continued to grow in intensity despite the heat of the day and the heavy work of riding.

Sarah had tried to convince herself her hunger for Caleb and Joshua was wrong, improper. She'd tried to keep her thoughts only to her husband, only to the life that duty dictated she live.

That duty had turned into a false one, for in the eyes of the very society that had ruled her all her life, the ceremony she'd undergone had been a lie.

Her husband hadn't wanted her, hadn't wanted to make their marriage real. Why not? She had no way of knowing the answer to that. Perhaps he considered the matter too insignificant to merit thought or attention. Perhaps he considered *her* too insignificant. But then, why marry her in the first place?

Caleb and Joshua didn't think her insignificant at all. Vivid in her memory was the frantic way they'd called her name, the way they'd

grabbed her into their arms after the attack on the stagecoach. Looking back, she understood Caleb had been shaking as much as she in the aftermath of the attack. He'd held her so tight she could still feel the imprint of his hard body against hers.

She could still taste the one kiss Joshua had given her then. She reflected on all the time she'd spent with these two men, the looks they'd each sent her that had heated her blood and sped her heart.

Her father had sold her to a man she had never met for money, for business prestige, for whatever purposes he deemed valid. But that marriage wasn't real. She was on her own, her future her own, her body hers to give to whomever and for whatever reason *she* deemed valid.

Was love not the most valid reason of all for bestowing such a gift? The hunger within her grew.

"Here looks good." Caleb said. He slowed his horse to a stop, then reached out for the reins to Sarah's animal. "We'll camp here tonight. I can't order you a tub of hot water, but that stream over there just through the trees might serve for you to freshen up."

Sarah pulled herself out of her thoughts. "Good. I hope the water's not icy cold."

Joshua had already gotten off his horse and was in the process of tying it and the pack horse to a tree limb.

"Last time we stopped here, Caleb and I went for a swim. It wasn't *too* cold."

He had such a twinkle in his eye she laughed. "Perhaps I'll dip my fingers in and test that theory."

Before she could dismount, Caleb was there, lifting her down. He held her until she nodded. One of them had done that each time she'd gotten off the horse to rest today. The first time she'd been especially grateful for the consideration because her limbs hadn't wanted to hold her then.

She sensed their eyes on her as she walked around in a circle, trying to get everything to work without limping too badly. It didn't

take long. Then she went over to the pack horse to help Joshua with the supplies.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he said, batting playfully at her hands when she tried to reach for one of the bed rolls.

“I’ll do my share,” she said, her chin notching higher.

“You will, over the next few days. But you’re not used to riding so long in a day.”

“We’ll take care of camp duties tonight,” Caleb confirmed. “And don’t get your back up. We never thought we’d be able to get this far the first day. We’ve come more than twenty miles. As far as we’re concerned, you’ve done your share by riding so well without a single complaint. So tonight, you rest.”

As much as Sarah appreciated their care and concern, she wasn’t a princess to be waited on. She nodded her acceptance of their decree, and then set about walking along the area, picking up bits of wood and brush that could be used for a fire. She found the stream, tested it with her hand. It felt cool, not cold, so she’d use it after dinner.

The men shook their heads but smiled when she returned from her explorations with an armload of wood. They’d already laid the fire and set out the bedrolls. They dined on beans and cheese and coffee that Caleb brewed in the small pot over the fire they’d made. Sarah hadn’t slept on the ground under the stars since she’d been a child. And while normally she might not have been looking forward to the prospect, she thought she just might be exhausted enough this night to fall right into sleep. But then the heat returned, banishing her exhaustion until only one need remained, and it was not the need for sleep.

Sarah took a clean chemise out of the saddle bag she’d packed and didn’t know what to say when Caleb handed her a bar of soap and a small towel. She hadn’t thought to ask for the luxuries. That they had thought of it for her made the decision she came to as she bathed by the stream seem the most natural decision in the world.

The water felt cold after the setting sun, causing her to shiver, but she immersed herself, bathed, and rinsed. What would they say? Would they spurn her? Revile her?

Many would. What she wanted, what she needed when she thought about it, seemed beyond naughty. What she wanted would earn her a label in some quarters. What she wanted was considered, by society, as very bad and shameful.

But that's not how the wanting felt to her.

She could hear the low hum of their voices, just, she knew, as they could hear the sounds she made as she cupped water in her hands and poured it over her naked breasts. Her nipples tightened but not from the cold—not *only* from the cold.

On the bank once more, she blotted as much water from her body as she could. As she made her way back to the camp, she thought she should be shivering. The air of the night did seem chill against her bare flesh, but it wasn't cold that consumed her. It was blazing, belly-tingling, toe-curling heat.

They sat with their backs to her and as one, looked over their shoulders when they felt her near. Staring when they saw her, they rose slowly to their feet and turned to face her full on.

"Sarah?" Caleb's voice sounded hoarse, his question tentative. There was nothing at all tentative in the way he and his brother raked her naked body with their eyes.

"I don't know how I can need you both when I've never needed before. I don't know how I can want you both when I've never wanted before. And maybe it's wrong, and maybe I'm wicked. I don't know how I can love you both. But I do. Please...please be with me."

Chapter 8

Sarah didn't have to wait long for them to react.

"My God, you're beautiful," Joshua whispered.

They both stepped forward, taking those few steps to bring them to her. Caleb reached out and lightly stroked the back of his hand across her right breast.

Her own hands, fully caressing that needy flesh, had been unable to elicit the burning excitement Caleb's one small touch did.

"Be with you? We've wanted nothing *but* to be with you since the moment you came down those stairs in Chicago," Caleb's voice shook with need, his eyes seemed to burn as he looked his fill of her.

"We were trying to figure out how to talk you into taking us both, afraid it would be impossible, and here you are." Joshua said. He stroked her other breast, and Sarah marveled that her legs could still hold her.

"Be sure, Sarah," Caleb said. He caressed her face and then cupped her cheek. His action lifted her face, so their gazes locked. "Be sure you want us both. Because once we touch you, once we *take* you, you'll belong to us. You'll be ours."

"We'll never let you go, sweetheart. Not ever," Joshua agreed. "So be very, very sure."

Sarah took Caleb's right hand in hers, brought it to her lips, and kissed it. She reached out with her left hand for Joshua's and repeated the gesture. Then she placed their hands on her naked breasts.

"I'm sure. Oh, *please*."

"Our woman doesn't have to beg," Caleb said. He cupped her breast in his palm, his forefinger and thumb pinching and tugging at

her nipple. The sensation sent a ripple of excitement right through her belly to her feminine flesh. She couldn't hold back her whimper. The brothers smiled.

"Our woman has only to ask. Any time," Joshua finished. His hand caressed her left breast.

Then Caleb combed his fingers through her hair, brought her face to his, and kissed her.

Hot and wet, his lips closed over hers, his mouth sucking hers in a way that stole the last bit of strength from her legs. She didn't fall because he caught her. When Caleb thrust his tongue into her mouth she opened wide, needing to give him whatever he wanted, whatever he demanded, and taking all she could.

Hands roamed her naked flesh, and the heat gathering in the base of her belly swirled and eddied, a stream of exhilaration that had a life of its own. It felt as if they drew her up and out of herself, and her skin gloried in their touch.

Sarah stroked her tongue against Caleb's, moving it as if in a dance, sliding, dipping. When he released her mouth she cried out but had no time to miss his taste, for Joshua turned her head toward him then, brought her face to his, and mated his lips to hers.

A different flavor, yet one still rich and evocative, filled her mouth and fanned the flames of her passion. How could she have guessed such burning need existed? How could she have guessed she'd discover an insatiable hunger for the taste of these two? The sensations she'd created in her body by her own hand for the first time during that bath in St. Louis seemed tepid compared to this...this conflagration.

She returned Joshua's kiss as ardently, as eagerly as she had Caleb's. Need propelled her to twist her fingers into the openings of their shirts. She clung, pulling them close, then closer still.

Caleb gently uncurled the fingers of her right hand, lifted it to his shoulder, and then bent down and used his mouth on her breast.

“*Oh, God!*” Such heat speared through her, such thrilling tingles coated her skin and sank deep into her that she cried out, thrusting her head back, letting loose of Joshua’s mouth. Her body convulsed of its own accord, thrusting her hips out in a wanton gesture she was too aroused to even notice.

“Close, sweetheart?” Caleb asked against her now moistened nipple. Joshua chose that moment to bend down and pleasure her other breast, and Sarah’s words tangled in her throat, emerging an inarticulate sound.

Caleb must have understood them, for he said, “Let me see just how close you are, darling.”

He spread his hand across her abdomen and then moved it down, brushing his fingers through the hair that covered her mons. His fingers and hand caressed her intimate opening once, twice. And then he thrust a finger inside her.

Sarah screamed as something inside her gushed. Her body filled with liquid sensation, overwhelming her thoughts, her senses, until she was nothing but flesh, aching, needy flesh. She bore down again and again against the hand and fingers pleasuring her as spasms of ecstasy swept through her.

Small twinges of pain burst in the middle of the pleasure, but that just added to the miracle of the luscious storm that consumed her. The tiny pleasure she’d given herself had never hinted at the lush abundance awaiting her at the hands of her lovers.

“Yeah, you were close,” Caleb said in a deep chuckle. He scooped her into his arms and brought her down to the ground.

Vaguely, Sarah realized he’d laid her on one of the bedrolls. Her body shivered with the lessening of the pleasure, and the wool blanket scratched against her bare back and bottom. It was all she could do not to whimper when Caleb pulled away from her, when he stood. Joshua came to stand beside him, and for a moment, they simply stared down at her.

“Close?” she repeated the word trying to understand what he’d meant, then felt everything that had been cooling within her begin to heat again as both men quickly stripped the clothing from their bodies.

Firelight dappled their flesh, illuminating them so that they stood as she imagined the Greek gods of ancient times would have stood before a willing nymph. Fully clothed, they heated her blood and shivered her belly. Naked, they weakened her completely. She wasn’t totally ignorant. She’d once seen a drawing of a naked man in a book. That pencil sketch failed to convey the strength and the power that pulsed through Caleb and Joshua. Mesmerized, her eyes drank in the sight of them, the muscle and sinew. Her gaze was inexorably drawn to their cocks which seemed impossibly large and far more vibrant and stirring than that long ago, flaccid depiction.

Then they were there, lying close on either side of her, their hands warm and sure, caressing her. Her bath-time daydream came to vivid, thrilling life as Caleb turned her head toward him, bent over her, and kissed her, making her heart thud and her hips lift.

“Close to heaven,” he answered when he weaned his lips from hers. The heat of his body against her side and the press of his penis against her hip aroused her nearly beyond bearing. He fastened his mouth on her neck. As she instinctively tilted her head back and to the side, needing to give him all of her, she found Joshua’s mouth. His kiss, fast and deep, fanned the flames of her desire.

“Close to the purest pleasure there is,” Joshua said. Then he kissed her again.

Hands caressed her breasts and belly. Hands stroked legs and thighs, parting them so that each leg draped a masculine hip. One hand crept upward, light teasing touches brushing the curls between her thighs.

“What are you doing to me? I feel wild and out of control. Something happened inside me when you touched me there last time and I...*oh!*”

“We’re pleasuring you...and ourselves,” Caleb said as he once more inserted his fingers into her. “We’re...being with you.” He spoke the words against her flesh, and they became like a beautiful concerto playing against her damp, fevered skin.

Sarah gasped as the delicious tendrils of excitement began to climb inside her again. Restless, her hips lifted. Rolling her head back and forth, she tried to grasp control of these sensations, but they slipped through and around her puny attempts as if mocking her.

Joshua took a nipple into his mouth and nipped it, the tiny pain adding to the thrill coursing through her. When he closed his lips around the sensitive bud and suckled, Sarah once more became conscious of the pull in her womb. Were her breasts and the place she hoped to one day carry a babe connected?

“You’re close again,” Joshua said. He brushed kisses against her breast and neck on one side of her as Caleb mimicked his actions on the other.

Joshua took hold of her hair, turning her head to him. His mouth captured hers once more. He kissed her fiercely, plunging his tongue into her mouth, stroking and licking, sucking and nipping in such a rapid rhythm she couldn’t keep up. She could only open wide and surrender.

She bowed her back off the blanket when Caleb’s lips settled on the feminine flesh between her thighs.

Sarah tore her mouth from Joshua’s. “Oh God, oh God, what are you...” speech sputtered into a deep groan as the conflagration once more roared to life, the excitement bubbling up, higher, then higher still until she reached it, that moment of *purest pleasure*, gushing from deep inside her womb, shooting through every part of her, a rain of passion nearly dripping out of her.

Caleb moved up her body, and she had one moment of awareness, of the sensation of his hot, turgid cock pressing against her folds. Then he thrust into her hard, fast, and deep.

Sarah screamed, the unexpected pain and the pleasure entwining to become one, shooting her to that pinnacle once more.

“Just the first time, Sarah. It only hurts the first time, I promise.”

Sarah opened her eyes, the shivers ebbing. Her vision cleared. Caleb loomed above her, his flesh on hers, *in* hers. Sweat drenched his forehead, glistened on his shoulders. He held himself impossibly still, a tautness to his face that looked painful.

He’s waiting. Sarah had no way of knowing how she knew that, but she did. Another truth penetrated, that he needed more, that he’d not reached that moment she’d enjoyed three times. But he waited because he didn’t want to hurt her.

How simple it was to wrap her legs around him, to curl her arms around his neck. She wanted to give him the same gift he’d given her.

Arousal flared and she undulated her hips. Caleb hissed in a breath through his teeth.

“The pain is already nearly gone. Everything else has felt incredibly good. I want more. Give me more, Caleb. Take everything.”

His expression softened, and he held her gaze for one long moment. “All right, Sarah. Hang on to me sweetheart. Just...hang on.”

From the expression on his face, Sarah thought he was still controlling himself. He’d made her lose all control, and she wanted to do that to him in return, but she didn’t know how. Letting instinct guide her, she raised herself just a little, set her mouth on his neck, and began to lick him. Joshua stroked her arm. Reaching out to him with one hand, she twined her fingers with his and lifted her hips closer to Caleb.

And then Caleb began to move.

* * * *

He'd told her heaven, and maybe at the time he'd thought it a poetic exaggeration, but right at this moment, Caleb was certain he'd never felt anything as close to heaven as being inside Sarah.

Her sheath felt so incredibly hot and tight and wet around his cock. He wanted to keep his thrusts measured, gentle. She'd been a virgin—his first. He'd known that, of course, but the sound of her scream when he'd breached her maidenhead had pierced *him*. He'd hurt her, and he never wanted to hurt her. At the same time, a sense of possession fell upon him. *No one had ever had her before. She belongs to us.*

"Give me more," Sarah whispered close to his ear.

Oh God. His control snapped. Slipping one hand under her ass, he lifted her as he thrust into her. She felt so damn good he withdrew then pushed in again, and again. The slap of his balls against her soft cunt rang in his ears as the scent of their joining teased his nostrils. Her ripe, musky fragrance intoxicated him. Grabbing her hair, he tilted her face back and kissed her, plundering her mouth with his tongue as surely and forcefully as his cock plundered her pussy.

He felt it beginning, felt it building inside him, knew his peak was nearly upon him. In the past, he'd made it a habit to withdraw from a woman's body before giving her his seed. The women he'd had were experienced, but he'd never fully trusted any one of them not to conceive his child.

This time, there lived a part of him that hoped his seed found a ripe and ready womb. His tongue swirled and dipped, drinking her. He angled his thrusts so that the hair around his cock brushed against the tiny bud hidden within her folds. Sarah shivered as that bud came awake, and Caleb did it again, and then again. Her sheath convulsed around him as her pleasure burst upon her once more. He held himself deep inside her as his bliss exploded, as his seed shot out of him, racing from his body into hers.

Caleb tried to hold his weight on his arms, but shook with the effort. He'd been in a near constant state of arousal since he'd first

looked up and seen Sarah peeking over the banister down at him. He'd never believed he would actually ever get between her legs.

Sarah labored for breath, and he raised himself up to ease his body from hers and placed a kiss on her forehead. Her eyes had closed but she was smiling. He grinned. Beside them, Joshua laid on his side, one hand supporting his head, the other stroking up and down Sarah's arm.

"You all right, Sarah?" Caleb asked.

"Mmm. Amazing. Simply amazing."

"You certainly are."

She popped her eyes open. Even in the soft glow of the fire, he could see the color kissing her cheeks. He grinned even wider, then swooped down and kissed her. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so happy.

Moving carefully, he eased himself from her body, ranging himself on her right side, across from his brother.

"You too tired for me, sweetheart?" Joshua asked. He bent over her and placed his lips on hers.

"I'm not tired," Sarah replied.

"Sore?"

"A little," she nearly mumbled the confession.

Caleb recognized that playful light in his brother's eyes.

"Do you trust me?" Joshua asked her.

"Of course I do."

Caleb bet it wouldn't take Sarah long to figure Joshua's moods out. In the mean time, he could only chuckle.

"Good!" Joshua got to his feet then reached down and scooped her into his arms.

"Where...where are we going?" she asked when, naked as the day he was born, he began to carry her away from the fire and into the darkness. Caleb got to his feet and followed, laughing out loud at Joshua's answer and Sarah's small scream.

"We're going to bathe in the creek."

Chapter 9

Tyrone Maddox wasn't a man easily intimidated by anyone or anything. Once he set himself on a course of action, he let nothing dissuade him from it. He would never have been able to achieve all he had in life, otherwise. But the events of the last few days, as relayed to him via telegram, had him more than a little concerned.

He didn't like it when events deviated from his plan.

He had a ranch that need running and other business interests he needed to tend to. He didn't have time to go into Waco to speak to the law. Especially when the only available law was Adam Kendall. Unfortunately, he could see no way around this unexpected trip.

Maddox couldn't say why Kendall rubbed him the wrong way. He had from the first moment they'd met. Maybe it was the eerie color of the man's eyes. Watery blue, when he fixed them on him, Maddox felt as if the lawman could somehow see into his head, knew all of his secrets.

A man didn't rise as high and come as far as Maddox had without harboring a few secrets along the way. Maddox knew he had more than his share, and just the idea someone might know them irritated him beyond measure.

He'd heard more than one rumor about Adam Kendall. He sometimes knew things he couldn't possibly know. The way others sometimes spoke of him in hushed tones, it wouldn't surprise Maddox to find out the man had Indian blood and was in fact some mystical shaman.

Despite Maddox's antipathy for him, he'd done his level best to make Kendall a friend. Only smart business to do so, really. But the

Texas Ranger had remained aloof. Because he'd failed to get the lawman under his thumb, Maddox tended to steer clear of the man.

The information he'd just received dictated a change in policy. He saddled up early, wanting to get this business out of the way and get home again as soon as possible. He felt most secure at his ranch.

His wife had gone missing, taken into the wilderness by those two gunslingers he'd hired. That had not been a part of the plan. And even though this new ripple *could* work to his advantage, it was a ripple that found him somewhat in the dark and not in complete control.

Maddox liked to be in control of things. He maintained a poker face as he entered Waco as would befit a man in his situation, but he smiled on the inside. One way or another, he would reach his goal. Soon he'd be so far above everyone else he'd no longer have to worry about petty annoyances like Adam Kendall—or Gareth Peterson, for that matter.

In fact, if he worked it right, he might manage to be rid of them both thanks to this unforeseen development. A smart man made the best of the cards he got dealt.

Tyrone J. Maddox knew himself to be a very smart man. He just needed to wait for his instincts to tell him which way he should play this particular hand.

The Texas Ranger Station had been erected beside the county court house as a part of The Square. Unlike other days when he came into Waco, he made straight for there.

He usually stayed as far away from The Square in the morning hours as possible. The place had become overrun in recent years with newcomers, all engaged in the business of trying to separate men from their money. Mondays were bad enough, with an open market teeming with people. That at least served a useful purpose, and he knew his houseman sometimes came to market for supplies. Even on non-market days, a man could likely encounter his fill of charlatans here, some offering the latest in “must have” wares and others

offering all sorts of dubious enterprises under the heading of legal services.

He'd never seen so many damn, cursed lawyers in one town in his entire life.

Maddox ignored the noise and the people, barely acknowledging a couple men who called out greetings. While he tied his horse to the hitch, he replaced his poker face with the visage of a man deeply concerned, verging on alarmed by the news he'd just received. Approaching the office, he caught a glimpse through the wide front window of lawmen huddled around the captain's desk.

He hadn't believed for one moment he'd been the only one to receive a telegram. That's why he'd had to come to town right away.

"I received a telegram late last night from the sheriff in Springfield," he said before the door had even closed behind him. "It would appear that those two gunslingers you introduced me to, Kendall, have made off into the open range with my wife!"

Captain Kendall looked up at Maddox's accusation. The man appeared unruffled, and if Maddox didn't know better, he'd swear the lawman seemed amused. Three other rangers had been standing by the Kendall's desk, their attention fixed on the map he had spread out there. At Maddox's thinly veiled accusation, they looked up and stepped back.

"I received a telegram from the sheriff as well," Kendall said. "The Benedicts are doing what you paid them to do. They're keeping Mrs. Maddox safe after an attempt was made on her life."

"Maybe and maybe not. All I know is that they've deviated from the route I set out for them and are somewhere out on the trail between Springfield and here, *alone* with my wife. I'll be the laughingstock of the county when they eventually arrive with her after all those days and nights isolated together, no chaperone, when word gets out. Did those two bastards have no thought as to the potential scandal their actions would cause? A woman in the wilderness alone with two hired guns." Maddox let his temper show. What those two

no-accounts had done was totally unacceptable, and he was determined Kendall would pay the price. A good strategy, even a righteous one.

"It seems to me," Kendall said, "Anyone wanting to gossip would have had enough fuel to do so already, considering that you left Mrs. Maddox behind in the first place then arranged for her to travel in the company of the Benedicts, with no chaperone, as you put it."

"Perhaps it *is* partially my fault." Maddox chose his words and his stance carefully. "I made the assumption that since you knew the Benedicts, they could be trusted. Perhaps I should have relied upon my father-in-law to arrange for Sarah's transportation through Mr. Pinkerton's agency."

He'd handed Kendall a way out, but the man's response wasn't the one Maddox expected.

"You seem to be under the impression that the Benedict brothers are a couple of drifters, no-accounts, out to make a fast buck, who would hire out their guns without engaging their consciences. Cut from the same cloth as Dick Morgan and his gang."

"I'm sorry, who?" Maddox asked.

"Five drifters known to run wild these last several years all throughout the southwest but in Missouri, mostly. It was Morgan and his men who attacked your wife's stagecoach, and then tried again to shoot her in Springfield last night."

Maddox looked at Kendall for a long moment, well aware the other man studied him closely. "The sheriff is certain of these facts?"

"Very certain. Look, I'm sorry if I gave you the impression Caleb and Joshua were like that, though I don't know how I could have since you never asked me a single thing about them, never inquired into their backgrounds."

Kendall sat back then and got such a look on his face that if they'd been playing cards, Maddox would have folded then and there, regardless of his hand.

“So let me put your mind at ease. I’ve known Caleb and Joshua Benedict for more than a decade. We served together for two years in the Union Army. And since that time, they’ve drifted some, yes. But only because their mother died during the war of typhoid, and their sister, Becky, married a Southern sympathizer. Becky and her husband took over the family ranch, and the man hasn’t been too keen, to date, on having anything to do with his north-supporting brothers-in-law.

“And while they *have* been known to take on the odd job—such as escorting the wife of a wealthy rancher—mostly they’ve worked where needed as deputy United States Marshals.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Maddox was a good enough poker player he kept his expression from reflecting the riot of emotions coursing through him.

He *had* assumed the men he’d hired to escort Sarah to be the sort who wouldn’t question orders, who’d do the least of what was required of them for the cash being paid, and would put their lives and well-being first if the situation got dangerous.

He realized he’d been silent too long. “Well then, Captain Kendall. I feel much better. Thank you for easing my mind.” He paced to the window, looked out on the street before turning and skewering the ranger with a hard stare.

“The sheriff didn’t give me any details. He said only that an attempt had been made to kill my wife. Sarah has spent her entire life in Chicago, a pampered young chit of no consequence. I find it hard to believe that anyone would actually want to kill her.”

“That’s pretty much the conclusion the Benedicts and Sheriff MacFarlane came to as well. They believe that whoever targeted Sarah—twice, not once, so they do mean business, and there is no mistake that she indeed had been the target—likely is an enemy of yours or her father’s.”

“Matthew Carmichael, have an enemy that would go after his daughter? Highly unlikely. The man’s led an amazingly boring

existence. His entire life is his modest sized business—that, and his second wife, a lovely young woman with very expensive tastes.”

Kendall shook his head. “The father is boring and the daughter of no consequence. Not the family one would expect to see a man of your stature marry into.”

“Sarah suits my needs perfectly, not that it’s any business of yours. No, I can’t imagine anyone hating Carmichael enough to target his daughter. I, on the other hand, have made an enemy or two along the way. Of course I have. The one that comes to mind immediately, as a matter of fact, is Gareth Peterson.”

“I got that impression the other night during our poker game. We’re looking at Mr. Peterson, of course, and I will question him personally. All the hired guns who came after your wife are dead. Sheriff MacFarlane is questioning known associates of theirs, attempting to reconstruct events, hoping that someone in the Morgan gang had a big mouth and let slip who’d hired them.

“Beyond that, unless something more happens, there’s not much we can do here. You’ll let me know when your wife arrives safe and sound, and I’ll come out and speak to her.”

“Thank you, Captain. I will.”

Once back on the boardwalk, Maddox took his time, nodding to a man who greeted him, looking around The Square as anyone might on such a lovely summer day.

Inside, his thoughts scrambled. He’d misjudged the situation, and his failure in that regard more than displeased him. It alarmed him.

He’d been so sure of his course, he’d not made any contingency plans. He eased himself up on his horse, turned the creature toward home.

The feeling of eyes following his every move accompanied him long after anyone from the Ranger’s office could possibly still be watching him. That was the sign of a guilty conscience, which was laughable because Maddox didn’t have a conscience, guilty or otherwise.

He could only hope, as he headed for home, that his latest thoughts didn't prove, in the end, to be his epitaph.

* * * *

Sarah came awake to the sensation of being lifted by strong masculine arms. Eyes closed, she snuggled against the naked male chest and inhaled deeply. *Joshua*. She wondered then if every woman could recognize the scent of her lover, or just those who, like her, were fortunate enough to have more than one of them.

"Where are you taking me?" She kept her eyes closed, but the brightness of daylight and the warmth of the sun on her flesh told her morning had broken.

"The stream."

"Again? Fancy water a great deal, don't you?"

"Well, I do, but that's not why we're going there."

Sarah heard the smile in his voice and felt her lips spread in response. Memories of the night before, of being held on Joshua's lap as water eddied past them flooded her memory. He'd cleansed her between her legs, his touch so soft and arousing that he'd had her writhing in no time. When he'd lifted her, spread her legs so that she'd straddled him, she'd been shocked. That sensation had only lasted a few seconds. Once he showed her how to take him into her body, to move in such a way as to pleasure them both, Sarah had found great joy in bringing them both to release.

"Caleb's waiting for us there," Joshua said, interrupting her reverie. "He's found a spot that's a bit deeper than what we used last night."

"Why do we want deeper water?" She opened her eyes and watched as the trees gave way to the babbling stream.

He kissed the top of her head, and Sarah snuggled deeper into his embrace. "We were greedy with you last night, love. You've got to be sore this morning."

Sarah *had* noticed an insistent ache between her legs and deeper, up inside her, where her two virile lovers had spent so much time the night before.

“Mmm. I am.” She thought she should protest being carried, but the very fact she felt sore made her stay mum. She enjoyed being carted around. It made her feel cherished.

“We were careful after the first time, so there’s no more blood on you. I checked. But still, we really should have let you alone after we’d each had you once.”

“You aren’t solely responsible for the tenderness I feel. It seems to me I awoke in the middle of the night and made some demands of my own.”

“For which we shall be eternally grateful.”

Caleb came into view and his statement, along with Joshua’s personal commentary, made her blush.

“I shouldn’t be embarrassed after last night,” she mumbled. Both men laughed at her discomfiture, but she sensed nothing unkind in their amusement.

“This is just our first morning as lovers,” Caleb said as he lifted her from Joshua’s arms. He held her as easily as his brother had. “It will probably take you until at *least* tomorrow to rid yourself completely of your embarrassment.”

“Rid myself of my embarrassment? It’s called modesty, I’ll have you know. Even virtue, by some.” Sarah sighed. “Though I guess we took care of getting rid of my virtue last night.”

“Not in our eyes,” Joshua said. There was an edge to his tone that brooked no argument. His attitude made her feel good. She knew they held affection for her because of the tender and caring way they treated her. It was good to know they respected her, too. Still, she felt a bit ill at ease with all the personal privilege these twins claimed.

“I can walk,” she said. Sarah had no idea why she felt compelled to protest.

“We know. And we’ll let you start doing things for yourself tomorrow. For the rest of today, why not let us pamper you? All right?”

The water felt colder in this deeper part than where she’d bathed, and been bathed, the night before.

“It’ll ease the pain,” Caleb whispered against her head. He used his hand to gently rub low on her belly. The touch comforted more than it aroused.

Joshua joined them and though it was unnecessary, helped support her. She was submerged to her chest. They had been right. The cold water did help ease the uncomfortable feeling between her thighs.

Joshua palmed the soap and rubbed it gently across her breasts. The light rose perfume teased her senses, the fragrance adding to her pleasure.

Something Caleb had just said niggled.

“Tomorrow I can do for myself? Aren’t we getting underway soon? Traveling?”

“Not today, Sarah. What with the way we both rode you last night, you need to take it easy today,” Caleb said. One thing she knew for certain, if they kept talking to her like this she certainly *would* rid herself of her embarrassment in a day or two.

“But I thought we were in a hurry,” Sarah said. She had to struggle to hang on to the thread of the conversation. The twin sensations of hands caressing her flesh and rigid cocks pressing against her hips had her in a state of near total arousal.

On the other hand, she didn’t feel sore in quite the same way anymore. In fact, the ache between her thighs had changed subtly to an ache of emptiness and need.

“We were in a hurry to get out of Springfield without being seen or followed,” Caleb said. “And we did.”

“We can take this one day, sweetheart,” Joshua added. “You deserve the chance to recover.” Joshua plucked and pulled at one of her nipples at the same time Caleb slid his hand down lower to cover

her mound. He moved his fingers back and forth, his clever action quickly awakening her clitoris.

Sarah couldn't hold back the groan that seemed to rise from deep down in her womb.

"Or to put it another way," Caleb said, his husky words brushing the shell of her ear in hot, scintillating breath. "When a woman fucks her lovers for the first time, she ought to be able to relax the next day."

Their words inflamed her. Their bodies enticed her. "I don't know how to tell you this, but I'm not feeling very relaxed at the moment." She reached down, took an erect cock in each hand. She knew how to touch them now, knew how to give them pleasure with just her hands. "And neither do you. I have a feeling we're going to be busy for a while. So much for my recovery time."

"Oh, darling," Joshua said, clearly enjoying her touch, "there's more than one way to reach pure pleasure."

"That's right." Caleb tilted her face up and brought his down so that a bare inch separated them. "There's more than one path to heaven. Let us show you."

Chapter 10

Sarah loved the taste of them. Something in the flavor of each of her lovers fed the flames of her hunger. The combination of Caleb and Joshua simply drove her wild.

The men had arranged all three bedrolls together, one atop the other, and moved them under the shade of the trees. She was naked in the middle of the day, lying on the ground but cushioned so that the hardness of it didn't bother her, touching and being touched by two naked men. In that moment, it seemed the most natural way in the world to spend the morning.

There was not another soul for miles, the only sounds to reach her other than her own tiny groans and whimpers the sounds of nature—the birds, the breeze through the tree tops, and the soft huffs of their horses grazing near-by.

“You have to tell us what you like,” Joshua said, bending to take one of her nipples into his mouth. He nipped it lightly with his teeth, and then sucked it hard, elongating it. He released it with a wet plop, and then blew on it. The cold air made her shiver, sending her arousal even higher.

She never could have imagined that there existed a connection between her breasts and her womb. But every time one of them sucked hard on one of her nipples, she felt an answering tug deep inside her.

“Everything. I like everything you're doing to me.” No less than the truth, she wondered they didn't know that already.

“Mmm, yes,” Caleb said. He ran a hand over her belly and down, dipping into her moisture. “We can see that you do because you’re so hot and wet.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s beyond good.”

There was so much she didn’t know. The basics, yes, she’d known the basic facts of fornication. Even before her wedding day, she had taken those trips to her uncle’s farm and had seen nature at its most basic. But the nuances, the intimacies—she’d been completely ignorant of those.

In that entire stumbling lecture Colleen had given her, not once had that older woman even hinted there would be pleasure involved. Unless...

“It’s normal, isn’t it? For me to enjoy...”

“Hush. Of course it is.” Joshua looked up from her breast, his gaze holding hers in place.

“I don’t know why society says that ladies shouldn’t get pleasure from this or that they don’t. But if a woman is loved properly, of course she can have sexual pleasure. So yes, it’s normal. You’re normal. No, actually, you’re fantastic.”

Their hands caressed and petted, their mouths seduced and enticed. Sarah’s arousal climbed, her excitement nearing fever pitch. And then one or both of her lovers would change the rhythm of their touch and that magical peak would recede, and she’d begin to gather momentum all over again.

“Oh, God, what are you doing to me?” She felt so *close*. Sarah didn’t know if she wanted to scream or laugh.

“Pleasuring you and ourselves,” Caleb said. He rose above her, filled her whole vision, and gave her a smile that melted her insides. Then he bent down, his mouth taking hers in a kiss warm, tender and addictive.

“Are you daring?” he asked when he’d weaned his lips from hers.

Sarah laughed. "I've just taken on two lovers at the same time. I'd say that makes me pretty darn daring."

Caleb's grin spread, quick and full of fun. "You have a point," he said over Joshua's laughter. "I guess I wanted to know if you'd be interested in trying a few things that some women—and men for that matter—would consider—um, scandalous."

Joshua relinquished her nipple and relaxed beside her on his side, facing her. Caleb ranged above her on her other side. Perhaps another woman might have felt caged in, intimidated by being so completely surrounded by these two muscular, naked males. Sarah didn't feel that way at all.

She couldn't ever remember feeling quite so pampered, or quite so *wanted* before.

"I could give you the same answer. This—being like this with both of you could be considered scandalous. It's also way outside of normal. But I don't care. To me, it feels right."

"To us, too," Joshua said, stretching to plant a quick kiss on her mouth.

"My point is I had no idea there could be such fun, such pleasure, or such...fulfillment. So the answer is yes. Yes, I'm willing to try anything...everything."

"Do you remember last night, when I put my mouth on your pussy?"

Sarah smiled, and not just from the memory of those wondrous moments when she felt his lips and tongue tasting her intimate flesh. She knew of only one term for her feminine parts. Now here was another. "Is that what you call it? My pussy?"

"That's one of the names," Joshua said. He blushed, and Sarah was touched. She wasn't the only one feeling a little awkward, it would seem.

"Yes," she said to Caleb, who had posed the question. "I definitely recall that moment."

"Good, because I want to feel your mouth on my cock."

If someone had made the suggestion to her a month ago—or even two weeks ago—Sarah would have thought the idea revolting.

Looking in Caleb's obsidian eyes, at the desire shining there for her, the image of her doing what he asked curled heat through her body. Memory of what his lips and tongue had done to her pussy, to the way those most intimate of kisses had aroused her, fueled her curiosity.

She wanted to pleasure him that way. She wanted to pleasure the both of them that way.

"Show me what to do."

Caleb drew her up into a kiss. His hands shook as he stroked them over her back. It seemed incredible to her that this strong, virile man could be as excited, as aroused as she herself had become.

"Get on your hands and knees, baby," Caleb said against her mouth. The flavor of him lingered, and she licked her lips, wanting to taste more of him.

The heated look he gave her made her heart thud in her chest. Eager to try something new, Sarah got on all fours, then raised her gaze to meet his, awaiting his next instruction. Since he had gotten on his knees, his cock bobbed fairly close to her face. She didn't think she'd need much direction.

"Open your mouth. Let me slide my cock between your lips. I'll move it in and out. You use your tongue to stroke it, maybe suck a little. Just a bit at a time. And sweetheart, if you don't like it, though I may cry, you can say stop, and we'll stop."

She couldn't hold back her smile. His cock ranged close to her face, and its presence fascinated her. Though both he and Joshua had used these wonderful organs on her, she'd not had the opportunity to see either of them up close until this moment. She'd wanted to. She wanted to study and explore and learn. They seemed to know already what to do to pleasure her. She wanted the same knowledge of their bodies for herself.

She felt Joshua behind her, felt the heat of his body and the force of his stare as he focused completely on her. When he reached out a hand and stroked it down her back and across her bottom, she arched her back, letting him know how much she liked his touch.

She turned her attention back to Caleb, to that marvelous cock that twitched just inches from her face. “Just let me...”

He seemed to understand what she needed. “Go ahead and do anything at all you want.”

Caleb’s voice sounded strained. When she looked up at him, tilted her head, he said, “The way you’re looking at me is getting me very horny.”

“Horny? Another new word. Good. I want you horny.” She felt bold and brazen, and she felt free. Reaching out her hand, she stroked his cock. So amazing. Hot, hard, yet soft as velvet. She traced the veins that ran the length of his penis, allowing her fingers to brush the swollen sacs at the base of it. Caleb hissed in a breath, so she guessed he liked that.

Leaning forward, she sniffed him and was instantly filled with such a craving for him it left her breathless. Right there, right where his cock emerged from his body, his scent was the strongest, a combination of sweat and man and passion that turned her insides to molten honey. She liked his aroma very much, and she liked what smelling him did to her.

“Have mercy,” he breathed.

She sat back on her haunches for a moment, met his gaze, then let one finger play up and down on his erect shaft. A bead of moisture emerged from the tiny hole at the top. She used her finger to spread it over the head of his penis, pleased when his cock seemed to jump and stiffen and grow even more.

“Taste me.” His voice came out a desperate-sounding rasp. Caleb put his hand in her hair, his fingers flexing, grabbing hold of the strands, then drawing her face down and closer. Because she knew

she'd teased him, and because she just plain wanted to, she got back on her knees, opened her mouth and let him slide his cock inside it.

Shivers wracked her as she closed her lips around his hot member, as the scent of him combined with his taste excited her. He slid his cock deeper, and Sarah had never imagined her mouth filled in such a way. She played her tongue along his shaft as he withdrew then surged into her again. His groan fueled her desire to please him, and she experimented, trying to suck as he moved in her, even sucking against his withdrawal.

His grunt and the flexing of his fingers—both hands now held her head—told her she pleased him.

When he'd been inside her pussy, when he'd reached that moment of purest pleasure, she'd felt his seed erupt into her. The memory of that heavy pulsing deep inside her body came back to her now, and that emptiness-ache in her womb increased.

Having Caleb's cock in her mouth like this evoked desires she never knew existed. She wanted to taste his seed, watch as that rapture overtook him, rapture that *she* gave him. As her excitement grew, she flexed inner muscles, trying to quench a thirst between her legs for her lovers' flesh.

She sighed with deepest gratitude when she felt Joshua's hand there, stroking back and forth slowly over her slit, dipping in to draw her moisture out, spread it over her. When he nudged her legs, she responded to his unspoken request and spread them a little wider.

Hot breath gave her little warning. Sarah groaned around the cock in her mouth when a hot, greedy tongue lapped her pussy.

* * * *

Joshua recalled other times when he and Caleb had shared a woman. Maybe it had been because they were twins, but the idea of sharing had always been there with them. Right from that first time when they had been sixteen, with twenty-year-old Cora Mae who'd

been the first for them both in a room in old Pete's bar back home in Baker, Texas, sharing had always just felt right.

Joshua wondered now if all those other times, and all those other women—bless their generous, cock-loving hearts—had been getting them ready for *this* time and *this* woman.

Caleb kissed Sarah, and she responded to him with such sweet eagerness.

“Get on your hands and knees, baby,” his brother whispered.

Oh my, but she has a pretty little ass. Nicely rounded, smoothly white, it looked tasty, and there was nothing more he wanted than to sink his teeth into it.

Watching the way Sarah examined Caleb's cock, watching the way Caleb's passion grew, fed a hunger in Joshua he couldn't explain. Older than him by mere minutes, Caleb had always been his big brother. Twice during the war, he'd have been dead if not for Caleb's instincts and his caring. He gained a particular satisfaction from seeing his brother's happiness.

Sarah nuzzled his brother's cock, and his own jerked in response. He needed to touch her, and from the way he could see her sweet ass twitching, she needed his touch.

Her sigh was all the encouragement he needed. She'd had them one at a time last night. They hadn't wanted to overwhelm her or shock her. But they didn't want to only have her one at a time.

Joshua knew there would be times when they both would have her—in various ways—at the same time.

He nudged her legs, and she parted them just that little bit more for him. Hungry for the taste of her, he lay down and maneuvered himself between her thighs.

Her woman's fragrance went straight to his cock, making it harden even as his mouth watered. Using his tongue, he lapped the entire length of her slit. The sound she made, coming out around his brother's cock, helped fuel the flames of his excitement. He nuzzled his face into her flesh, between her folds, spreading her moisture

across his lips and chin. Sarah tensed, torn, he knew, between pleasuring his brother and seizing her own rapture.

He'd show her she could have both, easily. Another time, he'd use his mouth to take her to the peak again and again. But the scent of her, the moans and the slurps had him more triggered so that he knew he needed to grab some of this passion, too.

Moving quickly, he got out from beneath her, rose up in his knees behind her. He moved his hand back and forth, testing her with a finger.

She'd taken them several times already, and he'd be careful. But he needed to feel her silky heat surround him again.

He focused on his objective, guiding his cock to her wet folds, gently rubbing it against her so that she knew what was coming. He looked up and encountered Caleb's glittering gaze.

His brother enjoyed watching as much as he had. Caleb looked down at the top of Sarah's head. As if just realizing how hard his hands had been gripping her hair, he relaxed his fingers, stroked his hands over her blond tresses.

"Joshua is going to fuck you, baby. He's going to fuck your pussy at the same time as I fuck your mouth."

"You're going to be full of our cocks, sweetheart," Joshua whispered. "You'll take us both at the same time."

"Mmm." Sarah reached one hand up, curled it around Caleb's cock as she slid it free of her mouth. He'd never seen a more alluring expression as the one she wore when she glanced at him over her shoulder. She widened her legs a bit, raising her ass just a fraction, as if offering it to him.

"Yes, please. I want to have you both inside me at the same time." She turned her attention back to Caleb and sucked his cock into her mouth again.

His brother stayed still, allowing her the freedom to move on him, to take as much or as little as she chose. And in only moments, Joshua understood she chose to take it all.

He hissed as she moved her ass back, captured the end of his cock between the folds of her cunt. He surged into her, one long steady thrust that was as thorough as it was controlled.

Hot and wet, tight and magnificent, her body took his in. “Ah, sweetheart,” Joshua said as he thrust his cock in and out of her. “You’re going to take us every way a woman can take two men.”

He grasped her hips, holding her still even as she tried to escalate their dance. He held her and teased, teased them both, until he saw Caleb throw back his head, his growl a keening cry of satiation.

Reaching down and around, he teased her clitoris until he felt the walls of her body convulse around him. Then he followed them both into the bliss.

Chapter 11

The land had leveled out, and as they traveled all day toward the southwest, it seemed to Sarah they left the hills behind. They'd been riding for several hours since the last break, their pace steady but not fast.

As the terrain became flatter, less rocky, Caleb no longer kept them to single file, and instead the men flanked her. That made it easier for conversation.

At the first rest stop of the day, Sarah had dispensed with the top part of her traveling dress and her blouse. The simple chemise she wore beneath would be too scandalous an item to wear out in Chicago. But on the trail heading through the untamed wilderness toward Texas, it seemed more than appropriate.

And since her lovers had seen, touched, and kissed every inch of her naked body the day before, Sarah had awakened that morning to discover her modesty truly beginning to ebb.

"See those trees up ahead? There's a small river up there. We'll stop and make camp for the night, see if we can catch some fish to eat. If you're hungry." Caleb said.

"I am hungry. You've been here before?" She realized they must indeed have been through the area to know there was a river in that spot. She could see no sign of it from her position on the horse.

"We've traveled through here a few times," Caleb answered. Did he seem even more on guard than he had been? Sarah wondered at the way he seemed to look all around, as if expecting danger.

"It's pretty land."

“Yes, the Cherokee think so, too,” Joshua said. His gaze, like his brothers, seemed to look everywhere at once.

“Cherokee? Aren’t they Indians?”

“They are indeed.”

“And they’re near here? Near us, right *now*?” Sarah would admit that her real knowledge of the Indians and Indian matters was almost non-existent.

When she’d been younger, her father had taken to purchasing dime novels that he read late at night. Sarah used to sneak into her father’s study to peruse these dramatic accounts of the violent clashes between “God-fearing, patriotic American settlers” and the “wild Indians”. She recalled some of her earliest nightmares had centered around those stories, some of which had been quite gruesome in their depictions of Indians or soldiers or even the settlers themselves being massacred. Her mother had never known about Sarah’s clandestine reading, nor had she ever approved of those novels being in the house in the first place. As far as Sarah knew, her father still liked to pick up those simple books to while away an afternoon.

Sarah had no idea what her father’s current wife thought of the practice.

“Of course they’re near here. This is their land, sweetheart. We’re in Indian Territory.”

“Indian Territory?” She heard the squeak in her voice and wondered if the smiles both men gave her were because they thought her funny or because they wanted to reassure her she had nothing to fear.

She rather suspected the former.

“Relax, Sarah. The Cherokee are a peaceful people. At least the ones we’ve met have always been. We need to travel through their land, then through that of the Choctaw. In fact, once on Choctaw land, we’ll be passing within ten miles of Durant. It’s not a large city, but it has many of the same amenities you’d find almost anywhere in Arkansas or Texas.”

“Oh. I thought hostilities existed, still, between the Indians and some of the settlers.”

“Some settlers seem to be of the opinion they can just move into the area, claim it as their own. So in a sense there are some hostilities. But nothing any of us have to worry about. Necessarily.”

“Joshua.”

Caleb’s tone of censure made his brother chuckle. “I’m sorry, Sarah. You looked so spooked I couldn’t resist teasing you a little. Seriously, we have nothing to worry about. The Cherokee and the Choctaw, at the heart of it, are no different than us. The people here just want to live their lives in peace.”

Sarah found her gaze drawn to Caleb. There were moments when she found it impossible to remember the brothers were twins. Caleb always seemed older, more serious. He was, between the two of them, the undisputed leader.

“He’s right. We are relatively safe here because he and I *have* spent some time among both the Cherokee and the Choctaw. Besides, you have to know we’ll keep you safe.”

“Bet your ass.” Joshua said.

Sarah widened her eyes in shock at the crude expression, then burst out laughing. She was beginning to understand that before she’d left her sheltered existence at her father’s house in Chicago, she really hadn’t known anything about the world at all.

She pushed aside her nebulous fear of the unknown and seized onto the only reality that mattered at the moment. She was with two men she had come to love. They would keep her safe.

* * * *

Caleb couldn’t shake the feeling they were being watched.

Well able to split his attention, he focused on Sarah and on the area around them. They’d come off the large plateau Springfield had been built upon, picking their way through the sometimes rocky

slopes of the Ozarks. Now the ground gradually leveled, and they would continue to descend until they reached the border of Texas.

A series of lakes and rivers assured them of plenty of water for themselves and the horses. They'd packed supplies from the general store in Springfield, enough to last them several days more than they needed. He'd hoped to be able to avoid civilization during their journey. Safer to stick to the untamed land, to make their way depending only upon themselves.

He turned from hobbling his horse by the stream and caught the sight of Sarah stretching the kinks from her back.

They hadn't been able to keep their cocks out of her last night, either. She had to be sore, riding astride all day.

She hadn't complained even once.

Sarah noticed him staring at her. She blushed, lowering her arms slowly, then smiled. He smiled back and went over to her.

"We've stopped maybe a couple hours sooner than I originally planned but only because we made it this far. It's a good place to camp, and the shorter day will give the horses a good rest. We haven't been setting a blistering pace, but I want to keep them working for us as long as we can. There are a couple of places we can get fresh horses but not for several days. Will you be all right to put in another long day tomorrow?"

"Yes. I won't lie to you. I'm sore. But I'll ride as long as we need to ride."

Sarah had a way of lifting her chin slightly when she asserted herself. He didn't think it a trait she'd indulged in much in the past—hell, she'd married a man at her father's behest. So he bent down and placed a quick kiss on her lips. He'd allow her the display of grit, and he'd keep an eye on her. If she flagged at any time, then he'd simply carry her.

Joshua had gathered enough wood for their fire. Since it might take a bit of time to catch their dinner, they opted to have some coffee

first. The smell of it brewing always perked Caleb up, and it seemed to have the same effect of Sarah.

"I've been thinking," she said. "When I look back on it, I realize Mr. Maddox couldn't have been too pleased with the idea of marrying me in the first place. On top of that whole wedding night fiasco where he passed out, drunk, he barely spoke to me and hardly looked me in the eye. Father, on the other hand, held the man's full attention. I've come to the conclusion he only married me as a favor to my father."

Caleb looked from Sarah's sincere expression to his brother's doubtful one. A man might do a lot of things for another man. Caleb wasn't altogether certain that getting married to the man's daughter fell into that category. Of course, Sarah made his mouth water—she would any man's. He could buy her theory if Maddox had ravished her. The fact he hadn't touched her was not just damned odd, it bothered Caleb.

"He didn't speak to you or look you in the eye?"

"Barely at all. In fact, he treated my step-mother the exact same way he treated me. I've served as hostess for my father before he married Miranda and if I saw Maddox and Miranda like that at one of my dinner parties, I'd make certain I didn't have them seated anywhere close together at any future gathering."

"Because you thought perhaps he didn't like her?"

Sarah shrugged. "He didn't seem to like either of us, was more interested in talking with Father. Well, some men, especially older men, don't pay much mind to women."

"And stupid ones," Joshua said.

Sarah smiled. "Thank you. But my point is he likely really doesn't care about me one way or the other. So I shouldn't have much trouble getting him to agree to the annulment, especially once I tell him that I *don't* want to be married to him."

Caleb looked at his brother. Joshua's expression told him they thought basically the same thing. He didn't think Sarah's

disentanglement from Tyrone Maddox would be as simple as she believed it would.

He felt torn. He didn't want to upset her by disagreeing with her, but neither did he want to treat her in a patronizing way by agreeing with her. He imagined she'd had a belly full of that kind of treatment all her life.

"There's still the matter of the five thousand dollars," Caleb said.

"Oh." Sarah's face turned a pretty shade of red. "Right. My bride price. I'd almost forgotten about that." She stared into her coffee cup for a long moment.

"Are there any lawyers in Waco?" she asked.

"One or two," Joshua said.

Caleb laughed. "One or two dozen, you mean."

Sarah brightened at the news. "A lawyer could help me write a promissory note. When I turn twenty-five, I come into an inheritance—my maternal grandfather left me a little something. I'm not certain how much it is, but it must be enough to pay back Maddox. A lawyer could verify the terms of my grandfather's bequest. Don't you think?"

"He won't want to wait for the money, sweetheart," Joshua said.

"No, he won't." Caleb agreed. "But that's all right. We've got that much. We'll pay him."

"Oh, but I couldn't—"

"Stop right there, sweetheart," Caleb heard the harshness in his tone and strove to soften it. "You're ours, remember?"

"And we take care of what's ours," Joshua finished for him.

"Then I'll pay *you* back," Sarah said.

"Maybe you didn't understand what Joshua and I just—"

"My father sold me!"

Caleb had known that knowledge wounded Sarah, but he hadn't understood how deeply until just now when he heard the pain in her words.

“He sold me as if I had been no better than a horse or a slave. I know I’m yours. And you’re mine, both of you. But this is something I have to pay back.”

“All right, Sarah.” If he ever had the opportunity to meet Sarah’s father, he hoped he had his anger in hand enough that he didn’t beat the shit out of the man. For now, he worked at keeping his tone gentle.

“We’ll help you do that,” Joshua said, with much the same forced gentleness.

“Thank you.”

“Sarah, how is it you don’t know how much your inheritance is?” Caleb asked her after thinking about it. She had mentioned the same thing once before, and he’d wondered then, but that had been before she’d become his lover and thereby his business.

“Oh, well, the money had been left to me by my mother’s father. He’d cut mother out of his life when she ran off to marry my father. I don’t think she ever saw him again. And then she got sick and died. Father has never spoken of the man and only mentioned in passing that he’d left me something.”

“So you don’t know the terms of the bequest or the amount?”

“No, just that the money can’t be touched until I’m twenty-five years old.”

“Why are you looking so uncomfortable, sweetheart? You know we’ve seen you naked.”

Sarah laughed at Joshua’s words. “That means,” he continued, “that there should be no embarrassment between us about anything at all.”

“It’s just that I realized I only knew that last part because Miranda told me. She told me that Father wouldn’t have had to sell me if he could have gotten his hands on my money.”

“Miranda is your stepmother?”

“According to the laws of Illinois, yes.”

Caleb laughed. It was good to see that prickly side of her.

“The laws of the land are made by men, and men, by and large, don’t seem to be able to see women very clearly. Our Dad died when we were small—kind of the opposite of what you went through—and our Mom raised us, took care of the ranch. She was one hell of a woman. She could stand toe to toe with any man. And I see some of her in you.”

He didn’t expect to see Sarah’s face soften at his words or for her to crawl into his lap, put her arms around his neck, and lay her mouth so sweetly on his.

Caleb wrapped his arms around her, the taste of her igniting his hunger. He kissed her long and deep and found her a more compelling drink than the coffee he’d just sipped. His tongue swept her mouth, challenged hers to a dance hot and sultry, a dance where clothes vanished and only the glide of body against body mattered.

Sun still up or not, he wanted to be inside her. She excited him as no other woman ever had. She wanted him with such honest desire, he wondered if she understood what a miracle she was to him, to them both. Her need for his brother matched her need for him, and he would surely spend the rest of his life thanking God for her.

“Caleb.”

The note in Joshua’s voice alerted him. He gently weaned his lips from Sarah’s, tucked her into him, and looked to see what had his brother’s attention.

From the west, stretched across the landscape like a snake moving sideways, the sun a blazing orb above them, a line of horses and riders approached. The cloud of dust in their wake left it unclear as to whether there was more than one row of them, if they had reinforcements waiting farther back.

Caleb got to his feet slowly. Not taking his eyes off the advancing column, he set Sarah behind him. His rifle rested in its scabbard at the back of his saddle and out of reach. He had every faith in his Colt .45 side arm, but pulling out his Peacemaker would raise the situation to

an entirely new level, and Caleb wasn't certain he wanted to do that unless he had to.

"Cherokee," Joshua said. Caleb shot a glance beside him and saw Joshua had also left his gun holstered.

He could feel Sarah trembling behind him. He couldn't blame her. "No matter what, Sarah, don't say anything," he whispered.

The column drew steadily closer, and it became easier to make out the details. Bare-chested warriors, black hair pulled back, and adorned by the traditional black and red headdress, black paint marking faces that appeared fierce and forbidding.

The column stopped barely two hundred feet from them. Silence thicker than the dust kicked up by their horses' hooves descended.

Three horses stepped forward, two paces ahead of the rest. The riders waited a moment as if giving them a chance to see just what they faced and just how unhappy the warriors were.

"The one in the middle of the three is their Chief," Caleb said softly.

The horses came toward them, bringing their riders closer, so close that it became easier to discern the individual features of the men, to judge the degree of hostility each face wore.

The three riders stopped. The man on the left of the Chief leaned forward on his horse. He scowled, his manner brusque.

"You are trespassing on the land of the Ani-Yun' wiya. Our Chief demands to know the reason why."

Chapter 12

Adam was worried about Caleb and Joshua. He couldn't push away the thread of guilt that wound its way into his thoughts. He'd been the one to get them into whatever mess they had ended up neck deep in. Having been alerted by Sheriff MacFarlane's telegram, he had immediately begun to come up with a plan. But the plain truth of the matter was that until they crossed the border into Texas, he could do very little to help or protect them.

The sun dropped to the horizon, providing a blazing sunset to trumpet the end of the day. Temperatures had soared this afternoon, and if the colors on display in the sunset could be counted any indication, there'd be no relief from the heat tomorrow.

Adam couldn't rid himself of the feeling of impending doom. He looked down at the notes he'd made. He'd reached out to several friends and colleagues, asking questions, looking closely where he'd not looked before. He was uncovering the puzzle pieces one by one, but they didn't seem to fit. Things weren't adding up, and that made him nervous.

Lack of evidence didn't prevent Adam from having his suspicions. What he suspected was just plain ugly.

He got to his feet, stretched. The door opened, and his relief officer, Sergeant Fred Saunders, nodded as he came in. He hung his hat on a peg and tossed his saddle bag on his desk.

"Beamer cattle drive is on the outskirts of town. You may have a lively night, Fred. Peter Beamer promised he'd keep an eye on his crew but once they get drinking..." Adam let the sentence hang, giving Fred a huge smile.

“Did anyone even once consider that having the primary cattle trail pass so close to Waco was going to just be a continual headache for us poor, over-worked, and under-paid rangers?”

Adam laughed and slapped his deputy on the back. “Yeah, likely for about a minute and then thoughts of all the money to be made pushed that piece of logic away. I’ll be at home tonight, so if you need me, someone can come get me.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. If I need immediate reinforcements, I’ll wake up Johnny and Wilson since they both live here in town.”

“There you go.” Adam grabbed his hat and headed out. He always took a few minutes at the end of the day to walk The Square, making contact with the citizens of his town. He’d been assigned to Waco right after the war. When the Rangers had been disbanded, he’d bought himself a small ranch outside town. He could make a living that way if he had to. He’d been born and raised on a ranch and knew cattle nearly as well as he knew the law. But his first love had always been working as a lawman, and he’d considered enlisting in the new Texas State Police at the time.

Then Governor Coke got elected, and he and the legislature had the good sense to reinstate the Rangers.

That was a few years ago. Adam had every confidence the Texas Rangers would remain a force to be reckoned with for some time to come.

Waco was a good town. They saw a lot of transients but for the most part, those tended to be law-abiding folk, only interested in doing their business then relaxing at the end of the day. They got a lot of drovers, thanks to the Chisholm Trail running so close to Waco. He shook his head. His town stood on the verge becoming a city, growing every year, and he didn’t know how he really felt about that because he was a country boy at heart.

Adam ended his rounds at the livery where he collected his horse, Houston. He lived about forty minutes outside of town. His nightly

ride generally made for good thinking time. But this night, as he made his way along the familiar trail, no answers came to him.

A soft glow of light shining through the window confirmed he wouldn't be alone tonight. The sense of relief and pleasure felt like a second wind. Opening the door to his barn, he heard a soft huff of air. Warren's horse, Jasper, greeted him as he unsaddled Houston. He gave both animals some feed, water, and affectionate pats before heading to the house.

Warren sat at the kitchen table, reading over some notes while something that smelled wonderful simmered on the stove.

He looked up when Adam came in.

"There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you'd been held up at the office. I heard Beamer's crew has arrived again."

"Fool holds up a Texas Ranger, he deserves to be shot."

"Now that's funny," Warren said, deadpan.

Having Warren in his home waiting for him at the end of the day defined pure joy for Adam. They tended to keep their expressions of affection for those times when they were behind closed and locked doors, with the lamps extinguished.

Not this time. Moved by emotion, Adam walked over to the table, bent down, and took Warren's lips with his.

He loved the taste of his lover and took the kiss deep. His right hand fisted in Warren's hair, as if he needed to keep the other man from escaping. Of course, escape wasn't on Warren's agenda. Warren did his own grabbing of Adam's shirt while his tongue slid and stroked and teased and tasted. Adam felt his cock harden and knew if he didn't ease back, he'd have Lawyer Jessop stripped and bent over the table in minutes. Fucking him would have to wait until those closed doors and extinguished lamps had come to pass. He would never risk Warren to the legal consequences of their passion. A kiss was as risky as he was willing to get.

Adam drew back slowly. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too. Why don't you sit down? I'll dish us up some stew."

Adam caressed his hand over Warren's hair, then took a seat at the table. "You know, you could sell your place and move in here. Everybody knows you're no rancher or farmer, that the land you're sitting on is just going to waste. They know we're friends. They've also seen us both with women. There are no whispers in that way about either of us. It could work."

"You want me to move in with you because it could work?"

Adam recognized the tone. In the two years he and Warren had been lovers, Warren had been the one most intent on talking about their feelings. What they had together was more than just the pleasure they took from each other's bodies.

Adam had never been one to talk about such things before Warren. He'd always just done what he needed to do in secret, usually in the larger cities he sometimes visited, and usually just one-time encounters with other men he'd never see again.

This thing with Warren was different and made him feel and want different things. He looked the other man in the eye. "No. I want you to move in here because I liked the way it felt coming home tonight, knowing you would be here. I want you to move in here because I love you, and I want us to be together every night, not just once in a while."

"It still has to be in the dark behind locked doors, Adam. And one or both of us will still likely end up getting married some day. Just to keep appearances up."

"I know. But in the meantime, maybe you could think about it?"

"All right, I will. Now let's have dinner. After you told me about that telegram you received from Springfield, I did a little digging of my own. While we eat, I'll fill you in on what I found out."

* * * *

Sarah shook with fear.

Caleb had pushed her behind him. He'd cautioned her to be quiet. He needn't have worried. Right then, she didn't believe herself capable of making a sound. Her hands clamped on his waist, and she knew he had to feel her trembling. Carefully, she moved her head so that she could peek around his shoulder and get a look at the threat that faced them.

The warriors appeared fiercer than the bold depictions she'd seen on the covers of her father's dime novels. They sat on the backs of the prettiest horses she'd ever seen. A mix of white and brown, the horses stood as proud and arrogant as the warriors astride them. No saddles encumbered the beasts, and Sarah wondered at the warriors' skill, that they could ride and control the animals without the heavy saddle and stirrups most white folk used.

One of the warriors addressed Caleb. "You are trespassing on the land of the Ani-Yun' wiya. Our Chief demands to know the reason why."

Oh God, please help. Sarah closed her eyes as she scrunched herself even closer to Caleb's back, and her mind took up a prayerful litany to the Almighty. If they were going to die, she prayed that it would be quick and painless. But mostly, she prayed for deliverance from this dangerous situation.

Caleb exhaled heavily and seemed to deflate. The warriors laughed loud and long.

"Damn it, Peter. You scared the hell out of us."

Sarah blinked, unsure she'd heard Caleb correctly. Joshua had also relaxed, shaking his head, a low rumble of curses on his lips.

The man who had spoken, as well as the one Caleb had said was the chief, got off their horses and approached.

Caleb turned and put his arm around her. "Sorry, sweetheart. It's all right. They're friends."

"Friends who would like some of your Arbuckle's," the warrior named Peter said as he drew near. He held out both arms to Caleb.

Sarah wondered if they would hug, a sight she thought just might cause her to have a case of the vapors after the fear she'd just experienced. Instead, they grasped each other's wrists by way of greeting.

"I'll make some more coffee," Joshua said. "The fire is good, so it won't take long." He laid a hand on Sarah's shoulder as he walked past her.

"Sarah, this is Peter Smith," Caleb said. He rubbed his hand up and down her arm, comforting her. She moved closer, nodded her greeting. Caleb had told her not to speak, and she was sticking to that for the time being.

Caleb turned his attention to the older man who approached. "Perhaps the chief of the Ani-Yun' wiya would tell us what this is all about?"

Sarah saw the older man nod at Caleb, then lead the way back to the fire Joshua had made. Sarah had thought Caleb would ask her to go wait by the horses. Back in Chicago when men got together to talk, they seldom wanted female company. She had no reason to assume things would be any different here in Indian Territory. But then Caleb took hold of her hand so she had no choice but to follow.

* * * *

"It is because the Keetoowah supported the blue coats that we have had the assistance of Major Mackenzie," Peter Smith said. "And yet, the settlers still come and try to steal our land."

Sarah listened quietly as the men spoke. She understood the gist of what they discussed. She found it curious that the Chief himself would remain silent. In her experience, the more important the man, the higher the rank, the more he wanted to speak. Leaders tended to dominate the conversation so that all eyes would be on them, thereby enhancing their importance.

“I do know that Major Mackenzie has been ordered to apprehend these settlers and that they *will* be charged. They *will* go to jail. My understanding is that President Hayes is a man of integrity, and that he has urged the army to honor the boundaries of Indian Territory. What does Major Mackenzie think of your war party?”

“Not a war party. The elders of the Ani-Yun' wiya are teaching their sons and grandsons the way of their people.”

“It sure as hell looked like a war party to us, until you stepped forward.”

Sarah tried not to laugh when the Chief grunted and gave one firm nod of his head.

“You should leave enforcement of the law to the army,” Joshua said. “Easier to avoid a misunderstanding that way.”

He sat on her left, as close as Caleb did on her right. The sensation of being surrounded gave her comfort. Her fear, nearly at the shattering point when these Cherokee warriors had dismounted, had calmed considerably.

Never in her life had she imagined she would be sitting around a camp fire drinking coffee with two lovers and two bare-chested Indians.

“We should teach our young our ways,” the Chief said, breaking his silence.

He looked directly at Caleb and continued in halting English. “We will lose ourselves in the White Man’s ways, so that nothing of the Ani-Yun' wiya will be left. No treaty lasts. No peace endures. We walked long miles, the Trail of Tears a line of defeat from our ancestral homes with nothing but our clothes, our horses, and our memories. We were brought to this, our new land. But soon, our new land will also be taken from us. All we will have then is the memory of our ways. This we must preserve at all costs. You are young, Benedict. You have faith. I am old. I have no more faith.”

Sarah had heard of The Trail of Tears and had thought nothing much about it. But now, sitting here and listening to the conversation,

an image formed in her mind. Perhaps because she had left her own home—if not against her will, at least against her heart—she felt empathy for these people.

She had at least known that at the end of her journey she would find a home of sorts and the means readily available to forge a new life.

It didn't take much insight for her to see that these people would have arrived in this strange new land to be met by nothing save the rivers, the trees, and the earth.

Everything that had been, gone. Anything that might be, not yet imagined. They would have, Sarah thought, sat around a fire, perhaps drinking hot coffee, with no more roof over their heads than she had now and no more idea of what came next than she had at this moment.

The Trail of Tears. She thought that most definitely an appropriate name.

The men got to their feet, and Sarah realized with some embarrassment that she'd missed the last part of their conversation.

"If you ride as far as the two-river fork tomorrow, I will see that you are met with fresh horses and some meat for your dinner."

"It would be welcome."

Caleb and Peter parted with the same small ritual they'd observed when they'd greeted each other. Despite his advanced age, the Chief vaulted onto his horse with ease. While they talked for nearly an hour, the rest of the warriors had remained still and silent on their mounts. Now, at a hand signal from Peter, the massive force turned as one. The line of warriors parted, making room for the leaders to join them once more. Then they headed off in the direction from which they'd come.

Sarah hadn't realized how taxing the encounter had been until she watched the Indians ride off. She exhaled heavily, her head feeling for the moment that it was simply too heavy to hold up.

“You’re a hell of a woman, Sarah,” Caleb said. He eased her into his arms and held her tight. Grateful for the gesture, Sarah clung right back.

“You are indeed,” Joshua seconded. “Not many women would have held silent after a scare like that. So if you feel like tearing a strip off either one of us, you go right on ahead. Get some of the fright and the mad out of you. Figure you’re owed that much.”

Sarah laughed. As soon as Caleb eased his hold of her, Joshua pulled her close and gave her a good squeeze. When he set her back, she said, “No, but thank you so much for offering. How far is it to two-river fork?”

“If we leave before dawn, we should make it by nightfall,” Caleb said. “We’ll have to push the horses, but Peter promised us fresh ones. Indian ponies make very good mounts.”

“And he said there would be meat.”

“He did indeed.” Caleb confirmed.

Sarah sighed. “I’m looking forward to the fish you’re going to catch, but I’m hungry for meat. What do you think it will be? Rabbit? Venison?” Then a small detail she’d read in one of her father’s books several years before came back to her, and she shuddered. The writer had claimed that the wild Indians of the plains loved to hunt and eat snake.

Her men must have understood the look on her face.

“Relax, sweetheart,” Caleb said as Joshua laughed. “They’re ranchers and farmers, for the most part. It will likely be beef.”

Sarah sighed in relief. “Well then, that’s good.”

As soon as she relaxed, Joshua hugged her again. “Pity we’ll be eating beef tomorrow night. I had my heart set on roasted rattlesnake.”

Sarah squinted, piercing him with a stare, as she barely controlled her shudder. “You’ll pay for that one,” she promised.

She couldn’t help but smile as Joshua, laughing, headed toward the river to catch dinner.

Chapter 13

In the glow of the lamp, his naked flesh looked impossibly bronze, impossibly perfect.

Adam had secured the doors to his house and locked them against the possibility of intrusion. For tonight, he wanted to create a sanctuary of safety. Warren obviously wanted the same, for he'd secured a curtain over the bedroom window, the heavy wool blanket fastened at the top and the bottom, ensuring no prying eyes could spy into the room.

Adam leaned against the doorframe, his eyes drinking in every delicious line, every glorious, naked inch of Warren Jessop.

Sometimes he wondered if the inherent danger in coming together as lovers formed part of the allure for him. He knew himself well enough to understand that danger was part of the reason he'd become a Texas Ranger. And then he would look into Warren's deep brown eyes and know even if that *did* form part of the attraction, not just any man would do. It was Warren he craved.

Adam stepped into the bedroom, then closed and locked the door behind him.

"I laid alone here each night while you were gone, imagining that you were here with me instead. When I closed my eyes, I could sense you. I could smell you, almost taste you. You have a flavor like no other. Have I ever told you that? I imagined what I would do to and with you if I had you here with me."

Warren's expression softened, and he looked at Adam in a way that made his heart catch. He came toward him, his gaze fastened on Adam's cock. "I love the sight of you, hard for me."

“I’ll always be hard for you.”

Warren took one more step, licked his lips. He would have dropped to his knees then, but Adam reached out, laid his hand on his arm.

“No. You’re always taking care of me. This time, let me take care of you.”

He didn’t care if the floorboards bit into his knees. He only cared about the taste of Warren’s cock, the sensation of it in his mouth. His hands played up and down his lover’s sides, caressing naked flesh, sliding around to cup the globes of his ass. Adam sucked Warren’s cock deep, then pulled back, a steady up and down motion, his tongue sliding along the hot shaft. He only cared about pleasuring his lover. Warren’s groan of delight, the shaking of his fingers as he speared them through Adam’s hair thrilled Adam, did things to his emotions he’d never imagined.

Warren drew in a deep breath, and shivered.

“On the bed,” he whispered. “Like we did the last time. I want your cock in my mouth, too.”

Lying head to foot, Adam petted and caressed, his hands stroking Warren’s balls even as he felt his own balls stroked, then licked, then, *oh God*, sucked into the hot, wet cavern of Warren’s mouth.

“Give it to me. *Please*, Adam.”

Adam didn’t even think about his lover’s impassioned plea. He could only react, thrust his cock as he felt the seed erupt from his body as the shivers of pleasure shook him to the core. He could only draw hard on his lover’s cock until he, too, drank the essence of life, until he felt his lover dissolve into the same rapturous trembling that came with the pinnacle of pleasure.

For long minutes, the sound of gasping breaths filled the semi-dark. When Warren stirred, Adam moved, pulled him up and into his arms.

“I should go to the other bedroom,” Warren whispered.

“Shh. You’ll not. You’ll stay here tonight.” Adam continued to hold Warren even though trembles still wracked his body. He managed to cover them both with a blanket. As the heat of passion cooled, as the sweat of sexual pleasure evaporated, the wool covered them, kept them warm.

“Someone might...”

“No one will know, Warren. We’re safe. The doors are locked. The windows locked and shaded. For this night, we’re safe.”

“I *hate* this. I hate always being afraid.”

“It’s all right. I don’t blame you for being afraid. Truth is I am, too.” Adam had never suffered any consequences for his choices. Warren had. Once he’d been badly beaten, left naked in a field near his native Philadelphia. That incident had occurred several years before, but the scars, Adam knew, ran deep. As did Adam’s need to protect his lover.

“I’ll keep you safe, Warren. I promise.”

“I love you, Adam.”

“I love you, too.”

They stayed silent, and Adam wondered if Warren had fallen asleep. He still clung close, holding tight as he only would allow himself to do in the dark of night.

“I’ve been thinking about that conversation I told you about.”

“Which one?” Adam continued to stroke Warren’s arms and back. The man had stopped shivering, seemed to be relaxing.

“The geologist. Do you think there’s anything to what he said?”

“Likely. There are always new and modern things being invented. We live in a very progressive age.”

“Progressive in some ways, perhaps.”

Adam didn’t know what to say to that. He allowed Warren his small bouts of bitterness, for they came few and far between.

“Sorry,” Warren said. He sprawled onto his back. Adam released him, then turned onto his side, propped his head up, and watched him.

He kept silent, for he'd learned his lover preferred quiet when he wanted to work things out in his mind.

"I'm wondering if the two things are related." He turned his head and met Adam's gaze.

Adam frowned, recalling what Warren had told him over dinner, the fact that Tyrone Maddox seemed to be buying up as much land as he could get his hands on between Waco and the border to the Indian Territory. Warren had met and spoken to a lawyer from Austin who'd been on his way out to see Maddox. The man had stopped in at the courthouse in Waco on a separate matter—a matter he wasn't going to tell Maddox about, he'd said, as it was none of his concern. Of course, not telling Maddox allowed him to charge the man more for making the "special trip", the lawyer had said, even if Maddox seemed to be running out of capital.

"I never would have let the man carry on, but I knew you had concerns about Maddox. I'm certain if he'd known why Maddox wanted that land, he'd have said."

"You think Maddox got wind of the geologist's report and is buying up land on speculation?"

"Men have done it when they thought rail lines would be going through. Why not for this, too?" Warren asked.

"I suppose it's possible. I just can't see where anyone would make any money from it, I guess. I mean, how much kerosene is burned in a year?" He fell silent for a moment. The piece of news that was most unsettling was that bit about Maddox running low on capital. Looking at the man, and the way he carried on, you'd never know it.

"You have a point," Warren conceded.

His heavy sigh made Adam smile. Warren spent far too much time thinking and not enough having fun. "The matter will keep." He stroked his hand down Warren's chest, pleased when the man's cock came to life. "Will you let me fuck you?"

The mixture of heat and fear in Warren's eyes brought all of Adam's emotions into play. He knew Warren feared discovery. He also knew he loved being fucked.

"Can we put out the light?"

One of Adam's cherished dreams was to help Warren become more comfortable with himself, with who he was, and how he loved. But until that day arrived, Adam would continue to do all he could to show Warren that he *was* loved, completely and unconditionally.

"Of course we can."

It took only a moment to get out of bed, go over to the lamp, and blow it out. The scent of the kerosene rose up strong for one moment, then dissipated.

Adam crawled back onto the bed, his hands seeking and finding his lover. Warren was waiting for him, eager to return caresses and kisses. When Adam wet his fingers and stroked them over his anus, Warren began to pant, his arousal wringing a keening moan that stirred Adam's passion.

Rolling to his knees, he begged without words. Rising above him, Adam pressed the head of his cock against the prepared opening, groaning in pure bliss as his cock sank slow and deep.

The fears of the night forgotten for the moment, Adam gloried in the depths of his lover's body, taking and giving until nothing in the world existed but the pleasure and the rapture.

* * * *

No wind teased the flames of the fire as golden flickering light bathed her lovers. Sarah would never forget the sight of them, naked, aglow. Caleb looked down at her, his smile promising earthy delights, pleasures she now craved more than water or food. In the back of her mind lay the certain knowledge that if not for them, she would have spent the rest of her life without passion, without love. What the three of them did together would certainly be considered a sin by others.

But she could not—*would not*—believe something that felt so right, so destined, could ever truly be wrong.

She was meant for these men just as they had been meant for her.

“Serious look on your face, sweetheart,” Caleb came down beside her on the blankets, his face above hers, the glittering heat in his eyes potent.

“That’s because I seriously want you.” She’d always known she had a bold streak in her but never imagined it manifesting in quite this way. And while she knew in the light of day saying such a thing would make her blush, here in the dark of night, naked, the words freed her. She turned her head slightly to look at Joshua who stood above her, his magnificent cock rigid and ready. “I want you both.”

“Will you take us both at the same time?” Caleb asked.

She turned back to face him. “Something new?”

“Yes. Something new and definitely naughty.” He kissed her, his tongue stroking her lips then sliding into her mouth, tasting, dancing with hers. “It may hurt a little the first time.”

His caution whispered against her mouth. Why did those words, that veiled threat, thrill her?

Joshua knelt then on the other side of her. The heat from their bodies warmed her to her core.

“We want to be inside you at the same time,” Joshua said against her neck. He nuzzled and she stretched, giving him more room. That action brought her lips closer to Caleb. Needing his taste, she stretched just a bit more and mated her mouth to his.

Hot and wet, spicy and daring, she explored his lips, sucked his tongue into her mouth, and felt her arousal climbing. When he gently parted his lips from hers, Joshua reached for her, drew her onto her side. He brought her left leg up, draped it over his hips, and pulled her flush against him.

Sarah didn’t wait but wrapped her arms around Joshua’s neck and kissed him. Her hunger knew no bounds as she undulated her hips,

rubbing her mons against his stiff cock. She felt her moisture rushing to bathe her inner channel, prepare her for his penetration.

Something wet and cool brushed across her anus, back and forth touches that sent a shiver over her entire body.

“Here,” Caleb whispered against the shell of her ear. “I want to fuck you right here while Joshua has his cock in your cunt. We’ll both fuck you at the same time. Are you bold enough?”

“*Oh, God.*” She’d had no idea such a thing was possible, let alone done. She heard the sound, knew Caleb sucked his finger into his mouth. Then he placed it there, right there against her back entrance, and began to push.

Joshua held his cock and rubbed it against her slit, teasing that tiny bud that gave her so much trembling temptation.

Caleb sucked the shell of her ear into his mouth, and she surged her hips forward in response, capturing Joshua’s cock between the lips of her pussy.

Joshua thrust into her, impaling her deeply.

Sarah sighed, the sensation of fullness a pleasure of its own. Her nipples pressed against Joshua’s chest, and his hand on her hip, securing her, made her feel even more possessed.

His mouth took hers, his tongue slick and tasty.

Caleb shifted behind her, moved closer, and pressed the head of his cock against her anus.

“Let me fuck you here, Sarah.”

The heat of his cock there made her womb clench. She wanted to thrust against him, the need a new kind of arousal.

She would have them both inside her at the same time!

“Yes.”

“Hold on to me,” Joshua said.

Joshua pulled her closer so that her breasts pressed even tighter against him. She was bent forward, her ass reaching toward Caleb.

Then he pressed his hot, swollen rod harder on her tiny virgin entrance. She felt the burning as her body began to open, the tiny pucker stretching and giving way one heartbeat at a time.

Joshua reached down and found the tiny button of her clit at the top of her pussy. He stroked a finger back and forth, his actions urging tiny waves of pleasure.

"I can't get enough of you," Caleb whispered as he thrust his hips forward in short jabs. His cock never left that small hole, and each forward surge brought him just a tiny bit more into her.

"When I'm not inside you, I want to be. You feel so good around my cock, Sarah. You belong to us. Now and forever. Ours. Only ours."

The burning turned to a hotter pain as he pressed against her, but instead of making Sarah cringe away from it, this pain increased her arousal, made her want more. Caleb's hands stroked her sides and her bottom, Joshua continued to stroke her clit. He took her mouth with his, his tongue salacious, his mouth sucking, owning hers. Then his lips caressed the flesh of her neck, and Caleb reached a hand into her hair, drew her head back. His lips devoured hers, his hunger for her so great, so forceful, she could only open her mouth, surrender to him completely.

Her anus opened, and the head of his cock slipped inside.

"Hold still, Sarah." Caleb hissed, his breath hot on her neck. She felt his shivers, or were they hers? *Hold still?* She couldn't.

"More." Her hips searched forward, then back, seeking, reaching. Close? There was a greedy yearning beyond close, she knew that now. Would the ecstasy be beyond, as well?

"So tight," Joshua said.

Sarah wondered if he could feel the presence of his brother, if her flesh that separated them allowed them that sensation.

The thought sent her over the edge of close to *there*. Sarah screamed as the waves of bliss broke over her, spasm after spasm of

thrilling rapture that consumed her body, took over her will. Her hips surged back, then forward and back again.

“Damn.” Caleb’s near cry alerted her that his control had snapped as he pumped in and out of her body.

“*So good*,” Joshua said, his hips thrusting in the same cadence as Caleb plundered her body, in and out.

Sarah screamed again, the rapturous pounding of two cocks feeding the firestorm of sensation. Pleasure became everything and all. It became more and rose higher and she wondered, faintly, how a body could endure such a maelstrom of emotion and sensation and survive.

“I love you.”

They’d said it at the same time, together, two male voices sounding as one. Sarah drifted in the aftermath, tiny shocks rippling her skin.

“I love you.” She said it once for both, and wondered in that moment if they weren’t all transformed, somehow remade from three into one.

Chapter 14

His brother had been born first, leading the way out of their mother's womb. Joshua could see no reason to question God's judgment in this ordering and was content to let Caleb lead the way ever since.

If there were times when he would have challenged that order, it was only when in leading Caleb put himself in danger.

Joshua would die to protect his brother.

He knew Caleb felt the same way about him. He considered himself one of the luckiest people in the world, that his brother and best friend were one and the same. They knew of other families where the siblings not only didn't consider themselves to be friends, they were very nearly enemies.

Joshua couldn't understand that. He wondered if their closeness did come from the fact they were twins and came to the conclusion that was probably so.

Up ahead, Caleb, riding the point, stopped and raised his hand. Joshua looked around, his senses heightened. This would be their last full day on the trail. Denison was only a few hours ride ahead. Shortly now, they would be leaving Indian Territory behind and entering the great state of Texas.

Joshua thought he might feel safer in Indian Territory.

The sun hung low in the western horizon. Around them, the land stretched out, rolling grasslands dotted with forests. The plentiful rivers and lakes of the last week had ended. A few rivers still meandered through the land but fewer and farther between. Indian

Territory seemed a veritable Garden of Eden compared to his home state.

The wind picked up a couple of hours before, and within its swirls, dust and grit littered the air. Just ahead, where the trail split, south-west to the Choctaw city of Durant and south to the relatively new railroad town of Denison, a small river gurgled over rocks. The water in early spring neared the edges of the banks. Now, edging into full summer, Joshua knew the waterway resembled a stream more than a river. They'd have water to heat for coffee and maybe for a bit of a clean-up from the trail dust. They likely wouldn't be able to sink chin-deep, though.

By that river, they'd make camp for the night. Tomorrow they'd get a room in the hotel he and Caleb saw their last time through Denison. Joshua smiled as he thought about providing Sarah with a hot bath tomorrow night, the first since they'd left Springfield. This time, he and Caleb would be on hand to scrub her back and enjoy the luxury of steaming water themselves.

Caleb turned his horse so that he faced them. "I think we're on our own, now."

Joshua let his gaze sweep to the east and then the west. Since their encounter with the Cherokee, they hadn't really been alone. There'd been Cherokee and then Choctaw warriors within a few minutes ride, shadowing them. Now as he turned his senses to his surroundings, he noticed what Caleb had noticed first. Their escort had left them.

"Probably because we're close to the border," Joshua said.

"Yeah, that's what I figure. Let's make camp. Then one of us can ride into Durant."

"We're not all going into town?" Sarah asked.

Joshua heard the note of wistfulness in her voice and knew Caleb did, too. He and his brother stared at each other. Caleb sent him a look that Joshua had no trouble reading.

"We both know you want a bath and a real bed, sweetheart," Joshua said. "Thing is, we're expecting trouble. Our friend Adam,

who's a Texas Ranger, will have arranged for us to have some reinforcements once we get to Denison. You'll have that bed and bath there tomorrow night. Here in Indian Territory, it's just the three of us. We can't risk you."

"All right. I did promise to trust you, and I do. I'm just getting a little tired of sleeping outside on the ground."

Joshua urged his horse to close the distance between him and Sarah. Their current mounts, spotted Indian ponies, had many advantages over the horses they'd left Springfield on. Cherokee-trained horses made the best rides in the world, in his opinion. They could ride faster and longer and took less time to recover. Now, as Joshua edged his mount right next to Sarah's, neither horse shied being forced to stand so close together.

He leaned over and kissed Sarah's lips lightly. "That is the first word of complaint I've heard out of you, and it's not even what I'd consider a real complaint. Most *men* I know would have been crying long before now. You're one hell of a woman, Sarah Maddox."

Sarah seemed not to know what to do with his compliment. He just smiled at her, then looked over at Caleb when his brother approached.

"Joshua is exactly right. I wish we could take you to Durant. But your safety is far more important than your comfort."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm just tired."

"Hell, Sarah, don't apologize. We're part of the reason you're so tired." Joshua knew it for the truth. He could tell from Caleb's expression that his brother had the same idea. "Maybe after I get back from town and we have some dinner, Caleb and I can do something to refresh you for a change, instead of just using you for our greedy pleasure."

"I'll have you know, sir, I find your greedy pleasure pretty darn refreshing."

Joshua couldn't hold back his laughter. "That may be, sweetheart, but I bet you'll find what we have in mind even more so."

* * * *

“How does that feel?”

“Mmm.” Sarah drifted in a sea of warmth and relaxation, the effort required to speak somehow just not in her power at the moment.

Joshua had ridden into Durant shortly after they’d made camp and returned just a half hour before.

He and Caleb had friends in the town, and he’d gone to enlist their aid in monitoring the area. Durant lay close to Denison, Caleb had explained, and it could very well be that whoever had hired the bastards who’d tried to kill her might have been laying in wait for her in Durant.

Joshua had brought back more than information from town.

“One of our friend’s mothers makes a lot of medicines and poultices and liniments. One in particular we think you’ll like. And we know how to use it.”

She now could attest that indeed, they did.

They’d put the bedrolls together as they had been doing ever since they’d become lovers. Then, as a special treat, Joshua spread a piece of very fine linen over the wool blankets.

They’d heated water and bathed her as she stood naked before them. Even their most intimate touch failed to conjure her embarrassment as they interspersed their cleansing caresses with kisses. When she was clean and dry, she lay down on her stomach on the bed they’d made and, oh, the fine linen felt delicious against her naked flesh.

The brothers then knelt on the makeshift bed, one on either side of her. “You’re wearing too many clothes.” Neither of them was undressed yet, and she didn’t think that was fair.

“Tonight isn’t about us, remember? Now hush,” Caleb said. “Just enjoy what we’re going to do to you.”

They put their hands on her, hands that held some sort of fragrant liniment that seemed to warm as they worked it into her flesh. From her back to her arms, to her bottom and her legs, and even her toes, not one inch of her flesh escaped their ministrations.

She'd not wanted to say how sore she'd been getting the last couple of days. Her back and her limbs ached with all the unfamiliar activity, from all the horseback riding, and their more intimate nighttime forays.

Caleb and Joshua erased that soreness now as if it never existed.

When they cradled her hands, rubbed, caressed each finger, Sarah sighed. This bed beneath her may have been simple blankets on the hard ground, but with their attention to her body, she became so relaxed, so comfortable, she could have been on the most lavish feather bed ever made.

"Over, sweetheart. Close your eyes and just drift." Hands turned her so she lay supine. It was easy to close her eyes, as her lids became too heavy to keep open.

Drift. What an accurate word for the state she'd assumed. *Drift.* She recalled one summer when she and her cousins used a small boat to explore the lake bordering their property. The sensation of rocking gently on the water that lazy afternoon had lulled her into a half sleep. So it was now. The treatment her men gave her put her in mind of that long ago summer. Yes, she drifted, and it felt fabulous.

Drifting loosened the control she'd held on her thoughts, on the dark reality of having a killer on her trail. Drifting sent her mind to wandering where she'd kept it back. She'd not allowed herself to think of what the future might hold. She had convinced herself that facing Tyrone Maddox would be a simple affair, that he would be a reasonable man who would, once he received the promise of compensation, be happy to grant her an annulment.

She'd done a good job of willing herself to forget how uncomfortable she felt in his presence, how truly frightened she'd been on her wedding night. She'd been embarrassed afterward but at

the time gave thanks he'd fallen asleep when he had. She'd been terrified to let him touch her. Now, she felt terrified to face him at all.

"Please don't let me be alone with him."

Silly to say that out loud, with no conversation leading up to it. Neither Caleb nor Joshua could read her mind, after all.

"We won't, Sarah. We won't let you out of our sight. Maddox won't get anywhere near you. We promise."

She hadn't had to explain herself. They knew her well. Almost, she mused, better than she knew herself. They had promised to take care of her and keep her safe.

Sleep crept toward her, gently wooing her to its presence. Her lovers would stay with her, guard her. She could safely drift, safely let her mind relax. Satisfied, feeling cherished and secure, she slept.

* * * *

One could always find someone with a price. Liam Larson stepped out of the livery stable into the late afternoon sunshine. The boy who worked for the blacksmith was more than eager to answer his questions. Liam knew he would do so again, and it would only cost him two bits.

He'd arrived in town before his target. Good.

Denison, Texas, had all the signs of a town racing toward either prosperity or hell, depending on one's point of view. Built at the conflux of the Red River and the MKT rail depot only a few short years before, the location, guaranteeing service by major transportation routes, meant the region would prosper.

Liam experienced a flood of pride. Jamie had foreseen this development and purchased land here, land that would sell at a healthy profit at the right moment.

He made his way to the train depot, his eyes scanning Main Street. The corner of his mouth turned up when he noted the handful of new businesses that had sprung up since his last visit the year before.

Once the bridge over the Red River opened and the first train crossed it, the population of Denison—named after one of the railroad big wigs—had exploded. Some said more than three thousand souls came to live here in the first one hundred days. He'd ridden through once just after the town was established, checking on the parcels Jamie purchased. In those early days, a man could drink his way through town, seeing as nearly every third building had been a saloon.

The town's changed some, at least on the surface. Liam knew that while the powers that be determined to "clean up" the place, they'd only succeeded in moving the questionable establishments a block south. Men will have their sins, Liam thought, come hell or high water. Greedy entrepreneurs, too impatient to wait for proper buildings, found an alternative and so one had only to walk a block south to see tents housing games of chance and bawdy houses.

Arriving at the train depot, he went in and presented himself at the counter.

"Good afternoon. I'm Mr. John Smith. I'm expecting a letter."

While the post office was open and operational in Denison, one could also send a letter via the railroad from one station to another.

The rail employee behind the counter wore the expression of a man suffering from a constricted bowel. "Yes sir, Mr. Smith. Came in day before yesterday. Right over here." He got up, went over to the cubby-hole shelf behind him.

Liam took the letter outside to open it. He'd sent a telegram to Jamie from Springfield, worded in such a way that his lover would understand what happened, but any prying eyes, whether idle or behind a badge, would see nothing alarming in the communication.

The next day, he'd received a return telegram telling him the package would arrive in Denison, and so to Denison he came.

Now he could read his lover's words, unfettered by subterfuge. Liam's brow creased as he realized that his beloved Jamie wasn't enraged, as he'd thought might be the case, but *afraid*.

He would gladly kill the Maddox woman, just for this alone.

Folding the missive carefully, he tucked it into his coat pocket. His eyes scanned the street. The sun would soon set. He'd arrived before the others. His early arrival gave him the advantage of scouting locations. Only one hotel had been erected, although for a price, a man could stay the night at one of the whore houses.

He didn't have to think long or hard over that one. That locale would bring with it the added bonus of seeming to disappear. No one paid any attention to anyone else on Skiddy Row. The new sheriff, a man reputed to be tough as nails, seemed happy to leave that section of town to itself as long as it didn't spread onto Main Street. He would be safe there, and that cover would afford him the best chance for success.

However, just the thought of stepping into such an establishment, even for a good reason, simply made his skin crawl.

He'd take a room at the hotel and check out tomorrow after the target and her gunslinger escorts arrived.

He didn't need whores to help him disappear. He could manage that feat very well all on his own.

Chapter 15

“How about a bath, followed by loving, followed by a nap, followed by dinner?”

Caleb’s softly spoken question pulled Sarah out of her sadness. She’d just been thinking about how she would miss the quiet evenings alone on the trail with just the three of them. While she looked forward to a real bath and a proper bed, she’d gotten used to sleeping between two hard, warm male bodies and deeply regretted she would have to do without tonight.

They were about to check in to Denison’s one hotel. She would never regret the choices she’d made, and she looked forward to other times when perhaps it would be just the three of them alone again. However, she wouldn’t flout convention. That wouldn’t gain her anything and could, instead, bring nothing but heartache to them all.

Sadly, she couldn’t celebrate the love she felt for Caleb and Joshua openly.

Caleb’s words, whispered as they’d entered the Katy Hotel, filled her with excitement, even as she wondered how such a feat could be managed.

He left her standing with Joshua and approached the registration desk. “Good afternoon. My wife, my brother, and I need a room. We’ll only be staying one night.”

Sarah nearly dropped her jaw when she heard Caleb address the man behind the hotel desk. Whatever else Caleb and the man discussed was lost to her as Joshua moved closer.

“You didn’t think we’d let you sleep alone?”

His whispered words not only tickled her ear but stirred her insides. "I feared that I'd have to."

Joshua leaned forward and added just two words, "Never again."

Never again. Joshua's promise warmed her. In a matter of moments, Caleb was leading the way to a room.

"The bath will be up in about an hour. I'm going to go see the sheriff, but I'll be back." Caleb bent and placed a kiss on Sarah's lips. "You rest. And when I get back, Joshua and I are going to very much enjoy getting our hands on your wet, naked body."

Sarah stared at the closed door for a long minute after Caleb closed it behind him. Joshua's soft chuckle made her blink and look at him.

"You're asleep on your feet, Sarah. Come on, let's both stretch out on this softer-than-the-ground bed. We'll rearrange the order of things and nap first."

Sarah hadn't even noticed the bed. Looking at it now, she thought they *might* just all fit on it, if they lay on their sides.

She dropped her hat on one of the chairs, then sat down on the edge of the bed. She sank into the mattress and sighed. The mattress was made not of ticking but feathers, an unexpected luxury in a frontier town.

"I just realized how much I miss my own bed," she said around a yawn.

Joshua knelt by her feet and helped her take off her boots. "You've been wonderful, sweetheart. Up you go."

"I'm still dressed."

"And so will I be. That's right, stretch out but move over."

Sarah yawned again, then watched as Joshua tossed his hat aside and kicked off his own boots.

"After that wonderful sleep last night, I shouldn't be so tired."

"It's because you know the trail ride is over. It'll be train from here to Waco. We both know you're not looking forward to the last leg of this journey. That will make you tired, too."

Sarah sighed as she set her head on Joshua's shoulder. "You're right. I'm really not looking forward to facing Tyrone J. Maddox." She intoned it in such a way as to try and make him sound less threatening to herself. She wondered if he could feel the slight tremble just saying the man's name aloud caused. Then he proved he did.

"You don't have to be afraid, Sarah. You're ours, and we protect what's ours. We'll keep you safe. We won't leave you alone with him, not even for a heart-beat of time."

Sarah snuggled into Joshua, the strength of his arms a wonderful reassurance. She wasn't certain what the future would bring, but she'd come to trust the brothers Benedict.

* * * *

The town had changed since he'd been here just a year and a half before. Caleb noted the new buildings, the somewhat tidier streets, even as he assessed the people around him. It was late afternoon on a warm early summer day with not that many people about.

He looked for familiar faces. Sheriff MacFarlane in Springfield had shown him a few wanted posters, reminded him of some of the criminal element roaming the south-west at the moment. They didn't know about every man who'd sell the use of his gun for a few dollars, but they had a good idea of some of them. So as he made his way along Main Street, he kept his eyes open and his senses on alert.

Caleb encountered no one who looked familiar on the street. Inside the sheriff's office proved another matter entirely.

"Hey, Red," he greeted, shaking the sheriff's hand, "I'd heard you'd hired on here." Caleb met Red Hall, a former Texas Ranger, a couple of years before when he and Joshua were working as members of the U.S. Marshall's service on an assignment in El Paso. The sheriff of Denison was also a friend of Adam's, a double connection.

It was the second man in the sheriff's office, sitting in a chair with one leg up on the desk, whose presence surprised Caleb.

"Well, I'll be damned! I haven't seen you in a long time, Masterson. I thought you were wearing a badge up in Kansas."

The dark-haired, mustachioed man got to his feet, his smooth, boyish face breaking out in a smile.

"Benedict! I knew you were headed this way. Red just filled me in on your situation. Where's that card-playing brother of yours?"

"Back at the hotel, keeping an eye on Sarah."

"Got a room over there myself. Yeah, I *was* wearing a badge in Kansas but not anymore."

"I heard about Ed," Caleb said. The man's brother, himself a marshal, had recently been gunned down in Dodge City. "Damned sorry, Bat. He was a hell of a good man."

"Appreciate the sentiment, Caleb, thanks. I got the bastard who killed him. You can be sure of that."

"So I heard, and good for you."

"Bat and I were just talking about your problem, Caleb," Sheriff Hall said. "I've been keeping an eye out as best I can for any known criminals. Truth is, no new ones have come to town in the last few days that I'm aware of."

"We're keeping alert, Joshua and I, assuming that something more *is* going to happen and happen here. Last chance, really, before we get to Waco." Caleb said.

"And you're pretty certain whoever wants Mrs. Maddox dead has to kill her before Waco?" Hall asked.

"Seems most likely," Caleb said. He had a theory but didn't want to reveal his thoughts. Theories weren't proof, after all.

"Course, if whoever *is* after the lady were crafty enough to hide out at one of the whorehouses here, we'd likely never see him, never even know he existed." Masterson said. "A man could lose himself in that part of town, not coming up for air until it was time to do the job."

“Thought about rousting the establishments over on Skiddy Row, but it would cause a lot of trouble I’d like to avoid. We have a working agreement, and I don’t want to be the one to break it.” The Sheriff shook his head, then shot Caleb a hard stare.

“That’s the kind of thing you and Bat can do, though. Take a look-see over on the wild side. Find out if anyone has someone hiding behind her skirts, so to speak.”

“I’m heading on over to Bobby’s place to get me a steak in a couple hours. He still has that restaurant a few doors down from where we’re staying. Perhaps we can meet up, then take a tour?”

“We’ll all meet you there. Maybe you and Joshua could take that tour after dinner. He’s a better card player than I am.”

“Taking turns with the lady? Guarding her, that is?” Masterson asked.

Caleb hadn’t thought it would be possible for him to feel embarrassed, but damned if Bat’s comment, backed up by twinkling eyes and his legendary sense of humor, didn’t do just that. He felt himself begin to bristle against the innuendo and fought back the instinctive anger.

“We won’t leave Sarah alone for a moment, if that’s what you mean,” he answered slowly. He knew Masterson had a penchant for teasing, so he didn’t take offence at the comment. At the same time, he felt honor bound to make it clear that Sarah wasn’t any kind of light skirt. “She’s far too important to us to risk even a hair on her head.”

“I look forward to meeting the lady. She sounds extraordinary. Perhaps she’d be interested in a more...experienced protector. Since I believe I have served as a lawman more than you and Josh combined.” Masterson said.

Of course, he knew Masterson was just having him on. Bat had an even higher code of ethics than he and Joshua did.

“Seriously, Caleb,” Sheriff Hall said, “I have my deputies ready to keep an eye on the three of you tonight. They’ll be there as you escort

your lady to dinner. Then if Joshua and Bat here take a tour of the seamier side of town, my boys will stay with you and Mrs. Maddox. By morning, we'll have a good idea if there's going to be trouble or not. Riding the train, tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we plan on only staying one night here in Denison."

"I'll have someone there at the depot, then, before first light. You'll have re-enforcements until you leave Denison, at any rate."

"I reckon that's about as good as it gets," Caleb said. He shook the men's hands and headed back to the hotel. It felt good to know others stood at the ready should their help be necessary. But knowing even the legendary Bat Masterson was part of his team didn't relieve Caleb's concern completely.

The skin between his shoulder blades itched. A sure sign of trouble, that.

* * * *

The hotel staff had brought the largest tub Sarah had ever seen, filled it half way with steaming water, and left a few buckets of water beside it. They'd also brought a dressing screen, setting it up to afford her privacy while she bathed.

When the last water boy had left, Caleb locked the door behind the lad, moved the dressing screen out of the way, then looked at Sarah with such hunger she wondered she didn't melt on the spot.

Joshua moved behind her. Reaching forward, he removed the top to her traveling suit, pulling it down her arms, then tossing it on the floor behind him. He nuzzled her neck, just below her ear. His hot breath caused a shiver that puckered her nipples. In front of her, Caleb reached out and stroked the hard buttons through her chemise.

"Oh, God. You make my knees weak, the both of you."

"We're delighted to hear that," Joshua said. "Especially considering you keep us in an almost constant state of horniness."

They didn't give her any time to think or to weaken. Working quickly, they stripped her bare. Caleb lifted her and set her in the tub.

"Now, we'll get to work," he mumbled. Chucking his clothes off, he knelt at the side of the tub. Picking up the soap, he wet it and lathered his hands. Then he put those hands on her.

Motion drew her attention to Joshua, who stepped to the other side of the tub, as naked as his brother.

He accepted the soap from Caleb, lathered his hands, and picked up one of her legs.

"You have one of those built-in bathtubs I've heard about in that fancy house of yours back in Chicago?" Caleb asked as he smoothed his soapy hands over her breasts and across her shoulders.

Sarah wondered that she could concentrate enough to form words. Closing her eyes, she settled back against the edge of the tub. "Mmm, yes. Miranda of the expensive demands insisted on it. She'd read about them being so popular in New York."

"Reckon we can have one built that would fit us all," Joshua said. He scooped a ladle of steaming water and drizzled it over her.

"Build a tub?" She wondered if she'd missed something.

"When everything is settled in Waco, and we set about finding a place for us—for all of us—then we'll see about building a tub we all can share," Joshua explained.

"I'm sorry we can't live in a big city. It's just not for us. We're partial to staying in Texas because here is where we were born and raised. We'll probably end up with a place outside of a town, since we're going to be ranchers and not gunslingers once we settle down. Ranching is a safer endeavor for family men," Caleb said.

Two separate men but they think as one. Sarah considered them a miracle.

She felt her eyes cross when Joshua lathered the inside of her thigh and carried his long, sweeping stroke to the tender flesh of her pussy. He used his thumb to brush her clitoris as he sank two fingers into her.

She moaned as arousal curled in her belly and flamed out to every inch of her skin. Caleb tilted her head up and claimed her lips with his. His tongue plunged, seducing hers into a dance of heat and lust. He took her right hand out of the water and brought it to his cock. She curled her fingers around him, the familiar hardness already a favorite handful. Blindly, she reached out her other hand, grateful when Joshua moved closer so she could clasp him, too.

The knowledge that she caused these two virile males to get hard, to hunger, pleased her beyond words.

“Please,” she whimpered, not caring in the least if she begged.

“Soon, sweetheart.”

They helped her from the tub, running towels over her to dry her, then set her on the bed. There was barely enough room for both men to stand in the tub but they did, making quick work of their own baths. How arousing to watch them run soap and cloth over their bodies, to watch them handle cocks that remained hard despite the common nature of the task they performed.

Watching them aroused her beyond measure. No shyness impeded her pleasure in the moment or in the build of anticipation as Caleb and Joshua worked quickly to clean the dust and the sweat of the trail from their bodies.

They each passed the cloths over their bodies to dry themselves before coming to her.

Together they brought her down on the bed, her head cradled on one of the pillows. Her hands already touched and teased as they petted and kissed, as they pressed their bodies close to hers so there was no space between them.

Her lips would taste one, her tongue would dip and dance, then her head would be turned so she could sample the other.

They spread her legs, opening her to their sight, their touch. Her hips begged for more, rising to follow the caresses. Masculine chuckles inflamed rather than embarrassed, and all Sarah wanted was more.

Bold and brazen, she rolled right, gained her knees, and kissed a line down Joshua's chest, further, dipping her tongue into his navel. Her hand stroked his hard cock, fisted it, and brought it to her mouth. She loved the taste of him, the feel of the hot, smooth skin sliding between her lips. She loved the way he cursed softly, then speared his fingers through her hair as he grasped her head, trying to control the in-out motion the same way he did when he fucked her pussy.

The heat of Caleb's body behind her shot her arousal higher. When his hands nudged her legs, she spread them even more.

When his cock stroked the folds of her cunt, she dipped her hips, captured the rigid flesh, and sank down onto it.

She'd driven them both to the point of need, and she rejoiced in her success. And when they began to buck in her, when she felt their seed enter her, she could only drink it in, above and below, as her rapture took her beyond anything she'd ever known.

Chapter 16

Even some of the restaurants in Chicago featured air heavy with grease. Sarah had never become accustomed to eating out, preferring instead the quiet, simple meals their cook had prepared. But after several nights of trail food, she was looking forward to a restaurant meal, and grease smell be darned.

Sarah smiled when she stepped into Bob's Eats with Caleb and Joshua. An amazing aroma filled the air, and it wasn't grease. Roast beef was a perfume she loved to inhale. She sniffed something else, a spicy, molasses-like scent that set her mouth to watering.

Caleb led them to a table in the back, one that seemed to be occupied already by a single diner.

The gentleman rose when they approached. If she had to pick one word to describe him, it would be dapper. His white shirt, crisp and clean, showed off his tanned face, a face that despite the dark moustache, seemed smooth and young.

"Hey!" Joshua's pleasure at seeing the man seemed genuine, and as they shook hands and pounded each other's backs, she couldn't resist smiling. "Caleb mentioned you'd landed in town. Great to see you."

"You too, Joshua. Perhaps you could introduce me to the lady?"

Sarah wondered at the possessive way Caleb, standing behind her, set his hands on her shoulders.

"Sarah, this is a good friend of ours, Bat Masterson. Bat, this is Sarah...Maddox."

"A pleasure, Mrs. Maddox."

Sarah tilted her head and wondered what Caleb had said to this gentleman earlier in the day, for she thought she could see a twinkle in his eye as he brought her hand to his lips.

“Mr. Masterson,” she acknowledged.

“Bat, please.”

“An unusual name, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Not at all. It’s just what folks call me.”

Bat returned to his seat in the corner, two walls against his back. Sarah wasn’t surprised when Caleb took the chair beside him and Joshua the one across from him. These western men seemed determined not to have their backs to the room.

Sarah perused the menu but already knew she needed to have some of that roast beef she could smell. The other aroma she identified as she’d been introduced to Mr. Masterson. Sure enough, checking the list of condiments, she saw Boston Brown Bread listed.

“Bob Winston, proprietor of this fine establishment, married an Irish lass from Boston Town, and so the fare is an interesting combination of east and west – East and West America, that is.” Bat said.

“What is it you do, Mr. Masterson? Bat,” she corrected when he raised an eyebrow.

“Well, until recently I was sheriff of Ford County, Kansas. My family settled in Kansas after brief stays in New York and Illinois when I was growing up. I was born in Canada, actually, a place called Henryville, Quebec.”

He’d pronounced the place, K-beck, as if it were an exotic name, and Sarah had to admit she’d never heard of it. “A traveler, then. Until recently, I’d never been anywhere, or done anything. I was born and raised in Chicago.”

“Then you let one Texan into your life, and the next thing you know, someone’s shooting at you.”

Sarah felt a shiver course down her spine even as she chuckled. She’d never looked at her situation exactly that way. Sarah shook off

the unsettling sensation. She did wonder that neither Caleb nor Joshua chose to comment on what Bat Masterson had just said. She slid them each a coy look, and said, “Is *that* what’s at the root of all my troubles?”

Masterson seemed to understand he’d stepped on delicate ground but didn’t appear to be too repentant. He signaled the waiter, who delivered a bottle of wine to the table.

“When I left my parent’s home, I started out as a buffalo hunter. Do you know what that is?” Bat asked her.

Sarah nodded. She wasn’t completely ignorant about frontier life.

“My brothers James and Ed joined me. We worked together for a time before going our separate ways. I wound up in some interesting situations.”

“One thing I’ve always been meaning to ask you, Bat,” Caleb said. He turned his gaze to Sarah and sent her a look that her body had no difficulty in translating.

“You can ask me anything, Caleb. Of course, if the answer is indelicate, I may decline to answer in the presence of the lady.”

“Oh, be indelicate,” Sarah said in a mock whisper. “I promise I won’t come down with a case of the vapors.”

Joshua laughed, a low masculine sound that had the same effect on her as Caleb’s look had.

“Nothing indelicate. I just have to know. Did Billy Dixon *really* make that shot?”

Sarah had no idea what Caleb just asked, but the question made Bat laugh. Then he looked at Sarah.

“Back a few years, Billy, Kit Carson, and I, along with a few others got caught in a bit of a situation against a much larger band of Comanche warriors. Things were looking a little bleak for yours truly. We were in the third day of a stand-off. Then Billy Dixon notices a group of warriors on horseback, heading toward us. Now, some say those warriors were a mile away, some say not so far. Billy raised his Big 50 Sharps rifle and fired, knocking one of those Indians clear off

his horse. That shot ended the confrontation. The rest of the warriors turned tail and rode off out of there as if the devil himself were chasing them.”

“A mile away?” Sarah couldn’t imagine such marksmanship.

“So they say.”

The waiter returned to take everyone’s order. Sarah settled on the roast beef which came with potatoes and carrots. She was going to resist, but the molasses bread was brought to the table, and she gave in to temptation.

Content to let the men talk, she, sipped her wine, and simply enjoyed looking at the Benedict brothers. They seemed completely at ease with Bat Masterson, so she knew they trusted him. Her brow furrowed when Joshua asked about his brother who’d been killed recently.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! How horrible for you!”

“Thank you, ma’am. I can see you are as compassionate as you are beautiful.”

Being an only child, Sarah couldn’t imagine the pain of losing a sibling. But she knew of families who had lost loved ones in the fire, and as always, thoughts of such loss saddened her heart.

The men were soon talking of happier times. The food arrived, and Sarah’s taste buds told her this meal surpassed even what her father’s cook, Mary, could create.

“Bat and I are going to go for a stroll through the seamier side of town after dinner,” Joshua said.

Sarah cocked her head to one side.

“They’re going to look for information, see if anyone new has come to Denison, settled in that part of town,” Caleb explained. “Plus, if there’re rumors, they might pick up on them. They both like to play cards. Gamblers tend to gossip.”

Sarah sighed. Then she turned her attention to Bat. “Thank you for your assistance in this matter. I’ve had to accept that someone is

trying to kill me because it definitely happened. I just can't imagine who or why."

"One thing I've learned in my years of being a lawman and something that I know Caleb and Joshua agree with, Mrs. Maddox," Bat said. His expression had turned serious, and he leaned closer, his voice lowered. "There's no such thing as human behavior without a reason. The reason may be plumb loco, but it will be there. Sometimes you uncover the reason first, and that always leads to the culprit."

Sarah found she agreed with that analysis. She just wasn't completely certain she was ready to face the answers.

* * * *

Sarah nestled closer to Caleb, the heat from his body instantly warming away the shiver that had awakened her. Wispy tendrils of a dream, already more than half forgotten, worried the edge of her thoughts.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Caleb's voice sounded fully awake. Sarah blinked, looked up to meet his gaze. No slumber marred his expression. She realized that even now, holding her in his arms, he lay vigilant, on guard.

"A dream. A strange one but I can't really remember what it was about."

"Hardly surprising you'd have a bad dream, under the circumstances."

Three light taps on the door followed by the turn of a key in the lock made her tense.

"It's Joshua. That's our signal."

The door opened, and the faint light from the hallway revealed a familiar silhouette. Joshua closed the door softly behind him.

Sarah wondered that he could see his way in the darkened room so well.

“Learn anything?” Caleb asked.

Joshua had been taking pains to move silently. Now he exhaled, tossed his hat onto the small table by the window.

“Only that it’s not wise to try and bluff Masterson in a game of five card stud. The man has killer instincts when it comes to poker.”

Sarah joined in Caleb’s laughter.

“You should be asleep,” Joshua said. She knew he spoke to her, but she didn’t answer. Instead, she focused on what she could see of his body as he peeled the clothes from his lanky frame. Even seen mostly in shadows his body made her mouth water.

“I was.”

“Bad dream woke her up,” Caleb said.

“What was the dream about?” Joshua asked.

“She doesn’t remember,” Caleb said.

“How nice that I don’t even have to speak for myself these days.” Sarah’s ire stirred to life. She didn’t know why it should. All her life she had been used to the way men treated women.

Somehow with her men, that treatment felt different.

The bed dipped behind her, and Joshua slid beneath the blankets, snuggling close to her back.

She’d been right. If they all three lay on their sides, they fit in the bed just fine. She didn’t worry about having pillows beneath her head, as Caleb kept her propped up just fine.

“I bet if we try, we can think of something to take Sarah’s mind off her bad dream—and her choler.”

“I’ll have you know I’m right here...” the ability to speak suddenly left her as Joshua slipped his hand between her legs. Caleb, facing her, pulled her left leg over his hip. The action pulled her closer to him so that his hot, hard cock rubbed against her woman-flesh. Inhaling sharply, Sarah tilted her hips forward to caress Caleb, then back to rub her slit against Joshua’s hand.

“I’m going to fuck your ass,” Joshua whispered.

The words inflamed her, arousal being fanned into flames, a fire reduced to embers but never extinguished, now reborn. Joshua's words and the sensation of his finger bringing her own dew to caress back and forth against her anus worked like a soft sigh against those embers. Her growing arousal demanded all her attention. Sarah thought in these moments civilization melted from her, reducing her to a feral creature whose only desire, only purpose, was to mate.

"Yes. Fuck me. Please."

Caleb's fingers teased her clit while Joshua shifted so that the head of his cock nudged against her opening. Leaning forward, he nipped her ear at the same time he pressed into her.

"Yes. Just like that." His words, a growl of need and arousal, made her heart thud in her chest and her flesh pucker. The invasion of his cock into her darkest part became delicious pleasure, spiced with a hint of the forbidden.

"Now take me," Caleb whispered. He flexed his hips forward. Sarah felt the brush of the back of his hand against her moist folds as he placed the head of his penis where it needed to be. Then he slid his cock into her, one long steady thrust until he was buried to the hilt.

She felt full to bursting. Satiny ribbons of bliss began to shoot out from inside her, a tiny spot where it seemed her two lovers nearly touched. They both proved intent on caring for her and pleasuring her.

"You're mine." The words emerged from her, a declaration, a dare, a sentiment almost beyond thought.

"Yes. And you're ours." Joshua spoke for them both. He reached around, cupped one breast in his hand, and squeezed the nipple between his finger and thumb. "Now and forever, Sarah. Now take what we give you."

Every time before, there'd been a fine gentleness to their actions, a restrained passion that she'd worked hard to loosen.

Not tonight.

Tonight, looming over her, leaning into her, Joshua began to thrust in and out of her, his pace steady and building.

Caleb growled, wrapped his hand around her leg, and levered himself up just slightly.

“Yes, take us, sweetheart.”

His thrusts became hard and fast and deep.

“Let go,” Joshua hissed. “Let go. Surrender completely.”

Sarah nearly yelled out that she didn’t understand. And then she felt it, that strand of tension, of force, that seemed to run through her very being. She’d held on, she realized, held on to protect herself, to perhaps try and forge some sense of control in these acts of physical joining.

Holding on and holding out.

Sarah collapsed against the bed, every muscle in her body relaxing as she gave over that control, as she gave them that submission.

Immediately, Joshua’s passage in and out of her eased, became more fluid. Liberated, he plundered.

Caleb reacted with no less force. She felt the velvet caress of his cock inside her tunnel, reveled in the brush of his groin against her clit. Rapture began to bubble from deep inside her, a rapture that promised to be more than anything she’d ever felt before.

“Yes, like that. Reach it, sweetheart. Reach it while we’re inside you.”

“*God!*” Sarah cried out, the eruption a bottomless volcano of desire and passion, as spasm after spasm wracked her. Eyes closed, throat taut as a high, mewling cry tore from her throat, Sarah’s body quivered and quaked as she felt both men shoot their seed into her, as their fingers dug into her flesh and they, too, lost themselves to the rapture.

Only when they stopped moving, only when they leaned close to her, breath heaving, did Sarah notice a slight discomfort from their loving. The passion had felt so huge, took over so completely, that her eyes leaked silent tears.

“Did we hurt you?” Anxiety laced Caleb’s voice. She tried to answer but could only shake in the aftermath of her sexual frenzy.

“Sarah? Sweetheart?” Joshua’s voice sounded just as pained as his brother’s.

She tried to shake her head, and managed one word. “Good.”

“We were both too greedy,” Joshua said. He eased himself out of her body, and she winced, for the arousal that dulled her senses to discomfort had ebbed.

He moved from the bed, and she heard the sounds of the chamber set being used. Water splashed into the bowl, then dribbled from a cloth dipped and squeezed out.

Caleb slowly withdrew from her pussy, and the wetness of his seed flowed after him. Sarah shivered.

“Here, sweetheart, let me.” Joshua cleaned her, his ministrations so gentle she barely winced.

“We should both be shot for letting our lust get the better of us,” Caleb muttered. He fished around on the floor until he came up with her chemise. Once Joshua finished, Caleb gently eased the garment onto her.

She couldn’t allow them to let their guilt eat at them so. “No. I liked it. I hope you’ll do that again.”

“Now?” Joshua asked.

Sarah was glad to hear that thread of humor back in his voice.

“Maybe not right now. Maybe give me a minute.”

Joshua tossed the cloth back into the basin and returned to bed. He helped pull her chemise down over her bottom, then pressed close to her back.

“Go to sleep,” he said, kissing her neck just under her ear.

“I love you, Sarah,” Caleb said. “More than I thought it possible to love.”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Joshua agreed. “I love you, Sarah.”

“I love you both. You’re a miracle. My miracle.”

“Sleep now, sweetheart. We have a long train ride tomorrow,” Caleb said.

Sarah didn't want to ride the train to Waco. She wanted to be anywhere else but there and nowhere else but with these two extraordinary men.

As she drifted to sleep, the sense of unease that had awakened her tried to return. She tramped it down. She was safe and secure, here between two men whom she loved, two men who loved her in return.

She drifted toward sleep only to come awake sometime later. Blinking, she tried to open her eyes, tried to figure out what jarred her from sleep this time. Groggy, her mind searched, curiously unable to focus.

Then the acrid smell of smoke assaulted her senses.

Chapter 17

One could always find someone who had a price, and sometimes that price had nothing to do with gold.

Liam Larson looked up at the dark sky, at the stars that twinkled high overhead. The night had turned exceptionally clear, not a single cloud visible. Nothing could compare to a Texas night sky. He could take this one moment and know that if Jamie happened to be outside right now and looked up, they'd be staring at the same celestial display.

It made Liam feel closer to his lover.

He needed that tonight. Liam wasn't a whimsical man or an overly sentimental one. Tonight felt different. Tonight, his soul needed a connection, however vague, to the one person in the world he would move mountains for. *Or kill for.*

He supposed the reason for these unusual feelings stemmed from his quest, from its being on the very cusp of completion.

Jamie could never again doubt his love when Liam had killed to honor it.

Across the street, he saw a small figure, furtive in his movements, his actions spare, nearly jerky. *Nervous excitement. He's already seeing his own fame in his mind's eye.*

Sam Jenkins, erstwhile stable hand and livery stooge, believed himself about to add a major feat to his non-existent list of life accomplishments.

The lad was almost pitifully easy to fool. Spying the small stack of dime novels in the area of the livery Sam called his home provided Liam with the clue to this young man's ultimate price.

Liam offered him the chance to be one of the heroes he read about.

It was a simple matter to convince Sam that Liam was a special US Marshal on a secret mission. The fool gobbled up that story about the notorious Benedict Brothers, aided and abetted by the infamous Bat Masterson, a hero turned rogue, being the worst outlaws since the James-Younger Gang.

He'd even believed that Liam had connections, including a certain very famous raconteur by the name of Ned Buntline, and that the writer would be thrilled and honored to feature Sam as the hero of a new series about the demise of these heinous criminals.

All Sam had to do for this great fortune to fall upon him was one simple thing.

Liam had wondered how he was going to manage to kill Mrs. Maddox. It hadn't taken him long to understand that the sheriff of Denison was well-acquainted with the Benedicts nor for him to realize Sheriff's deputies had been set about, vigilant, keeping an extra close watch over Sarah Maddox.

Under normal circumstances, there would have been no way for Liam to get close to her. So the challenge had become to make the circumstances vary from the normal.

Once he realized that Mrs. Maddox was being kept in one of the second floor rooms in the Katy Hotel—a room, in fact, that looked out onto Main Street—then he knew exactly what he had to do.

He would be able to shoot her from the roof of the dry goods store across the street if he could get her out onto the hotel's verandah roof. The surface was sturdy and sound and only a couple of feet below the room's only window.

He'd instructed Sam on what to do precisely and where he needed to stand once his assignment had been completed.

Liam checked his rifle, and then settled in to wait.

Slowly at first, as if dancing to a dreamy waltz, tendrils of smoke flitted into the night sky from the back of the hotel. The building,

made entirely of wood, would offer no resistance to the kerosene-aided flames.

Liam didn't allow himself to think about any innocents who might be caught in the conflagration about to erupt. If the poor sots had retired to their beds after imbibing an abundance of drink, then their deaths would be their own fault.

A man should never allow himself to be so out of control as to get drunk.

The fire wasn't meant to be a killer, just a distraction. Anyone not impeded by drink should have no difficulty escaping it.

Now he could hear the crackling of the flames as they began to eat at the back of the hotel, consuming the dry wood and whatever trash lay about in back of the building.

The fire proved hungry and ate voraciously.

Soon an orange glow lit the night, overcoming the stars so they became invisible. Shouts of anger, fear, and panic filled the air. Sam stood, his gaze transfixed as he watched the hotel begin to burn in earnest. The boy had followed Liam's directions to the letter. A shame, really.

Liam raised his rifle, his position on the roof a comfortable one. He gently swung the weapon between his two targets.

The window above the verandah roof opened, and one of the Benedicts slid out, dangled for a moment, then gained his feet. Turning, he reached up, his focus on someone inside the room, coaxing that person forward. A couple of bags came tumbling out, and then he spotted dainty, feminine feet.

Liam waited until the man nearly had his arms around the woman. He swung the gun to the right, aimed down, and fired.

Sam Jenkins was dead before he hit the ground.

Liam swung his rifle back toward his primary target, finding her and those bothersome Benedicts just as a cloud of smoke floated across the road and into his face. Determined, he bore down, blinked, sighted down the barrel, and fired a second shot.

* * * *

Caleb came awake and shot out of the bed.

“Damn it. The hotel’s on fire!” He reached down, laid his hands on Sarah, and pulled her to him.

“Joshua!”

“Yeah? Oh, Christ. Fire!”

“I can smell it,” Sarah said.

Caleb looked down into a face too pale with eyes too wide.

“It’s just like before, the smoke and the screams. My nightmare. My worst nightmare.”

Caleb knew she meant the Chicago fire and it was obvious she harbored some horrible memories from the ordeal. Hating the necessity, he gave her a single, hard shake.

“Sarah, wake up. No nightmare. We can get out, but we have to move now.”

Joshua threw on his trousers and handed Caleb his. He reached for Sarah’s skirt, the one she’d worn to dinner, and quickly helped her into it.

Caleb saw Joshua had their woman safe and took a bare moment to grab the saddle bag that contained their cash and one that had some of Sarah’s clothes in it.

He ran to the window, looked out, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Fire must be out the back. We don’t dare chance the stairs. We can gain the roof of the verandah, then the ground.”

“Yeah.” Joshua threw on his shirt but didn’t button it. He grabbed his gun belt and fastened it quickly.

Sarah came fully awake, and Caleb sighed in relief when she grabbed her skirt jacket, then reached for a few more of their things.

She didn’t fuss, just jammed things into a bag and tossed it toward the window.

Caleb calculated that from the time he'd awakened to this moment, not three minutes had passed. Joshua threw open the window.

"I'll go first, make sure it's safe. You hand Sarah out to me."

"Go," Caleb said.

The smell of smoke assailed them, and the sounds of panicked shouts from outside nearly drowned out the crackling of the flames as the dry wood of the building became fuel. Caleb caressed Sarah's arms as Joshua disappeared out the window. He helped her sit her bottom on the window ledge.

"He's just below, see? His hands are not even two feet below the window.

"Hand me the bags. Let me toss them before you toss me."

"Damn, you're bossy. I'm not going to toss you." Caleb reached down, scooped the three bags, and shoved them out the window.

"Now, Sarah," Joshua shouted, and Caleb understood his brother feared the building might explode into a fireball. They'd seen it happen during the war.

He nudged Sarah, and she let go of the ledge, trusting them to keep her safe. "Good girl," he said.

It took him only a second to sit on the window ledge once Joshua had her, swing his feet out, dangle, and drop.

As he straightened, a shot rang out.

"Down!" The shout came from beside him, and he recognized Masterson's voice just as he grabbed Sarah and spun around, covering her with his body.

A second shot, and then a third, both of them loud, swallowed every other sound for a few seconds. The sensation of being slammed by something hot and sharp made Caleb suck in wind. He knew that feeling, remembering Atlanta.

"Got him," Masterson said.

"Damn it!"

"Caleb! No!"

His brother's oath and Sarah's scream faded into the background. He felt weak, as if his legs couldn't hold him, and he sank to his knees.

"Damn it, I've been shot." His own voice sounded funny to his ears.

"How bad?" Joshua demanded.

Caleb's head began to clear. The shock of impact faded as the burning pain of injury flooded his mind, pushing away everything else. His hand covered his right arm where the pain surged, and he felt the hot stickiness of blood. It wasn't spurting, so he guessed it wasn't as bad as it could have been. "I don't think it's too bad."

"Come on, Mary," Masterson chided him as he knelt beside him, taking a quick look at his arm. He yanked a bandana out of his pocket and wrapped it around the wound, tying it tight. "In case you forgot, this damn building is burning down around us."

"Right," Caleb said. They were still in danger, even if the shooter had been taken out of the mix. Sarah sat down on her knees in front of him, her gaze fixated on the bandana.

"I'm all right, sweetheart. We need to get off this roof, now. Can we do that?"

"Yes. Yes, all right."

Caleb let his gaze meet Joshua's for just a moment, letting his twin know he was hurting but not badly hurt. People below them formed a bucket brigade. They paused in their firefighting to help them down. In moments they all four had feet planted on solid ground.

"Roof across the street," Masterson said. Leaving the firefighting to the long line of people already pitching in, they headed in that direction. The full moon gave brilliant light this night. Caleb felt grateful for that. At least he could see where he was going even as he wondered if he would be able to climb the stairs in back of the building.

He noticed Masterson limping beside him. “That hip still bothering you?” he asked.

“Only when I jump out of windows and off low overhangs to escape burning buildings,” Masterson replied.

They headed down the alley and around the back of the dry goods store, looking for a way onto the roof.

“Ever think of maybe carrying a cane? I saw one in a store front in Chicago, all shiny black with a gold knob. Cost a fortune, but it had a certain elegance to it. I actually thought of you when I saw it.”

They stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the second story of the store. Masterson shot Caleb a look of sheer disbelief.

“Not in this lifetime,” he said succinctly.

Caleb chuckled, then focused on getting his wounded self up the stairs. They found a small ladder on the landing that led onto the roof.

The man lay where Masterson’s shot felled him. He’d dropped his rifle, and Caleb kicked it away for good measure. The would-be killer was still breathing, but from the looks of him, not for much longer.

Sarah stood beside Caleb. Then her attacker opened his eyes and focused on her.

Masterson squatted next to the man. “What’s your name, old son?”

“Larson. Liam... Larson.” He coughed, and Caleb felt Sarah flinch when some blood came out of his mouth.

“Why?” Sarah asked.

Larson closed his eyes, and then opened them again.

“For Jamie. Because ...I love him.”

Sarah looked at Caleb, confusion in her eyes. In the next instant, she moved closer, giving him her shoulder for support. *She must think I’m going to pass out.* Problem was, that might not be all that far from the truth.

“Jamie? Who the hell is Jamie?” Joshua asked the question they all wanted answered.

“My...Jamie.”

Caleb recognized a death rattle when he heard it. He stepped back from the body, bringing Sarah with him, just as Sheriff Hall reached the top of the stairs.

“So close to knowing,” Sarah whispered. More than a hint of disbelief laced her words. Then she met Caleb’s gaze and tilted her head to the side. “Now what?”

“We’ll talk later,” he said softly.

Hall examined the body, listened while Masterson and Joshua filled him in.

When the Sheriff approached the two of them, he looked Caleb up and down. “You look like you need to see the doc.”

“Nah,” Caleb said at the same time Sarah said “Yes.”

Hall chuckled. “I think I’ll take the lady’s word on things.”

* * * *

Sarah had never been as frightened as she’d been when that shot rang out, and she’d felt Caleb jerk. Now, as he lay on his back on one of the cots in an open jail cell, she began to relax.

“The bullet went in and out again through the fat part of his arm. He should heal just fine, but you need to watch out for fever.”

The doctor thoroughly cleansed Caleb’s wound before stitching him up, something Sarah found interesting. When she asked the middle aged doctor about it, he said, “there’s speculation—here, and in Europe—that infection could be caused by something called microbes. Germs. I don’t know if it is true, but if simple washing can prevent sickness and save lives, I say, wash.”

He bandaged Caleb, and promised to check back in the morning. Joshua went back to the hotel with the Sheriff and Bat Masterson about a half hour before. They came in just as the doctor prepared to leave.

“Fire’s out,” the sheriff announced. “Damage wasn’t as bad as we feared. A lot of smoke because of some of the trash piled up behind

the place. Actually, it was mostly that what burned. Bucket brigade got it out, and only a few rooms at the back are ruined. Have to do some work before they can open for business again. Only one casualty,” Sheriff Hall finished up. “Sam Jenkins worked over at the livery. From the looks of things, he set the fire and got shot for his participation.”

“A diversion,” Caleb said. Despite Sarah’s protests, he insisted on sitting up and leaned his back against the wall.

“I agree.” Hall said. “As well, we discovered Larson was a guest at the hotel. Soon as the building is deemed safe to enter, my deputies are going to search his room. Might find something. Never know.”

Sarah figured if Caleb was stubborn enough to sit up, he could answer a few questions. “You said we’d talk later. Well, it’s later. Now what do we do, since we have no idea of who sent that man?”

“Correction, we don’t know who, precisely, but we have a pretty good idea where to find your enemy.”

Sarah knew she looked confused. She turned to Joshua hoping he would clear matters up.

“When we were in Springfield,” Joshua explained, “we had Sheriff MacLean send two telegrams, one to your father, one to your...one to Tyrone Maddox,” Joshua explained. “Each one specified a different town in Texas where we’d be.”

“Maddox got the one that said we’d be coming to Denison.” Caleb said.

Sarah closed her eyes in relief. There’d been a tiny part of her that was afraid her father might have been behind this villainy, after all. His sale of her to Maddox had shown she really didn’t know what she could expect from the man who sired her.

“Maddox. Do you think he...”

“We have no proof that he is behind the attempts on your life. We do know that it has to be someone close to him, at the very least. How else to know where we’d be?”

Sarah sighed. “So still no answers.”

“But we’re closer. We have to get to Waco, quietly, without Maddox being any the wiser. Then we’ll send off some more telegrams. We need to have a few more pieces of the puzzle revealed to us, including the details to your inheritance.”

“My inheritance? I don’t get that until I’m twenty-five. Besides, I doubt it’s more than a few thousand dollars. What does that have to do with anything?” Sarah felt totally confused.

“I’ve known men who’ve killed for a lot less,” Bat Masterson said. Then he turned his attention to Caleb.

“I wish I could go with you to Waco, see this thing through to the end.”

Something about the way he said that made Sarah feel that both he and Caleb knew more about the situation than she did.

“I wish you could, too. Have to tell you, I for certain owe you one. Thanks.”

“If you’re planning on settling in the Waco area, I may find my way over there in a few months.”

“You’re always welcome,” Joshua said.

“So what’s next? I’m sorry to sound crabby, but I am awfully darned tired of people trying to kill me.”

“Adam might have an idea how we can proceed,” Caleb told her. “If I know him, and I do, he’s been digging away, finding out information. No one is better at that than he is.”

“So in other words, we have to go to Waco in the morning anyway.”

“You’ll like Waco,” Joshua said. “Trust us.”

She did trust them. Sarah yawned just then and found herself the focus of all four men.

“Sorry. I’m exhausted.”

“Not much left of the night. I reckon you could use a bit more sleep, and maybe some fresh clothes. Only place I figure you can come by both and remain out of sight—in case that Larson had another accomplice—is Cora’s,” Sheriff Hall said.

Sarah wanted to ask who, or what, was Cora's, but she was entirely too exhausted by the night's events to care.

The sheriff had one of his deputies fetch a buckboard from the livery, and amidst the dying furor caused by the fire on Main Street, she allowed Joshua to hand her into the wagon after she was assured that Caleb had boarded and been made as comfortable as possible. She wondered at the laughter in the eyes of both the Sheriff and Bat Masterson as she bid them goodnight, almost as much as she wondered why neither Caleb nor Joshua would meet her gaze.

Five minutes later, she decided that she really should have asked about Cora. She shook her head, gave it up, and with the Benedict brothers, entered the whorehouse.

Chapter 18

Joshua wanted to kill Tyrone Maddox. He had no doubt whatsoever that the man was behind the attacks on Sarah.

The clackety-clack of the train wheels against the rails droned on, and since both Sarah and Caleb slept, Joshua was left alone with his thoughts, and all he could think was that he wanted, very badly, to kill Tyrone Maddox.

He didn't need any more evidence to tell him what this was about. Rich bastard thought he could marry Sarah, then *kill* her and collect her inheritance?

The miles toward Waco disappeared one at a time, and Joshua sincerely hoped it wouldn't take long to bring this mystery to a close. He was looking forward to beginning a new life, just him and his brother and Sarah. He had no doubt that before long, she would belong to them completely.

He'd come too close to dying during the war to turn his back on love or happiness once he'd found them. For him, those two words had one definition, and that was Sarah.

Joshua knew Caleb felt pretty much the same way, which was one of the reasons, he reckoned, they had no trouble between them, both loving her.

His gaze landed on his brother, arm bound in a sling, an expression of pain on his face even in sleep. He hadn't spiked a fever so far, thank God.

It took no effort to see again the events of the day before yesterday. Never far from his thoughts was his memory of shielding Sarah alongside his brother, of hearing the impact of lead against

flesh and feeling Caleb jerk. He knew his brother had been shot, and for one terrifying moment, he feared the worst.

Beside him, Sarah stirred. She slept with her head against the window. Gently, Joshua eased her toward him.

She sighed softly and snuggled into him.

"Is Caleb all right?" she asked.

"He's fine, sweetheart. He's just sleeping." Joshua kept his voice low, needing to keep their conversation private. Only a handful of travelers shared the rail car at this point, but Joshua didn't know any of them, which meant he didn't trust any them.

"Neither one of us got much sleep last night," she said softly. "Caleb because of his pain and me...well, just because."

Joshua grinned at the churlish note in Sarah's voice. Staying at Cora's was the smartest move they could have made, safety-wise. The only whorehouse on Skiddy Row housed in a solid building, they'd had a sturdy roof over their heads and beds to sleep in.

Cora herself was easily persuaded to keep their presence a secret. They'd stayed the extra night to give Caleb a little more time to heal before traveling.

Of course, the down side of that particular arrangement had been the sounds of Cora's girls plying their trade all night.

All night and well into the morning.

It really was well passed time to make amends. One thing his mother had taught her sons was when dealing with a lady, apologize quickly and often.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. We never would have taken you to such a place except under the direst of circumstances. Keeping you safe was our only priority. Being in such an establishment must have been extremely offensive to you."

"No, not so offensive and I do understand. I knew that the first night, when the sheriff's deputies dropped us off, and I realized where we were. It's just..." her voice trailed off, and when he looked down at her, color tinged her cheeks.

“It’s just what, Sarah?”

She looked around, checking, he knew, to make sure no one sat so close they could overhear. Even so, Sarah whispered

“After listening to all that activity, I’m afraid the next time we all lay together, I’ll be afraid to make a single sound. I had no idea how...how bizarre it sounded.”

Joshua strangled on his laughter. He bent close and put his lips next to Sarah’s ear. “I promise to do my damndest to make sure you forget all about that the next time I have you naked and under me.”

When his gaze met hers, he read the passion in her eyes. And when she squirmed in her seat, he knew he’d done his job.

The train slowed for another stop. In the seat right across from him, Caleb stirred. When his brother opened his eyes, then sat up, Joshua gave him his complete attention. Sarah moved to sit beside Caleb. He blessed her presence, for she could get away with fussing over his brother in ways Joshua couldn’t.

Sarah felt his forehead, then nodded. “Good. The doctor said if you could make it through today without a fever, you’d probably be safe from one.”

Caleb grunted, which made Joshua smile. His brother had always been a piss-poor patient.

“I’m sore but fine. How long have I slept?” he asked.

“Couple hours. We’ve a few more to go before we get to Waco.”

Sheriff Hall sent a telegram the day before, so Adam would have been busy pursuing their new lead and would also be ready to meet them at the depot. Joshua just hoped Adam would be able to keep word of their arrival quiet. None of them wanted Maddox to know when they arrived in town.

They needed just a little more time to put everything together.

* * * *

Tyrone Maddox looked over his shoulder, the sense that someone watched him a strong one. Since the night before last, he'd been experiencing the strangest sensations.

Even though it was the middle of the day, he decided what he needed was some whiskey and fresh air.

He poured himself a glass then took it outside to the covered verandah he'd so recently constructed on the front of his house.

He hadn't heard from Liam, and that couldn't be good.

Maddox had been almost certain Sarah and those gunslingers would have arrived in Denison by now. Would be dead, by now.

Unless those damned Indians had done Liam's work for him. He didn't much like that Indians had been given lands to call their own, however 'civilized' the tribes were supposed to be. But if they had solved his problem for him by killing Sarah, he might just change his mind.

Maddox looked into his glass of liquor, swirled it, then knocked it back in one gulp.

Something had gone wrong. He felt it, down deep in his soul.

Then slowly, he realized the strange sensation that had been coursing through him for the last couple of days. He felt...afraid.

Maddox went perfectly still, the realization numbing his senses. *Afraid*. How long had it been since he'd *felt* afraid?

It was all Liam's fault. He'd promised that everything would be taken care of. Obviously, he'd failed. Had to have failed, or Maddox would have heard from him by now.

Was everyone destined to let him down?

Liam had come into his life, a distraction at first, a man so desperately hungry for attention and affection that it had been a simple matter to feed him tidbits and reap huge rewards.

The physical side of their relationship gave Maddox pleasure, of course. He could be lord and master and Liam his willing and eager supplicant, which also fed his need for power and control.

In turn, he'd been generous with the man. He'd given him money and gifts. He knew Liam was in love with him, had known it for some time. Maddox had used that love, of course he had. Why not?

That was the only purpose love held.

A breeze brushed him, ruffled his hair. With that breeze came the scent of rain. Maddox noticed the clouds rolling in from the south, dark creatures that stretched for as far as his eye could see. A storm was coming. While some rain would always be welcome, too much caused flooding. Nothing in life, it seemed, was ever all good. Or all bad.

If Liam had failed, and the woman Tyrone had taken to wife still lived, then he would have to devise an accident for her himself. Not right away, of course. Clearly, moving too soon would point the finger of guilt straight at him and him alone. That was why she was to have been killed en route, just another victim of western lawlessness.

How long could he wait before he laid his hands on that money?

Maddox got to his feet. He had funds available to him, funds he'd deposited for Liam that he would now claw back. Yes, that would help. How much time could he buy himself? A month?

A month should work. City girl, born and bred, what would she know of ranch life, of—Maddox's mind scrambled—of feral horses captured to strengthen the breeding stock. Yes, that would work and nicely, too. Just like a foolish city girl to wander into a stall holding a wild stallion, determined to pet the pretty horse and getting trampled to death for her trouble.

He got to his feet, his vision clearing, the storm on the horizon now nothing more than a bit of nasty weather to be got through.

He'd wait another day, two at the most, before he took himself into town, the impatient and aggrieved bridegroom, and begin to demand that the law in the form of Adam Kendall find his wife and find her now.

Maddox exhaled deeply, nodded his head once. That was a solid, workable plan.

* * * *

Sarah was expecting another small town like Denison and was pleasantly surprised that, although a frontier town, Waco already showed signs of prosperity and modernity.

True, it lacked streetcars or an omnibus, but from what she could see, the businesses here looked to offer every bit as much variety of goods as the ones back home. Plus, the streets certainly appeared cleaner.

Unfortunately, she didn't get a really good look at the town of Waco, just what she could spy peeking out from under the blanket that hid her as she rode in a covered buggy.

Captain Adam Kendall had met them at the train depot and hustled them into the buggy, which he'd borrowed from the livery.

Joshua and Captain Kendall rode up front. She and Caleb, who seemed to be flagging, sat in back.

It took nearly an hour to reach their destination, a simple adobe house set down in a field of ...something. Sarah tried to figure out what crops were being grown on this farm. She figured it must be a farm because there wasn't much of a barn, just a kind of lean-to with a tarp covering the entrance.

"Didn't want to bring you to my place, just in case," Captain Kendall said.

Joshua helped Sarah down from the carriage. She immediately turned to help Caleb.

"I can manage, damn it."

"Fine, fall on your face," she invited sweetly, even as she stepped back, frowning, and watched him very awkwardly get out of the carriage.

Joshua and Captain Kendall both laughed. Caleb just grumbled. Once he had both feet planted on the ground and appeared in control of his body, he gave her what she could only term a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, sweetheart. You probably need to know I don’t weather illness or injury well.”

“I don’t need to know that. I *do* know that.”

“I’ll feel better when we’re all indoors,” Adam said.

Once they were inside the house, not much more, really, than a large kitchen and sleeping area, Captain Kendall took his hat off and gestured to the man who stood waiting by the stove.

“This is Warren Jessop, a friend of mine. Warren’s a lawyer in Waco.” He waved his hand in introduction as he spoke to Warren. “Caleb and Joshua Benedict and Sarah Maddox.”

“I’ve got coffee and just enough cups to go around,” Warren said. “Why don’t we all get comfortable? Or as comfortable as we can be here?”

Sarah was offered one of the two chairs. She promptly sat and removed her hat. “What do you grow here, Mr. Jessop?”

“Weeds and rocks for the most part. I’ve been thinking lately of selling this place and moving in with a friend. I’m neither a rancher nor a farmer.”

His smile was aimed at Captain Kendall, and Sarah wondered just how friendly the two men were. Before leaving Chicago, she never would have entertained the thought that just entered her head. However, while in hiding at Cora’s, she and her lovers discussed all sorts of different sexual matters, and she’d found herself asking about the taboo subject of men having other men as lovers.

She’d been surprised to learn it wasn’t as unheard of as she’d believed.

Now she looked at Captain Kendall and Warren Jessop and wondered.

“While Warren pours the coffee, why don’t I fill you in on what I know so far?” Captain Kendall asked.

Sarah felt an odd sort of clutching in her belly. She knew her father had been ruled out as a suspect. But now, as she turned her

attention to this Texas Ranger, she wondered if the man who sired her was as completely guilt free as she hoped.

"I have two of my deputies on the trail between Waco and the Maddox ranch. Far as I could tell this morning, the man was there. One of them will come here if he moves, and the other will follow him."

"You suspect him, then?" Sarah asked.

Adam looked first at Caleb and then Joshua. "First, what I know. Tyrone Maddox has been buying up land like mad the last several months, and he's running low on cash. Second, there's the fact that Liam Larson tried to kill you. We know Larson, and so does Maddox."

"Sheriff Hall sent a telegram to Adam with all the pertinent information they had on the man." Joshua said.

"He said he did it for Jamie," Sarah recalled. "Did you find Jamie, then?"

Adam looked over at Warren this time. That man nodded, slowly.

"Jamie is Maddox," Adam said. "James is his middle name, and Jamie is what he's called in certain circles, by certain...friends."

Sarah sensed both the Texas Ranger and the lawyer were attempting to avoid upsetting what they'd assumed would be her delicate sensibilities.

She thought of the man she'd married, about his apparent lack of interest in her as a female, his preference for conversation with her father. This time, she looked at those actions in a slightly different light than thinking them a sign of misguided male superiority.

"Were Larson and Maddox lovers? Is that what you're trying not to tell me?"

She'd obviously taken Adam by surprise. His eyes widened while Caleb and Joshua chuckled.

"Yes," he confirmed at last. "That's exactly what I'm trying not to say."

“I’ve recently come to understand that some men prefer other men. Even before I learned *that*, I decided that it’s really nobody’s business what goes on between people who love each other.”

“A very...enlightened attitude,” Warren said.

Did she sense relief in his words? It didn’t matter. She focused on Captain Kendall once more. “That still doesn’t explain why the man would want to kill me. It explains other things but not that.”

“Warren?” Adam said.

The lawyer sat forward. “I was able to send an inquiry to an acquaintance of mine, a lawyer in Virginia. You may be aware that once a will has been probated, its contents become a matter of public record, and so it was simple to find the terms of your inheritance, Mrs. Maddox.”

“Sarah, please. I think I detest that last name. I plan to be rid of it very soon.”

Warren smiled. “I can sympathize. All right, Sarah then. I am delighted to tell you, Sarah, that you will soon be an exceptionally wealthy woman. Your maternal grandfather left you two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, to be yours on your twenty-fifth birthday, or on the one-year anniversary of your marriage, whichever came first. But,” here the man paused and seemed to wince, “should you die at any time before that anniversary, then all monies would pass either to your child, should you have one, or to your husband, should you die childless.”

Sarah felt the shock reverberate through her. No wonder Maddox hadn’t touched her. If his plan had failed, if he’d had to wait for a period of time to pass before finally succeeding, he hadn’t wanted there to be a child to inherit her estate.

“For money. He...he married me so that he could kill me. For money?”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. Yes.”

She turned disbelieving eyes on her lovers. They didn't even blink, and she narrowed her eyes. "You're not surprised, not either of you?"

"No," Caleb said. "It was the only thing that made any sense when you looked at all the facts. It's what we suspected, but we had no proof."

"Still don't, come to that," Adam said.

"No, but we have motive now, motive, and opportunity, when you place Larson into the mix."

"Do you think there's a chance that Maddox will confess if you confront him?" Sarah demanded of the lawman.

Caleb chuckled, and the other men just shook their heads.

"No," Adam said. "He'd deny any wrongdoing and deny it convincingly. Even if we had some evidence, he has enough friends in high places that he'd weasel his way out. We need an iron-clad case. We need a confession, but we're going to have to find a way to trick it out of him."

"Or beat it out of him." Sarah rose to her feet. "All I need is something to hit that son-of-a-bitch with."

None of the men were laughing now, she noticed. She nodded her head once to let them know she meant business, then turned on her heel. Before she'd taken two steps, Joshua stopped her by picking her up.

"Let me go." Sarah felt the anger seething through her. "He married me to kill me. That's even worse an insult than my father's having sold me to him in the first place. *Goddamn* this world we live in when men can just treat women like....like *things*! Like unimportant things, easily disposed of!"

"Hush, sweetheart." Joshua wrapped his arms around her, and she felt her temper begin to level out. Then, as he continued to hold her, that temper began to deflate.

"Curse Caleb and I for being another two men who won't let you have your way. But the truth is, Maddox is a very dangerous man.

You mean too much to us for us to risk you. We love you, Sarah. Please, let us handle the bastard.”

“Do you have a plan?” she asked after a long moment.

She felt heat at her back and knew that Caleb, as worn out and in pain as he was had come over to join them. He stroked her back, then took her into his arms gently when Joshua released her.

“We have the beginning of one. Come and sit, and help us hone it.”

Chapter 19

“I don’t like it.” Adam said. “We don’t know what that man is capable of doing. I don’t want you anywhere *near* him.”

“I’ll be fine,” Warren said. “Joshua can do the rough stuff if there is any to be done. Besides, I make a damn good witness—the only one among us with neither a history with the man, nor any axe to grind.”

“No history? That’s not how I remember that encounter you had with him not long after you came to town. That encounter gives you, lawyer Jessop, one hell of an axe to grind.” Adam said.

“True, but you’re the only one who knows about that. You can bet your ass Maddox didn’t tell anyone else about that incident. Except maybe Larson, and he’s dead.”

Caleb decided it was time he made his presence known. He hadn’t intended to eavesdrop, but now that he had, he needed to understand what he’d just heard.

Although he had a pretty good guess and if what he suspected proved true, the new knowledge explained a lot about the dynamics he’d sensed in the last few hours.

“What incident?” Caleb asked as he rounded the corner of the lean-to that served as a horse shelter.

The sun had set, but there remained enough light from the moon for Caleb to easily read the embarrassment on Warren’s face and the discomfort on Adam’s.

“If it will help or hurt our mission, I need to know,” he said. Then, more softly, “I’m not one to judge *anyone*.”

He waited, unable to read the looks passing between the two men, but aware they were poignant.

“Warren’s being a lawyer isn’t the only reason Maddox hates him,” Adam said.

“I met him not long after I arrived here. He—” Warren stopped speaking, ran a hand through his hair. Then he looked directly at Caleb. “I’m going to trust you. Adam will tell you it’s not something I do easily. I hope to hell I’m not making the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Whatever you tell me goes no further,” Caleb said. “Not without your permission.”

Warren exhaled heavily and looked at Adam. When that man nodded, he turned his attention back to Caleb.

“All right. Not long after I arrived in Waco, I was introduced to Tyrone Maddox at a social gathering. We...recognized each other. Like recognizing like.”

As if daring Caleb to react, Warren stopped talking. Caleb never considered himself to be the sensitive sort, but he could feel the anxiety radiating off both men. He couldn’t say he blamed them. Warren had, in a roundabout way, just admitted to something that could get him hard jail time just about anywhere man had laws, and Adam...Adam, Caleb realized, harbored feelings for the lawyer that pretty much mirrored the feelings he and Joshua felt for Sarah.

“All right. Go on,” Caleb said.

Warren closed his eyes just for a moment. When he opened them again, a hardness had come into them. “He wanted us to get together, get to know each other better. But I disliked the man on sight, despite what we had in common. So, I refused. Looking back, I guess I refused a little too harshly.”

“That’s no damn excuse for what he did next,” Adam bit out.

“Not an excuse, no, but maybe a way to ...I don’t know, understand it.”

Caleb noted Warren used a different tone of voice when he spoke to Adam. Then the lawyer looked back at Caleb.

“About a week later, I went to the Old Ranch, one of the saloons in town, with a couple of new acquaintances. We ended up staying there into the evening. None of us had a lot to drink. We were too busy arguing points of law to drink very much.”

Warren smiled, and Caleb could see that part of this memory, at least, was a pleasant one.

“Just as I was making ready to leave,” Warren continued, “I saw Maddox. He came down the stairs. I guess he’d been playing poker in the private room. He didn’t see me, I thought, and I remember feeling relief at that. Anyway, I finished my beer, then left, heading over to the boarding house on Washington where I lived at the time. I passed an alleyway, in the middle of the block. I didn’t see him coming. It seemed as if he came out of nowhere.”

Warren stopped speaking again, and Caleb understood this time because the memory had moved into difficult territory.

“Maddox punched me in the face, stunned me. He pushed me to the ground, kept hitting me, and told me I was going to be sorry I hadn’t said yes when he asked me nicely the first time. That if I’d said yes, he’d have been gentle, and now he wasn’t going to be gentle. Now I was just going to be his whore. I began to fight back, but he’s bigger and heavier, and he already had me pinned to the ground.”

“That’s when I came around the corner. I’d heard what he said and knew immediately what Maddox planned to do—sick bastard had a hard-on while he was beating Warren—but I acted as if they were simply two drunken men fighting in an alley. Broke it up, told them both to go home and sober up, and sent them on their way with a warning.”

“I haven’t come face to face with Maddox since.” Warren said. “He avoids where I go, and I’ve never returned to that saloon.”

“And you’re willing to take this on? To go and face him, take on this role?” Caleb shook his head. “You’ve got guts, Warren. I’m impressed.”

Warren seemed to totally relax at that. Adam met Caleb’s gaze.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You don’t have to thank me. We’ve been through a lot together. Life is too short, as I’ve recently had pointed out to me.” Caleb indicated his arm, the sling the major reason he had to stay behind, let Joshua and Warren take on Maddox. Then he smiled. After what these two friends had shared with him, he could be just as honest. “Besides, Joshua and I are the last ones who would ever cast stones, considering how we’re planning to spend the rest of our lives with Sarah. If you find what makes you happy, you have to seize it.”

Adam smiled. “I was wondering,” he said, obviously referring to Sarah.

“You know,” Warren’s words sounded cautious, “maybe Joshua and I can go in there tomorrow as if we’re...together. Maddox would buy that in a heartbeat. The added element might be enough to totally disarm the bastard. It would bring his ego into play, piss him off, maybe just enough to keep him from looking beyond the obvious.”

“That might work. You want me to discuss it with Joshua?” Caleb asked.

Warren looked down at the ground for a long moment. Then he met Caleb’s gaze again, a decisive light in his eyes.

“No. No, we’ll discuss it, all of us together. Inside.”

Such emotion flowed between Adam and Warren, Caleb felt as if he was in the way. Deciding the two of them deserved some privacy, he nodded.

“Good. I’ll see you inside, then. Take your time.”

* * * *

“A gunslinger and a lawyer. Why am I not surprised? Two of life’s worst vermin.”

Maddox left them waiting in his entrance hall for nearly five minutes. Joshua figured that was long enough for him to dispatch his men to see if anyone else waited beyond sight of the house, if he had a mind to.

The man was dressed in what Joshua considered prissy clothing. No working duds for him. Beneath his fine tailored waistcoat, his cross-draw holster gleamed in all its fancy leather glory. Joshua wondered if Maddox could even shoot straight. The man carried himself like the lord of the manor looking down on a couple of peons.

Then he came down the stairs, his manner disparaging, even as his gaze fixed on Warren, before meeting Joshua’s.

Joshua waited just until Maddox was on the bottom step before lunging forward, picking him up by his lapels, and slamming him hard against the wall.

“My brother is dead, you son of a bitch! You’re lucky I don’t kill you here and now.”

“Joshua.”

Warren called his name a second time, his tone more pleading than the first. Joshua blinked, then stepped back.

Maddox, clearly not expecting the attack, had been put off balance. *Good*. Keeping him off balance had been their main intention.

“Perhaps we should go to your office,” Warren suggested. “After all, these are...delicate matters we have to discuss. No sense in any of your employees getting an earful.”

Maddox straightened his shirt, then nodded. “I’ll give you two minutes. And you may as well know, I’ve sent one of my men for Captain Kendall.”

An outright lie. The last man he wants here is Adam. “Good.” Joshua hissed that between his teeth. He wondered if Maddox had been off balance even before they arrived. Maybe he knew his lover

was dead. Perhaps Larson had meant something to him, though from what he'd heard the night before and what he knew of Maddox's lack of morals, Joshua doubted it.

He didn't wait for Maddox, just walked into the man's office until he stood before his desk.

He didn't let Maddox get fully settled in his chair before he said, "Both of your assassins are dead. The second one killed my brother. I killed him. Mr. Larson died slowly and in great pain, and, he proved very loquacious before he breathed his last."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Joshua caught the flash of pain and counted that news as just one more way of keeping the bastard off balance. "Let me see if I can awaken your memory." He leaned forward. "You married Sarah Carmichael so that you could kill her and collect her inheritance, a quarter of a million dollars left to her by her maternal grandfather. Your first contracted killers were a band of no accounts called the Morgan gang. They tried to kill your wife twice and failed. They're all dead, too, of course."

"Yes, I heard from the Sheriff of Springfield that there allegedly had been some trouble. At which point you and your brother made off with my wife. I'm afraid I have serious doubts about her virtue now."

Oh, he's good. Maddox had recovered quickly, giving the appearance of a man affronted, a man in control. If Joshua didn't detect just the slightest tremor, he'd be tempted to believe him. He decided his best course would be to ignore the slur against Sarah and push on.

"Then Sheriff MacFarlane sent two telegrams, one to you and one to the woman's father, signing Caleb's name to both. One said we would be crossing into Texas at Henrietta, the other Denison." Joshua leaned forward even more. "Do you want to know what Larson told me just before he died?"

He saw it then, a trace of fear in Maddox's eyes.

“He told me why you married the bitch and why you wanted her dead. Ten thousand dollars.” He straightened up again, so Maddox would think that was *all* they knew about Larson. Sure enough, there was the relief in the man’s eyes. He believed his deepest secret to still be safe, though how he could with Warren standing here was beyond Joshua. He controlled his thoughts, and donned a smug expression.

“That’s how much I want to kill the woman, or she lives and I go tell what I know to Adam Kendall.”

“You expect me to believe you haven’t already spoken to the man?”

Joshua stepped back, let his gaze track to Warren. Warren returned his look steadily. Joshua counted to five and hoped to hell that exchange looked convincing to Maddox.

“Adam was Caleb’s friend, not mine. He doesn’t even know Caleb’s dead, yet.” Joshua let himself imagine the gut-wrenching pain he’d feel if anything happened to Caleb and knew that pain showed on his face. He turned and looked at Warren again. Then he gave Maddox his full attention. “My brother is dead, and there’s nothing I can do to bring him back. But ten thousand dollars will buy us a fresh start. Ten thousand dollars will take us anywhere we want to go. We can find our place with that kind of money. Build a life.

“You’ve got only a minute to decide what happens next.”

The look Maddox sent Warren was one of loathing. Warren reacted by stepping just a half inch closer to Joshua. When Maddox turned his mocking glare on him, Joshua let him see the very real hatred he felt for the man.

“Where is she now?” Maddox asked.

“We left Denison and headed straight to Warren’s. I...I needed to see him. Sarah was so upset by all that happened, she was nearly hysterical. Right now she’s on Warren’s bed, sound asleep, thanks to the help of a good dose of laudanum.”

Maddox sat back and ran his fingers across the top of his desk. Joshua could read him as easily as he could an open book. He saw the

calculation. If he was sitting across a poker table from the man, he would swear a bluff was imminent.

“Fine.”

“Fine, what?” Joshua asked.

“Fine, you’ve got a deal. Ten thousand dollars in return for Sarah Carmichael’s body. Don’t bring her here. Shoot her, then ride into Waco with her. Tell Kendall whatever damn story you want.”

“When and how do we get the money?” Joshua asked.

“I can write you a note on my bank right now,” Maddox said.

“Then cancel it the moment you come in to town? How stupid do you think we are?” Warren asked.

“All right. I’ll ride into Waco today, take out the gold. Meet you wherever you say. But, by damn, it has to be today!” Maddox slowly sat forward, his eagerness plain.

Joshua turned to Warren, one eyebrow raised. Warren nodded.

Joshua turned to face Maddox again. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the expression on Warren’s face. Warren had let his mask fall, and Joshua was willing to let him have his moment of revenge.

“Got you, you filthy bastard,” the lawyer said.

Everything that came next happened so fast, it seemed a blur.

Maddox roared. They’d talked over the night before all the possible reactions Maddox would have when he realized he’d been had, when Joshua and Warren, who’d both been deputized, arrested him. The consensus was that he would explode in anger, then threaten them with exposure as homosexuals, waving his influence and wealth in their faces.

Adam hadn’t been one hundred percent certain that once charged, even with this confession of sorts, that Maddox could be convicted. None of them had been, but they were all willing to take that chance.

Having him charged would serve one very important purpose, in that it would almost guarantee Sarah would be granted an annulment.

None of them expected Maddox to draw his weapon and shoot.

Too late, Joshua thought. Maddox gave in to his pettiness and aimed at the man he hated, not the man who posed the biggest threat. Joshua had only an instant to act. Lunging toward Warren, he knocked that man out of the way and began to fall sideways even as he drew his peacemaker and fired.

Twin explosions blasted out in the small, enclosed room. Joshua felt a hiss of air as Maddox's bullet passed within a hair's breadth of his ear. Warren's cry alarmed him at the same time the sight of the hole between Maddox's eyes filled him with a deep, personal satisfaction.

Joshua hit the floor then rolled, coming to his feet, his gun trained on Maddox. The man had fallen back into his chair, definitely dead.

"Son of a bitch, that stings!"

Warren's curse yanked his attention away from the corpse. Sliding his Colt back into his holster, he privately admitted he'd been tempted to give Maddox an extra couple of pieces of lead, just out of spite.

He went down on his knees next to Warren, who sat on the floor, his right hand clamped to his left arm.

"Let me see," Joshua said softly.

The door to the office burst open, and there stood the same skinny Mexican man who'd answered the door when they'd arrived. He looked at Joshua and Warren, then swung startled eyes to where Maddox's body lay sprawled. He crossed himself and began to pray in Spanish.

To the startled houseman Joshua said, "Vaya a abrir la puerta. Viene un posse." Or the posse would be coming shortly, since Adam had only been willing to give them about ten minutes.

He looked down at the wound on Warren's arm. "Only grazed you, thank God. Adam would kill me if anything serious happened to you." He tore Warren's already damaged sleeve, using the strip of material to tie off the wound. They'd clean it, and wrap it in proper bandages later, but Joshua didn't think he'd even need stitches.

“That’s funny. Sarah threatened me with a fate worse than death if I let anything happen to *you*,” the lawyer said, smiling. Then his gaze tracked over to Maddox’s body. “Stupid bastard. Why did he draw? He must have known the odds were good that he was going to get off any charges we laid.”

“I guess we’ll never know.” Joshua said. “Come on. Let’s get you on your feet before Adam storms the gates.”

He helped Warren stand and would have said more, but the sound of Adam’s shout and running footsteps cut him off.

The Texas Ranger burst into the room, gun drawn. He took one look at Warren, hurt but obviously not seriously, then focused his attention on Maddox. Stepping forward, he looked over the desk. Joshua guessed he wanted to verify the presence of the man’s side arm, on the floor where it had landed from his death-slackened grip.

Slowly, Adam holstered his weapon and turned to give Joshua a level look.

“Seems our work is done here,” he said.

“Yours, maybe,” Warren asserted. He went to Adam, and giving in to the urge, brushed a light touch of affection over the lawman’s arm. “But my work is just beginning.” He made a show of looking around the room, at the carpet and the furniture, the trappings of ego and wealth with which Tyrone Maddox had surrounded himself.

He turned his gaze to Joshua. “Do you think Sarah will like her new home?”

Chapter 20

“You have to appreciate the irony.”

Sarah turned at the sound of her lover’s voice, her smile natural and free. Caleb stood beside her just inside the entrance of the huge house. When he reached up to rub absently at the ache in his arm, she frowned. Never far from her thoughts, and lurking just at the edge of her dreams, lived the memory of that horrible moment a few weeks ago in Denison when she’d believed Caleb had been taken from her forever.

That fact and the knowledge of the fate the former owner of this ranch planned for her effectively squashed any guilt she might have felt about moving in to his house. *No, not his house anymore. My house, and damned if I haven’t earned it.*

“I do appreciate the irony. I appreciate my lawyer even more.” She turned as Joshua came into the house to stand on her other side.

“He did seem kind of gleeful when he got a copy of Maddox’s will. Then he complained about the lack of a real challenge.”

Sarah shook her head. As Caleb said, she had to appreciate the irony.

In his efforts to prove to the world that his marriage to Sarah had been real and valid—laying the groundwork, they knew, for the claim he’d planned to make on her death—Maddox had his will changed as soon as he returned home from their wedding in Chicago. That document not only acknowledged Sarah as his wife but named her his sole heir. That which he’d planned to use to support his crime served as a means, not only of recompense, but of ensuring a future for her and the men she loved.

“You’re certain you don’t mind this? Moving into his house, taking over his ranch?” she asked her lovers now. She knew enough of the male ego to know that sometimes, it could be a fragile and delicate thing.

“Not one bit,” Joshua said, then looked at his brother. “What about you?”

“Nope. We were working as gunslingers, hoping to save enough to buy us a place of our own. I told you that, sweetheart, remember? We’re ranchers born and bred. Ma actually left the homestead to us, but we let Becky and her husband have it, since they’d kept it going all the years we were away. What about you, sweetheart? Our moving in here, especially into the house with you and not the bunkhouse means people are likely going to talk.”

Sarah smiled, then slipped her arms through theirs. “What do I care about talk? In case you don’t realize it, we’re rich. One thing I learned living in Chicago is that when you’re rich, you can get away with just about any damn thing. Doubt it’s any different here.”

“No, sweetheart, we’re not rich. *You’re* rich. We’re just a couple of leeches.”

Joshua said that in such a way she knew he teased her. She shook her head. “Nope, sorry. That amazing lawyer I have is drawing up a partnership agreement, and it’s going to include everything. Not just what Maddox left me, but my inheritance from my grandfather, too. An equal three way split, share and share alike.”

Her amazing lawyer, Warren Jessop, had contacted the lawyer in Virginia who administered her grandfather’s estate. By the terms of his will, her death would have guaranteed Maddox he would immediately come in to that money.

And Maddox’s death—making her a widow—had done the same for Sarah.

She felt both her men tense, knew protests were imminent.

“Don’t argue. You told me I belonged to you and that there’d be no going back. Well, I feel the same way. So what belongs to me, belongs to you.”

“You’re a bossy little thing, aren’t you?” Caleb said.

Sarah didn’t think he expected an answer, but she gave him one anyway. “I am now. Being docile nearly got me killed. From now on, you can expect that speaking my mind and having my way are going to be two of my most notable traits.”

“Is that right?” Joshua asked.

Sarah knew her men and knew when they were battling laughter. Another rhetorical question and another she chose to answer.

“That is right.” It was her first time inside her new home. She’d elected to stay at Warren’s until the legalities had been straightened out and finalized, but Caleb and Joshua stepped in immediately to see to ranch operations and clean out Maddox’s clothes and personal effects.

She hadn’t wanted to encounter anything the man might have worn when she finally made the house her home.

She looked around at the room she could just see off to the left, a parlor of some sort, and the room she could see to the right—Maddox’s office. She’d leave that one for last. Maybe tomorrow. She wanted to explore this new home of hers, especially the one room in particular she wanted to see above all the rest, first.

Before her sprawled as fine and wide a staircase as she’d ever seen. “Maddox spared no expense building himself a manor house,” Sarah said. She’d known her future home would be nicer than the standard frontier cabin, but she had no idea it would be this grand.

“He had a hell of an ego,” Caleb asserted. “And spent a damn fortune feeding it.”

She felt his sideways glance. “What?”

“Are you going to be all right sleeping in what used to be his bed?”

“As long as the sheets don’t smell like him and I’m not sleeping there alone.”

“The linens have all been washed and aired, as has the feather mattress,” Caleb said.

Sarah wasn’t one bit surprised Caleb and Joshua had thought of that. They both proved amazingly thorough in their quest to take care of her. That suited her just fine.

“As to sleeping alone? Not if we can help it,” Joshua said.

“Good. So...where is this bed?”

Upstairs, four bedrooms branched off a central corridor. Three were of a normal size while one appeared enormous—with the biggest bed Sarah had ever seen. Not only was the contraption longer than any she’d laid eyes on, it had to be nearly double the normal width.

“My goodness!” was all she could think to say.

“According to Jose, the houseman, Maddox had this bed built especially,” Caleb said. “Rather considerate of him, don’t you think, love? Saved us from having to do the exact same thing.”

“Jose and his wife Rita have a small adobe on the other side of the saddle barn,” Joshua added. “There’ll be no one in this house at night but us.”

Sarah walked toward the bed, reached out, and tested the mattress with her hand. She smiled, then turned and sat down on it.

“It’s like sitting on a cloud!”

Both men grinned. As one, they began to unbutton their shirts.

“In that case,” Caleb said, with a voice that tickled Sarah’s pussy, “why don’t we take you to heaven?”

“Mmm.” She avidly drank in the sight of their naked chests emerging from the cover of their shirts. “Yes, why don’t you?”

* * * *

They stripped themselves naked and came to her. Before they pulled her to her feet she'd reached out with her tongue and given each of their erect cocks a good, long lick. Then, holding them off just a moment longer, she'd nuzzled each of them. Each man had a unique scent that set her mouth to watering and her pussy to weeping. When they drew her to her feet and raced to undress her, she had already grown wet for them.

"You both smell so good to me. I can tell you apart by the fragrance of your balls," Sarah said boldly.

"Can you?" Caleb's words took on the edge of arousal. Reaching out, she fisted his cock, her hand gliding over hot turgid flesh that expanded the more she stroked.

"I can."

"We can smell you, too, sweetheart. Your cunt just calls to us." Caleb said.

"Even when you're fully clothed, even when there are others around, we can scent you, and we want you. You're our mate, Sarah." Joshua, the least assertive of the brothers, could certainly have his moments.

This was the man who had killed her would-be murderer. Shot him dead, because the fool had drawn his gun, yes. Sarah knew, though, that under that, at the bottom of it, he'd done it for her.

They risked themselves to keep her safe. But more, they had opened her to the kind of loving and belonging she'd pined for all her life. When she'd discovered she had fallen in love with them both, they both took her, gladly sharing her, and wasn't that a miracle?

"Yes. I'm your mate. And you, both of you, are mine. I need to smell your scent on my skin. I need to feel your cocks inside me, your seed coming into my body. Fuck me. Fuck me now."

"Sarah." Caleb brought her down to the bed, his body hot and hard against her right side.

“You’ll have our cocks. You’ll have all of us.” Joshua laid down on her left, his hand stroking down her body, mirroring the same caress his brother lavished upon her.

They feasted. Sarah could think of no word more appropriate for the way they used their hands and their mouths to take pleasure and return it tenfold. Every part of her felt on fire. Every inch of her skin craved their touch and burned for their kisses.

Stroking them, pulling them close, she kissed her lovers, one, then the other. Their unique flavor coated her tongue and filled her soul. A new level of intimacy surrounded them. No longer did the shadow of another stand over them, threatening to end what they’d found together. Sarah knew that nothing, and no one, would ever come between them again. Nothing would stop them from spending the rest of their lives together.

“Mine.” She’d needed to say that just one more time. Then their touch, their passion, commanded her full, undivided attention. Fingers traced and pinched, dallied and delved and Sarah’s hips left the bed as her pleasure poured out of her like rain. The shivers and rapture took her so keenly, she cried out with sounds that came from her heart.

“That’s one,” Caleb whispered. “How many more can we give you?”

He combed his fingers through her hair, his hand gripping her head as his mouth came down on hers. Hot, wet, his lips sucked while his tongue swept and drank her.

He pulled her right leg up onto his hips, opening her wider to their whims and their wills. Joshua kissed his way down her body, giving little teasing nips, stroking with his tongue. He twirled his tongue in her navel.

Before she could draw a breath, his mouth settled on her pussy. Licking, tasting, he drove her arousal impossibly higher. Then she felt him penetrate her slick passage with his fingers. He thrust them hard and fast and stroked something inside her, something she could feel wrapping around his finger. The rapture flooded her once more,

stronger, longer, so that Sarah wondered if the entire world had faded away and only these men, and this moment, remained.

“Two,” Joshua said.

Caleb eased back as his brother worked his way up her body. He threaded the fingers of his left hand through her right and lay back against the mounded pillows, watching Joshua love her.

Having one lover watch while another pleased her was nearly as thrilling as having them both loving her at the same time.

Joshua loomed over her, bent down so that she could smell her own essence on his face.

“Kiss me, Sarah. Taste yourself on my lips. Let me share your own sweetness with you.”

Shocking and shameful, lust swamped her and she wanted nothing more than to take whatever he wanted to give her. She felt the head of his cock press against her wet folds and then he surged inside her, all the way deep inside her. A twinge of pain accompanied the wonderful bliss of having his length and breadth in her. Needing more, she raised up, her mouth hungry for the taste of them together.

Her lips devoured, her tongue lapped, and Sarah knew she drank a new flavor she would forever crave.

Would her dew taste different from Caleb’s lips?

“Wrap your arms around me. Hold on.”

Joshua’s command as he slipped one hand under her bottom had her raising herself to comply.

She gasped when he rolled them so that she ended atop him. His cock, still deep inside her, seemed to hit deeper.

“Ride me, baby.”

She knew what to do, for she’d been on top of him once before, in the stream their first time together. She’d learned much since that initiation. Raising and sinking upon him, squeezing him with her inner muscles, she shuddered with the wondrous sensations coursing through her.

She'd let go of Caleb's hand when she'd wrapped her arms around Joshua, but she knew he was still close, watching. Caleb caressed her nape to ass, and she shivered. When his fingers caressed back and forth across the tiny rosette of her anus, she moaned and sent him a heated look over her shoulder.

"You want me to fuck your ass?" His whispered words moistened her ear and drove her higher.

"Yes. Yes, I want your cock in my ass."

Coyness and modesty were emotions to be worn for company, to be donned when necessary. They had no place here and now. Here, alone and naked with the men who loved her, Sarah felt as if she'd been created a new creature, one of lust and longing and love. Here, she was heart and flesh, a vessel to be filled, a nymph to pour rapture onto her lovers. Here she was free to love, with no restraints, with nothing forbidden.

She widened her legs when Joshua did, the two of them, joined, making room for their third. They were one heart. They had become a family on a journey of personal discovery and love.

She felt firm hands on her ass, spreading her cheeks. Shivering, she moaned in delight as Caleb used his tongue to moisten her anus, as he dipped and swirled and probed with it. Then she felt him shift.

Instinct drove her to push her pussy down and forward even more securely onto Joshua's cock as she lifted her ass, relaxed her thighs, offering herself for her second lover's enjoyment.

Caleb hissed as he sank into her, her back muscles now accustomed to accommodating her lovers' shafts.

Sarah sighed, the sensation of being full and stretched the most wonderful sensation in the world. Her hands rested on the bed on either side of Joshua's head. His gaze, fierce and burning, held hers as his hands gripped her waist, and he thrust up with his hips.

Behind her, Caleb's grasp on her hips strong, he thrust in and out of her ass, his rhythm steady and deep.

Sarah groaned, a woman-as-animal sound of need, of desire, as the friction of her lovers cocks stroked and stoked the fires of her passion.

“Fuck us, sweetheart. Fuck us both,” Joshua said.

Yes. Back and forth, down and then up, her hips moved in an ever faster pace, her cunt and ass hungry for the purest pleasure, her heart and soul famished for that piece of heaven only these men could give her.

“More, oh, more!” Wild, wicked, she took them, took from them, until she thought she might go mad.

“Damn! Take it, love. Take it all.”

Hot and swollen inside her, she felt their cocks begin to twitch, felt the beginning of their pleasure, and then their seed, hot, liquid, shot into her, filling her with all they had to give.

Shivering, quivering, calling their names, Sarah soared all the way to heaven and beyond.

* * * *

They moved her, lifting her and pulling the linens down, then crawled in with her until she was sandwiched between them, covered and cared for.

Late afternoon sunshine lit the room, and Sarah sighed in the aftermath of their loving. One naked male at her back, the other snug against her front, she didn’t care if she ever moved again.

“Every time it gets better,” Joshua whispered.

“Better, and more,” Caleb agreed.

Sarah could only sigh.

“I never thought I’d prefer a bed indoors over a ceiling of stars, but I think I do. Now.”

Caleb’s confession made Sarah smile. “I wouldn’t mind, once in a while, camping out somewhere, just the three of us. Like we did.”

Sarah sighed again. “Those are some of my fondest memories, but I think we’re going to have to wait until next summer for that.”

“There’s still several months before the weather turns, sweetheart,” Joshua said. “If you want it, then we want to give it to you.”

“Mmm. I do want it.” Sarah smiled. She turned onto her back, pleased the bed was large enough so that she could do so without dislodging either of her men. She was pleased because for this moment, for *this* sharing, she would be able to see both their faces. She took Caleb’s hand, brought it to her lips, and then Joshua’s. And she recalled that first time, when she’d dared to make love under two gunslingers. That had been the beginning, and now came the next chapter.

“The thing is, I might find the ground not so accommodating for the next...say, seven or eight months.”

She sensed it, that sudden tension that came into her lovers, a tension chased away, almost immediately, by joy.

“Sarah?” Joshua reached down, stroked her face gently.

“Sweetheart?” Caleb’s eyes glittered as brightly as his brother’s.

She took their hands and placed them on her stomach. “This is going to be one very lucky baby because he’s going have two daddies who will love him beyond measure. Just the same way I’m a very lucky woman because I have two husbands whom I love with all my heart.” No vows had yet been spoken, but in her heart, these men were both her husbands. Not even death, she felt certain, would part them.

“Might be a girl,” Caleb said, and didn’t he look happy as hell about that possibility, Sarah thought.

“Might be twins,” Joshua said, his joy a nearly palpable thing.

“Yes,” Caleb agreed. “It might be twins.”

Had any two men ever worn such wide smiles? Had any two sets of eyes ever sparkled with as much joy and love? Sarah didn’t think so.

“It might indeed be twins,” Sarah agreed. In that moment, she knew it not only might be, it *would* be.

Just as she knew their lives, their futures, and their happiness would be long and loving and bright.

THE END



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