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Collection

Josie Hunter THE GOLD DIGGER



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

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

THE GOLD DIGGER

The Lost Collection
Black Hills Beauties 1

Josie Hunter

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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THE GOLD DIGGER

Black Hills Beauties 1

JOSIE HUNTER

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Chapter 1

The Black Hills

Dakota Territory

1877

Lucinda Parks plunged her tightened fists into the folds of her skirt when the wagon lurched onto the rutted path leading to home. She didn't want her stepdaddy to see how anxious his silence had made her. He hadn't said a word on the ride back from Sturgis. The weather had turned during their visit to town, and Cinda had been forced to track him down at the saloon to let him know a storm brewed. He hadn't been happy she'd interrupted his poker game or his drinking, but he'd have been less happy to arrive home with ruined supplies. The problem was he'd never admit that.

His glance skittered across her face with the creepy sensation of a damp spider web. Cinda wondered what might be on his mind. It never took much to put him in a mood, and when he drank whiskey at the saloon all afternoon, it got worse. His silence spoke volumes about what might come. Thomas Wilson liked to communicate with his hands, and up until the last few weeks, he'd focused most of his attention on Miranda. Though Cinda had always felt sorry for her older sister, she'd liked it better when Thomas ignored her existence.

Now that Miranda had vanished from the homestead, Thomas did most of his communicating with Cinda, and she'd had enough.

If he tried anything today, she planned to stop him. She hadn't decided exactly how yet, but he'd hit her for the last time. Miranda may have cowered for years until she made the decision to run, but Cinda didn't intend to live that way.

He parked the old wagon in the dooryard and set the brake. Cinda tensed, waiting for the swipe of his hand, but he jumped down without a word and headed toward the barn.

Cinda released the breath she'd been holding. "Thank you, Lord. I haven't got a plan yet."

She glanced up at the glowering sky. They'd made it back just in time. Dark clouds rolled over the distant hills in waves. Lightning flickered deep inside the clouds, eerie yellow flashes against the billowing swirls of gray and black. Wind tore against the wagon, rocking it in a steady, almost comforting motion, the way she imagined riding a horse would feel. She'd never been on a horse, not even the old nag that pulled the wagon. She thought riding a horse across an open range would be the most glorious feeling on earth.

She wished she were on a fast horse right now, bound for freedom, for anywhere but the Wilson homestead. On the back of her horse, she would answer to no one because no one could catch her. She wondered how far Miranda had gotten. She wished she knew where to start looking.

She tried to rise from her seat, gathering her skirts against the wind lashing at the fabric. Dust stung her face like tiny pins and swirled around her in a choking cloud. A gust slammed against the wagon, and Cinda lost her balance. She pitched forward and cracked her head against the buckboard.

"Criminy."

She blinked several times, trying to get her bearings. When she touched her forehead, her fingers came away streaked with blood. She stared at them for a moment and several more tiny drops splashed

onto her skin. She pressed her palm against the wound, hoping to stop both the blood and the dizziness that swamped her. Darkness hovered at the edges of her vision, and she closed her eyes to concentrate on holding herself together. She feared she'd pass out.

"Stop your dreamin' and move your ass!"

A hand hooked like a sharp talon around her upper arm and wrenched hard. She flew from the wagon, and the world spun crazily around her. She crashed into the dirt, and her cheekbone hit something hard. She struggled for a moment to get her breath.

Pushing up to her hands and knees, she blinked rapidly when a splatter of blood slid down and dripped into her eye. She swiped at it with her sleeve, and her hand trembled as she swept the tangles of hair away from her face. She heard the scuffle of a boot against the ground and rolled right as the tip brushed against her shoulder. She scurried backwards, and Thomas Wilson took another step toward her.

She lurched into a crouch and glared at him through the tangles of her hair.

"Go ahead," she snarled. "I dare you."

"And if I did?" Her stepfather barked out a laugh. "What would ya do about it, missy?"

"Maybe nothing...today. But I guess you'll never know for sure, will you?" She clenched her jaw, grabbed a fistful of hair, and twisted it at the nape of her neck. The corner of her mouth twitched upwards without her permission, but it didn't feel like a friendly smile. In fact, it felt dangerous and a little bit scary.

Thomas peered down at her, his eyes narrowing until they were slits spitting cold fire. "You're an uppity bitch. You wanna watch that mouth, girl." He slid his foot along the dirt, trying to scare her, but she lifted her chin and refused to move a muscle. Thomas shifted his gaze.

Cinda kept her eyes locked on him. Just because a snake stopped rattling didn't mean it wouldn't strike. "If you touch me again, I'll run away, too."

Thomas snorted. "We're better off without that sorry sister of yours. You keep that in mind, and stick to your business."

"I stick to my business, but that doesn't stop you from sticking your nose in mine. You want to work this dirt farm with no hands at all?"

"Drop the arrogance, missy. You might have gotten all grown up, but inside that woman's body is the little brat I met ten years ago. And I never liked her much. You might keep that in mind, too." His jaw tightened. "Get that wagon unloaded now." He spun around and headed back to the barn.

Slowly, Cinda stood. The wind continued to buffet around her, tearing at the hem of her skirt and wrapping the fabric around her legs. She stumbled a few times, holding onto the wagon slats as she made her way back to the gate. She pressed her other hand against her wound, remembering the blood that streaked Miranda's face the last time Cinda had seen her sister.

"Why didn't you take me with you?" Cinda murmured.

As much as Cinda missed her sister, she understood why Miranda had run. It was clear Thomas had ceased to care about the damage he did to his stepdaughter, and another encounter with Thomas's fists might have resulted in Miranda's death.

"I'll find you someday. I just hope when I do—"

She shook her head, refusing to think about what Miranda might be doing to survive. The Black Hills offered very few options for women who lived without the protection of a father or husband. Money offered the only other safety, and that was often hard to come by. Unless luck found you. Unless you had the Midas touch. Cinda doubted that Miranda had struck it rich, which left whoring, thieving, or working herself to the bone. Another possibility was worse yet. She

hoped Miranda hadn't saddled herself to a man like Thomas Wilson for the rest of her life.

Cinda shuddered. She yanked at the edge of the coffee sack and hauled it across the wagon bed. The burlap fibers caught for a moment, and she gave a little tug. The sound of a rip made her freeze. She squeezed her eyes closed and stopped breathing.

She listened, tuning out the wail of the wind, the wheezing breath of their old nag and her stepfather's coarse voice shouting to her ma. Soon only one sound remained—the heart-stopping noise of coffee beans cascading out of the bag in a steady stream.

"No, no, no. Please no."

She quickly slipped her hand under the sack and shoved her bloody palm against the hole. Leaning down, she used her body weight to flip the bag. She cast a glance toward the ramshackle shed they called home then removed her hand. A six-inch gash ran down the center of the bag, and coffee beans continued to leap from the tear. They slid down the sides to hit the wagon bed with the plunking sound of heavy raindrops then skittered over the boards.

"Lucinda!"

Cinda's heart lurched. She grabbed a tattered tarp and flung it over the mess. "Yes, Ma!"

"Get that horse in the barn before the storm hits."

"Yes, ma'am!"

She swept her hands across the planks, ignoring the splinters that stuck in her flesh. When she had a pile of coffee beans, she reached inside her dress and unhooked the pin that held her chemise together. She stuffed the beans back into the bag then secured the pin. Hopefully she could fill the bin in the house before her mother noticed the gaping hole.

Cinda hoisted the bag into her arms, cradling it like a child, and moved quickly to the house. Keeping her gaze on the swirling clouds overhead, she realized she had about five minutes before the sky opened and drenched her, the rest of the supplies, and the horse. She

pounded up the porch steps, dropped the bag on the table, and headed back outside.

She finished unloading the wagon just as the first raindrops smacked into the dirt. By the time she'd put the old nag in the barn, the dooryard was a swamp. She slogged her way through the mess back to the house then quickly put the supplies away. She started supper absently, all the while contemplating how to leave this part of her life behind, and how she might go about tracking down her sister.

She heard the hard knock of her stepfather's boots on the porch, and within a few moments, her parents' voices drifted through the open window. Cinda ran her flour-streaked hands over her apron and tiptoed across the room. She peeked through the gap in the burlap curtains. Her mother and Thomas stood in the shadows at the edge of the porch, and Cinda had to concentrate to hear them over the roar of the wind and the pounding of the rain on the tin roof.

"You don't believe me?" Thomas said. "See for yourself."

Her mother gasped. "That's a fifty dollar gold piece. And he just gave it to you?"

"With the promise of another. On delivery."

"When?" her mother asked.

"I'm to meet..."

Cinda inched closer to the window, trying desperately to hear. *Damn it. Talk louder.*

"...days. Said he's..." Cinda pressed her ear against the curtain. "And he liked the way she looked."

"It's not right, Thomas."

"You didn't object to the gold we got for Miranda."

Cinda grasped the edge of the window sill and heard the wood crack beneath her fingers. For a moment, the pounding of her heart overwhelmed the sound of her mother's voice. Thomas Wilson had sold Miranda off?

“Miranda was always a handful,” her mother said. “You two never got along, and it wasn’t getting any better. I’d hoped to marry her off, but I’d rather see her gone than dead.”

“I never came close to killin’ her, Marion,” Thomas said.

“You can’t control yourself. Not when you’re drinking. That last beating was pretty bad. I can’t believe the man wanted her with the bruises on her face.”

“A man lookin’ for a whore doesn’t give a tinker’s damn about a few bruises.”

“But Lucinda is a hard worker, and she does what she’s told.”

“She sasses me,” Thomas said. “She’s gettin’ worse every day.”

Because you’re a monster and a bastard, not to mention a horse’s ass.

“Selling her still doesn’t seem right.”

“The gold’s gone and dried up, Marion. There’s nothin’ in this land.”

“We could try farming a little longer.”

“I ain’t no farmer!” Thomas shouted. “We came here to find gold, and we can’t even afford a decent stake. With a hundred dollars, we could head to the next strike and get there before anyone else. Buy the land when the price is low.”

“I’ve already sold one daughter. I don’t want to sell another.” Her mother’s voice hitched.

“Would you rather I sell you?”

Her mother gasped, and Cinda heard the shuffle of her boots on the porch as she backed away. Thomas’s voice was filled with contempt when he continued. “Not that you’d fetch much of a price. Make your choice, Marion.”

Her mother’s sigh could be heard over the force of the raindrops.

“Lucinda’s been nothin’ but extra baggage from the start. She works, but she can barely pull her own weight. The time’s come to lighten the load. Besides, we need the money, even if we only use it to get back to Ohio.”

“And do what?” her mother asked.

“I don’t give a damn. I just want out of this territory.” Cinda chewed on her lip, waiting. When her stepfather continued, his voice sounded thoughtful. “I could head into Deadwood tomorrow. I’ve heard the saloon owners pay a pretty price for their women. Might even get more for her than I was offered today. Lucinda gets a lot of glances when we go into town.”

“Because she’s a pretty girl.”

Cinda almost laughed. Her mother had never once told her she was pretty, though Cinda knew she was. She’d been on the receiving end of too many leers and stares, but it seemed that pretty blond curls, bright blue eyes, and a lush, healthy body meant only money to Thomas Wilson. Beauty meant gold in the Black Hills.

“I could call on that man that paid me for Miranda. Lucinda’s our ticket out, and I’m takin’ it.”

Cinda had heard enough. She sidled along the wall then returned to the work table to finish making the biscuits. Part of her felt sick that her stepfather considered selling her, but the other part soared with happiness. Miranda hadn’t run away. She hadn’t left her behind.

After her parents headed to the bedroom, Cinda packed a bag with her worldly goods, grabbed a bit of cheese and leftover biscuits and opened the back window. She slipped out in the rain-sodden night.

Without a thought in her head, she tore across the dark field in the direction of Deadwood with no real plan and no real hope, but anywhere was better than the Wilson homestead. Today, her stepdaddy had only pulled her from the wagon. Other times had been worse, and she’d never endured half of what Miranda had been through.

“If anyone’s getting a hundred dollars for a pound of my flesh, it’s going to be me. But I aim to make sure that doesn’t happen. And I’m going to find Miranda.”

Soaked and chilly, she struggled across the rocky terrain, battered by rain and lashed by the wind. When she couldn’t take another step,

she cried herself to sleep, resting fitfully in a wet, hollowed-out log. When she awoke, the sun peeked through a hazy cloud cover, and as she ate her meager breakfast, she watched the rays fall to earth in a dazzling display. The sunlight perked her up a little. She'd never thought it looked so pretty. She felt free, full of hope and looked forward to the future, whatever it brought her way. She'd left the worst of her life behind. Anything else had to be better.

She continued her journey toward Deadwood, wondering what fate would offer. When a beautiful spark of light caught her attention, Cinda hunkered down to inspect it. Suddenly she had a plan for the first time in her life.

* * * *

The chunk of gold dazzled her eyes. Cinda had never seen anything so beautiful or so shiny, and nothing had ever filled her with such hope. Looking at that golden rock sent waves of delight tingling over her skin, and her body shook as she contemplated touching it. The excitement she felt surpassed the exhilaration she'd gotten when Thomas Wilson hitched up the horses and they'd set off from Ohio years before to find their fortune. That first jolt of the wagon had made her mind burst with images of what might come to pass. Her stepdaddy said they'd be richer than kings, and their lives would change. They'd changed all right, and had she been blessed with the gift of sight and could see the future, Cinda would have stayed in Ohio. Each journey to another mineral strike pushed Thomas closer and closer to the edge when he found the area tapped out. As much as she hated her stepfather, she'd hoped the Black Hills would give him the opportunity to find his fortune, but once again, her stepfather had met with failure. The future had offered nothing but watching him drink himself into more stupors and feeling the fury of his fists as he took out his frustration on those around him.

Suddenly though, looking at that shimmering hunk of metal, Cinda envisioned a different future. She'd only seen gold a couple times, and never a nugget this big, but she knew the difference between real gold and fool's gold. Once she got the nerve to pick it up, she intended to keep it because this gold was as real as it got.

Every ray of sun glistening through the tall trees seemed drawn to its brilliance. It created a dazzling symphony of golden light that hurt her eyes, yet she couldn't stop staring at it. Forced to squint despite the shadowy copse where she squatted, her hand trembled as she reached toward it. She glanced around the woods, unsure why, but the importance of secrecy weighed heavy in her mind. Her stepdaddy had known people killed for less gold than this small thumb-sized nugget that lay near her foot. Cinda checked the pocket of her dress for holes, then snatched it up and shoved the nugget inside.

She realized she'd been holding her breath when a gasp filled the woods. She knew it was hers but still jerked at the sound. After a shaky laugh, she rose then checked the pocket to be sure the treasure was still there. Silly perhaps, but she'd done sillier things in her life.

The idea crossed her mind to head to Deadwood and trade the gold for cash. Though not large, she thought the nugget would probably provide enough traveling money to get pretty far away. She could take the stagecoach to Cheyenne. She knew the train ran through there, and she'd have her choice of destinations. First, though, she wanted to find some word about Miranda. If she could locate her sister, they could head back to Ohio together and plan their future. Perhaps they could return to their grandmother's house. She didn't even know if their grandmother was still alive, but it was the only safe haven she knew. In the meantime though...

She glanced around the woods again because one thought thrummed in her mind.

There might be more gold.

More gold meant oodles of money and definitely a better future. Money opened doors and offered opportunity. More importantly,

money bought information. Finding Miranda might take longer than she thought, and she had no idea how much she might have to pay along the way. Most people didn't offer information out of the kindness of their hearts. In fact, since they'd come to the Dakotas, she'd been hard pressed to find much kindness at all.

She hiked up her skirt and petticoats and stuffed the edges into the tattered belt, then grabbed her satchel from the ground and tossed it over her shoulder. She strolled north, in no hurry now. Slow and cautious would reap more rewards than going off half-cocked like her stepfather was wont to do. He hadn't had better luck in the Dakotas than he had in any other territory they'd lived in or traveled through. He hadn't found a lick of gold in over a year in the Black Hills, and what he had found could be better described as dust.

Cinda followed the bank of a gurgling stream, her gaze wandering over the damp ground and dipping into the water. She searched for anything that blazed like the sun. Gold had become her new favorite color.

After several hours of stopping and starting, bending and stooping, she found another nugget, larger than the first one. She clapped a hand over her mouth, barely containing the whoop of joy, and jumped up and down in the stream, squeezing the lump in her fist. The frigid water splashed up her bare legs, and her body broke out in goose bumps. Her boots soaked through. The cold water squished into the worn socks and between her toes, reminding her that dancing around in six inches of water probably wasn't the healthiest thing to do. She might pay for it later, but at that point, Cinda didn't care. She'd never been happier in her entire life. She splashed and frolicked, twirling in the stream, and silently screamed her elation for long, blissful moments, daring nature to do its worst.

She wanted to hug someone, but she seemed to be alone in this neck of the woods. That was probably just as well because they'd have carted her off to the nearest asylum. After her body stopped quivering with excitement, she dropped the gold into the pocket of her

dress, gave it a satisfied pat, and continued the quest. The irregular lumps of beautiful metal knocked together with a very satisfying weight. She fingered them through the rough material of the skirt, loving the jagged edges and smooth surfaces that told her she could be a wealthy woman if luck held. She hadn't been a believer in luck up until now, but something had led her to that spot, and something had led her to this one. She came to an abrupt stop in the bubbling stream, staring above the bank.

She stood still, only vaguely aware of her frozen feet. On a tiny hill above the stream sat a small cabin. It nestled beneath some giant-sized trees, almost lost in a hodgepodge of bristling vegetation. Poorly constructed, the cabin looked decrepit and ready to fall down in the next stiff breeze. It also looked uninhabited. A warped plank served as a door and hung by one rusty hinge. The boards pretending to be shutters over the only visible window looked ready to give up their task and fall to the ground.

She sloshed backwards through the stream, trying to get a better look. The cabin was in pretty bad shape, but she'd seen far worse inhabited by the men who'd come to the Dakotas. Some lived in squalor in the back alleys of the mining camps, and others burrowed into hollowed-out caves in the hills. Most of the miners lived little better than animals.

This place was a palace for these parts. Despite that, it looked uninhabited. She glanced at the chimney.

"There's no smoke."

Surely, if the occupants were home, there would be a fire in the hearth. Maybe they were panning in the hills or downriver.

But the tools of the gold mining trade—pans, screens, sluice boxes—leaned against the dilapidated structure. She recognized them because her stepdaddy had quite a collection of his own.

"They can't be off panning because they didn't take the equipment."

She twirled a piece of hair around her finger, staring at the forlorn cabin.

“They’re gone,” she murmured. “Why would someone leave all this?”

She thought of Thomas Wilson, a man with large dreams but nothing to show for them. No matter where he went, no matter what he did, he failed. In another few months, perhaps someone would travel past the Wilson homestead, find it empty, and stake a claim because Thomas had plain moved on.

“They left because that’s what men do when they give up.”

She trudged through the water, her heartbeat escalating as the thoughts spiraled faster and faster through her head.

“They’re long gone, back to their farms or their shops, back to their wives. No need for panning equipment in St. Louis, or New York, or Denver. And they left everything behind ’cause they’re really bad diggers. They didn’t have the luck or the skill.”

Cinda smiled and patted her pocket.

“But I might have both.”

She glanced around, feeling rather stupid for talking to herself, then decided she shouldn’t worry about it. Talking to anyone in the near future seemed less likely than finding more gold on her new claim. Her brows rose, and she cocked her head.

Your claim, Cinda? When did you decide that?

“Right this minute.”

She rubbed her hands together and smiled just thinking about the possibility of finding more gold. She squared her shoulders and nodded, knowing it was the right decision. She trudged out of the stream and started to climb up the bank. She slipped and fell to her knees, pitching forward into the mud with a squishy noise. She dirtied her dress as well as the palms of her hands, but it all seemed so insignificant, and she laughed. The sound of it circled the woods, and a happiness she hadn’t felt in forever curled around her like a loving hug. Not that she knew what hugs felt like any more, but she

remembered those her grandma had given out, and it was a nice feeling. She got to her feet, checked the pocket, and fisted her hand around the nuggets.

“Home sweet home.”

She laughed again then scrambled up the hill to investigate her palace.

* * * *

The former occupants must have left quickly because the old, worn cupboard still held some food, broken up dishes and a couple of pots. Cinda took quick stock and decided she had everything she'd need for cooking. A comfy-looking quilt covered a big, lumpy bed in the corner. After wiping her hands on her skirt, she touched the quilt, and it felt soft and nice. She couldn't wait to sleep under it, knowing that anything she heard in the night would be less scary than hearing the sounds of her stepfather prowling through their cottage. She'd be willing to wrestle with a bobcat or shoo out snakes as long as Thomas Wilson stayed the hell away from her.

A washstand under the window held a basin and pitcher and some personal articles a man would use to shave. She wondered why a man would leave a razor and strap, but she looked at it as a bonus. She wouldn't be shaving any time soon, but a razor came in handy for lots of things. The hearth needed cleaning out, but she thought she could go a few more days before she had to do it, and the tidy little stack of wood at the base of the cooking stove was a nice sight. Her new little house didn't hold much more than that beyond a small hearth bench, a rickety table and two roughhewn chairs. She'd have an extra for any company that might come a calling. She laughed at that but seemed to be laughing a lot lately. She liked it just fine.

She dropped the satchel on the table and set to unpacking. A row of pegs lined one log wall, four of which held some men's clothing, streaked with dirt and patched many times. She knew why these had

been left behind. Who needed panning clothes if they weren't panning? Well, that suited her just fine because she'd be panning tomorrow and be able to work far better wearing trousers. They were a little large, but Cinda decided she could hack off some of the length and tailor them to her liking once she'd settled in. Plus, if her luck held, she'd be able to afford to buy her own set of mining clothes.

She hung up her good dress and her shawl and put her extra boots near the door. She left her brush and the broach Grandma had given her in the bag, along with the only book she owned, a dog-eared dime novel Thomas had bought to keep her quiet before their journey years ago from Ohio. The book had only lasted for about fifty miles, and he'd refused to buy her another, saying reading was a waste of time, and he wasn't put on earth to cater to Cinda Parks' needs and wants.

She wondered at times why Thomas had even married her ma with her ready-made family. He was a sorry excuse for a man. Any man who'd sell a woman, let alone his own stepdaughter, deserved a special place in one of the levels of hell. She knew there must be better men out there, though she had no interest in finding one. She could take care of herself.

After trekking out to the crystal clear stream, she returned with two buckets of water, one for cooking and one for scrubbing off the road dust. She poured the water into a kettle and swung it over the hearth, then found some salted pork in the cupboard and set about making supper. She looked forward to it because she had a big hunger rumbling in her belly and had become a pretty good cook over the years. The only good thing about having parents like Thomas and Marion Wilson was that a girl learned to look after herself, and that suited Cinda just fine, too.

* * * *

The morning dawned clear and bright and, though she'd never slept better in her life, Cinda eagerly bolted out of bed to get to work.

She washed up again, thinking how stupid it was considering she'd be caked in mud within an hour, but she liked to start each day fresh. It cleared her head of cobwebs and allowed in new thoughts. She took the razor off the washstand and hacked some of the length off the pants and the sleeves of a flannel shirt. After she yanked the dirty panning clothes over her clean skin, she rolled up some of the excess and wrapped a belt twice around her waist.

She glanced at the pieces of material that had fallen to the floor. There was enough there to make herself a decent apron if she could find a sewing kit. Whoever had owned these clothes was a big son-of-a-bitch. Not that it mattered to her, because he was long gone. He had scurried back to his safe little home in the East, a broken man with broken dreams, and left everything to Cinda Parks, new claim owner.

My claim.

It had the best ring to it and seemed like music to her ears. She stood in the center of the room and wolfed down some of last night's supper. Luck. Timing. Fate. No matter what word she chose to explain her good fortune, it all boiled down to the same thing. She'd never had much to call her own, and now she had an entire plot of ground, a nice little cabin and possibly a ton of gold. She couldn't contain her excitement, and should anyone have passed by and glanced through the hole in the boards pretending to be shutters, they'd have thought she'd lost her mind. Most girls didn't dance to imaginary music or laugh for no apparent reason, but she couldn't stop her excitement from boiling into the open.

She yanked her hair back and tied it in a strip of flannel then raced around the cabin. After making the bed, sweeping a little dirt out the door, and tidying everything up, she was ready to get to work. She surveyed her clean little home, clutching the gold in her fist like King Midas himself.

"Hmm. What should I do with my bounty?"

She couldn't decide if she should keep it with her or find a place to hide it. She figured the safest place would be with her, so she

wrapped the nuggets in some more flannel and pushed them inside her chemise, tucking them between her breasts. Luckily, she was fairly well-endowed and had a great cleavage for holding treasure. She figured if worse came to worst and they fell out of the chemise, they'd get caught in the shirt because the tight belt formed a barrier.

She glanced around her cabin with complete satisfaction and a very happy heart.

“Now to make myself richer.”

Chapter 2

Stuart Dare listened to his brother bitch and moan on the trail back from Deadwood for three hours. Stu guided the horse and wagon around a rut in the path but kept his gaze on the back of Mitchell's head, trying to convince himself that tossing a boot at him wasn't a good idea. Mitch had such a hard head the impact probably wouldn't affect him anyway.

"Give it a rest, would ya?" Stuart said.

Mitch twisted around in his saddle and pierced Stu with a scowl. It reminded Stu of the way he looked in a mirror when he cut himself shaving—dark, angry, and murderous. "We're never going to get out of these fucking hills if we don't get that mine operational."

Stuart rolled his eyes, which prompted another glare from his twin. "I had to wait for the goddamn telegram. I can't make messages come through the wire. Did you want to make another trip into town this week?"

"Christ no."

"At least we know everything's on schedule, and Ty Markham should have everything here within the month."

"I wanted out of here before that," Mitch grumbled. "How long does it take to get a crew together? Next time I'll do it myself."

Stuart laughed. "Oh, sure, that would work. With that charming personality of yours, you couldn't get a whore to fuck you for a nugget the size of Texas. Your chance of convincing a bunch of diggers to work for you is next to zero."

"The time table's all screwed up now."

“Taking a night off in Deadwood isn’t going to upset the time table. You need to learn to relax.”

“Fuck relaxing. I thought we were running for supplies and doing a quick turnaround, but no. You had to go and change everything with your lame ass plans. We could have gotten in a night’s digging.”

“Jesus, Mitch, calm down. It was one night.”

“And for all we know someone’s come along, found the shaft and—”

“And what?” Stuart laughed. “Managed to extract the gold from a thousand tons of rock overnight? We’re done for now. We can’t do any more without equipment, a crew, and more dynamite. Seriously, Mitch, I don’t know what you do with your brain sometimes. Is it in your saddle bag? ’Cause it sure as hell isn’t in your head.”

Mitch reached up and crunched the top of his hat. He jammed it down like the action would keep his head from exploding. “I don’t like leaving the mine unguarded. I don’t trust anyone.”

“I know, and around here, it’s understandable, but it’s our claim. The Black Hills might have some serious low-lives, but we own that land. No one can take it from us. It’s recorded.”

“Ha!” Mitch twisted in his saddle. “And did you leave *your* brain in Deadwood? Dead men don’t own anything, Stuart, recorded or not. The maggots around here wouldn’t hesitate to turn us into dead men.”

“You’re forgetting something, Mitch.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re the Dare brothers, and the Dare brothers are lucky sons-of-bitches. Besides, once Ty gets that crew, we’re going to be the richest sons-of-bitches in the Black Hills.”

“We were the richest sons-of-bitches when we arrived here,” Mitch grumbled.

“Exactly.” Stuart shook his head, trying to hold in a laugh. “So quit your bitchin’, little brother. It’s all gravy from here on in.”

Mitch tossed a glance over his shoulder. “And if someone kills us in the meantime?”

“They’ll have to get through both of us. But look on the bright side. If they do, they’ll have to pay for the equipment and the men to get the gold out of the hill. Not to mention Ty’s hefty percentage. His telegram said he’d gone insane and fallen in love. I feel another percentage point coming on.”

“If we give him much more, he’ll be a full partner,” Mitch said. “Another partner is the last thing I want.”

“You’re a greedy bastard, you know that?” Stuart laughed.

“That’s what gold does to ya.”

“Here’s an idea. Stop thinking about the gold for one day. Just one day.” Stuart paused, waiting for a response, but knew his brother better than to expect one. He smirked as he prepared for Mitch’s reaction. “I dare you.”

Mitch dropped his head toward his chest and groaned. “Don’t.”

“Can’t do it, can you?”

“Damn it, Stu. Yes. I can do it.”

Stuart laughed. “We’ll see about that.”

“Bastard.”

* * * *

Wiping her sleeve across her sweaty forehead, Cinda hunkered down in the stream.

“I swear to God I must be the luckiest person alive.”

After working all morning, she had already found seven gold nuggets, each one larger than the last. At this rate, she could be queen of the Dakota Territory. It crossed her mind that whoever had originally staked this claim must be the dumbest ox ever to cross the Mississippi or blind as a goddamned bat. Gold had literally jumped into her hands, and she hadn’t even touched the equipment leaning against the cabin. Who needed to pan for dust when nuggets littered the water like pretty, shining pebbles?

With the thought of food on her mind and gold in her pockets, she practically skipped through the stream on her way back to the cabin for some lunch, singing a couple songs her grandma had taught her. The future danced through her head, each of the visions more vivid than the last. Besides finding Miranda, Cinda hadn't yet decided where she'd go or what she'd do, but she had a hankering to see a big city. They'd passed through several towns on their travels west, but only because her stepfather couldn't find his way to the outhouse without a guide. The towns had been exciting but surely bigger cities existed, filled with people and stores and horses. Oh, yes, she definitely wanted a horse. She never understood why her stepfather refused to let her ride them, but giving Cinda joy had never been one of the things on Thomas Wilson's list of priorities.

Yes, a horse sounded like a good thing to own. Cinda decided to name her Goldy and laughed at that, but then she hadn't stopped laughing since her arrival in this lucky stretch of Dakota woods. It felt good to laugh.

* * * *

Mitch tossed the sack of coffee through the open door to Stuart then headed round the cabin to get another load of supplies. A sound caught his ear, a sound that had no place in the woods or on their claim. It sounded like a little girl singing. For one moment, his jaw clenched as he wondered how in fuck a child had gotten this far out of Deadwood and become lost on their claim. The last thing he wanted to do was saddle up and head back to town, especially to deliver a package that shouldn't have arrived in the first place.

He cocked his head and listened, and it struck him odd that a lost child would sing. Besides, whoever sang this song sounded happy. Her lilting voice—pleasantly melodic, loud and filled with energy—held excitement, like she hadn't a care in the world. Not many people

in this stretch of the Dakotas felt that way, so this girl, whoever she was, seemed to be one in a million.

“What the fuck? It can’t be real.”

When he heard laughter spill up the embankment, he reached over to where he’d propped his rifle against the cottage wall. “Be back in a minute.”

“Now what?” Stuart said. “That imagination of yours working overtime again?”

“It’s probably nothing, but better safe than dead.” He headed toward the stream.

At the bank, he trained the sight on the edge of the tiny hill. He waited, wondering why he felt the need to scare the piss out of the interloper, but with so much gold on the line and claim jumpers running rampant through the hills stealing people blind, no one could be careful enough. He’d known more than one miner who’d lost the profits of his hard work because he’d lost his focus. A couple had even lost their lives. The area around Deadwood had turned into a powder keg of violence, and no matter how complacent Stuart sometimes got, Mitch was determined nothing would happen to the Dare claim.

When a head of golden curls popped up over the rise, he adjusted his aim. He wasn’t expecting the face or the body that followed and damn near swallowed the tobacco in his mouth. He choked then turned, spitting the tobacco out before he embarrassed himself by falling down dead in front of her.

The trespasser wasn’t a little girl at all. She was all woman, young to be sure, but definitely not an age that might bring trouble into the Black Hills or get him strung up the next time he went into Deadwood. The city might be a lawless place, but there were some things a man couldn’t usually get away with no matter who turned a blind eye. Lucky for him, this little filly looked like she wouldn’t land him in jail. She also looked like she’d had a bit of trouble somewhere

along the line. A crimson welt marred the skin of her forehead, and a dark bruise shadowed her cheek.

Her hair, though, was perfect. It blazed golden in the streams of sunlight that shimmered through the forest canopy. A beautiful spiral of shining curls spilled over her shoulder, soft, silky-looking strands that he wanted to touch. He hadn't seen hair that looked like spun gold since they'd left San Francisco.

The young woman climbed lithely up the bank like she'd done it thousands of times, and he had to stifle a laugh as he studied the soft curves of her body encased in the most god-awful clothes he'd ever seen. He managed to keep the shock off his face when he recognized them as his. They looked darn cute on her, but he couldn't assess the true nature of her body swaddled in all that cloth, and he sure wanted to see it. He also wanted to know why the hell she wore them in the first place.

When she glanced up, her bright blue eyes widened with surprise. Her laughter died as her pretty pink lips closed with a snap. She froze like a deer does at the snap of a twig.

Jesus, she's a beauty.

Her lips parted wide enough to whisper, "Holy shit."

"Understatement of the year," Mitch said. "What the fuck are you doing in my woods?"

* * * *

The laughter and fun literally leapt from her body. Somehow she just couldn't manage to hold on to those good thoughts and laugh staring into the barrel of a gun. Shock surged in to fill the void to be replaced quickly by suspicion. The first thought that flickered in her mind was *Holy hell, that's a big gun*, followed by *Touch my gold, stranger, and you're a dead man*.

Considering she had no firearm, and this man did, it seemed a rather hollow threat even in her own mind. Yet, at the same time, she

also knew she wasn't going to hand over the treasure without a fight. She had plans for it. She wasn't greedy, but damn, she'd earned it, and she wanted to keep it. Somewhere out there, Miranda might need help, and a horse named Goldy waited to be claimed. Cinda had no intention of disappointing either.

The third thought that flickered in her mind was, *God Almighty, he's a fine looking man*. Cinda wondered at herself sometimes. Having several disparate thoughts almost simultaneously might have seemed odd to some, but to Cinda it felt completely normal because her mind swirled with so many thoughts she couldn't keep them straight. Some days it felt like being caught in an avalanche. She'd never been in an avalanche but had heard stories about them in Colorado, and that's how her mind felt—mounds of snow, sheets of ice and drifts of fresh powder all tumbling together, rolling straight toward her and burying her deep. Standing face to face with this stranger, she felt suddenly like she'd been buried alive without a shovel. She was in over her head, and she could barely draw a breath. He might be a fine looking man, but a snake was a snake, and if he proved to be a serpent, she'd deal with him.

She stared at him, and he stared at her. His appreciation showed in his eyes as he raked a heated glance over her. She knew what he saw. Under the dirt and grime, she had a pleasing face and pretty eyes. Her mama had once said that she had eyes the color of cornflowers. The tone of her voice had made Cinda believe that was a good thing. It might have been the nicest thing Marion Parks ever said to her daughter. Of course, that had been when Cinda was a little girl, before her real daddy had died and her mother had become Marion Wilson. After that, she'd turned into a different woman.

Even though her hair felt sweaty and strands had fallen down around her face, Cinda knew her hair was a nice shade of yellow and it looked kind of soft and silky. She also knew damn well she had a nice shape. Every man she'd ever met had told her *that*. That shape might be hard to see under the clothes she wore, but this stranger

looked like a man with a decent imagination, and the way his gaze lingered on her breasts proved it.

Fine looking wasn't quite the right description for him. He looked like sin. Hot, sensual sin. Not that she'd been overly familiar with sin, but he sure seemed to fit the bill. His large body encased in flannel and rough denim looked like it had been carved out of granite. Smooth muscles flexed beneath the fabric in both his arms and legs as though irritated to be confined, and his chest muscles strained against his shirt. Black hair curled under the brim of his hat and down around his neck. His eyes blazed with the power of a hard, perfect emerald. Cinda had seen a real emerald once in a shop window. It had been the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen until she'd found her gold.

While Cinda studied his face and appreciated his looks, she thought about the nuggets hidden in her chemise and those wrapped in more flannel in her pockets. Her hands itched to slide inside and hold them, but doing so might draw his suspicion and also might make him pull the trigger. She had better plans for today than ending up dead.

"Jesus Christ!"

Cinda flinched at the shout that came from the cabin. Running into a gun barrel should have made her skittish, but so far she'd kept her composure. Hearing that shout almost stole her nerve. She glanced toward the cabin and saw no one, but now she knew there were at least two of them. The man holding the gun didn't seem worried about the other man, because the rifle never wavered. Cinda turned her attention back to him and decided she needed to get a few things straight.

She lifted her chin and tried to put on her haughtiest look, the one Thomas said made him want to smack her. Dealing with Thomas Wilson had perfected that look. "Who are you and what are you doing on my claim?"

The man barked some sort of laugh. Inside the cabin, something fell, or maybe it had been thrown. It was hard to tell, but Cinda curled her hands because having someone destroy her place irritated the hell

out of her. She'd spent a lot of time cleaning it up. She took a step forward, and the gun poked toward her a couple more inches, not really threatening, just enough to remind Cinda he had a weapon and she didn't.

Which wasn't exactly true, but she didn't plan to tell him that. Another shout came from the cabin—"Goddamn it!"—followed by a crash.

She clenched her jaw and ground out, "Your friend better not be breaking my things."

The man's brow rose and another one of those laughs exploded from him. "Your things?"

"Yes, my things."

She stood straighter. She wasn't all that tall, but her stepdaddy always said she was way too arrogant for her own good and apparently too big for her britches. Cinda took that to mean she came across as bigger than she was, so she used that to her advantage now. Though she barely reached the man's shoulder, she figured she could bully him away. It had worked with others when she and Miranda had trouble at school. Of course, none of them had been this big, and they had been a lot younger. She gulped then narrowed her eyes, forcing a firm look on her face while trying to ignore the fluttering of her heart.

"Get off my property," she snarled.

"Well, aren't you a feisty little thing?" the man said in a slow, even drawl.

"You have no idea. Get that goddamn gun out of my face and get off my claim."

He smiled, but it wasn't a friendly smile. Cinda knew a friendly smile when she saw one, and this didn't come close.

"I don't think so, pretty lady." He glanced at her clothes and frowned. "You *are* a lady, aren't you? Kind of hard to tell under all that dirt."

"Rude *and* dumb. How did I get so lucky?"

He lowered the gun, reached out and skimmed the length of hair across her shoulder. "I'm kind of wondering how *I* got so lucky."

She jerked backwards, nearly tripping down the hill. She teetered for a second then he grabbed her arm and yanked her back. Cinda smashed into his chest, and that's when she realized she was in bigger trouble than she'd thought.

She'd never willingly been this close to a man before. Oh, she wasn't a virgin. She could pretend she was, because losing it hadn't exactly been her choice, but once something's gone, it's just plain gone. The man who took her virginity hadn't hurt her over much, which she'd been grateful for, though she doubted her stepfather would have cared. She'd been given to a friend of his in exchange for a loan.

Barney Dent was nice enough and tried to be gentle. In fact, Cinda thought Barney felt a little bad about the whole thing, but not enough to turn down the offer. He thought she was pretty, had a nice way about her and said she could make a fortune in town. He even offered to help set her up in Deadwood with one of the saloon owners. Well, as great as all that sounded to *him*, Cinda decided it wouldn't be her first choice and told him no. Unlike Barney, she had no problem with the word no, for all the good it did her. Luckily for her, Barney had been married, or she'd be living in Sturgis with a passel of kids by now.

That day she'd lost her virginity hadn't been the best day of her life, but it hadn't been the worst, either. She figured that said a hell of a lot about her life.

This stranger looked as though he'd never take no for an answer, and she wondered if she could even get the word past her lips. He made her heart pound, and not out of fear. She had begun to think maybe she wanted to touch him a little, just to see what a real man felt like, one of her choosing, and not someone who was getting repaid for a loan.

He tightened his grip on her arm, and his heart thumped a nice steady beat she felt through the fabric of their shirts. It made her fluttering heartbeat seem like a hummingbird's. She stood eye level to his chest and stared at his flannel shirt for a minute, admiring how clean it was and thinking the dark green color matched his eyes rather nicely. Given the circumstances, it was a stupid thought, but it was there just the same. She should have struggled, maybe even screamed, but she figured it would draw the other man out of the cabin, and she had enough trouble on her hands with one man. She didn't need two hunks of trouble right now.

Cinda sniffed at him. He smelled a little musky, like a man, but oh so much better than any man she'd ever known. He definitely smelled nicer than Barney Dent, who had reeked of some kind of fancy cologne to mask the sweat. She appreciated the effort at the time, but the scent of cologne now gave her a queasy stomach and made her dizzy. This stranger smelled slightly sweaty, but it reminded her of hard work and noble pursuits. She had no basis for thinking thoughts like that, and she shook her head at her own stupidity. She didn't know the man from Adam, and for all she knew, he'd just killed someone and stolen their gold. But the smell of him made her privates ache a tiny bit. She had no idea why.

He held the rifle loosely at his side. It dawned on her that she could maybe get a hand on it, but she didn't make a move for it. She thought maybe her aching privates had something to do with that.

When he spoke, she raised her head, craning her neck backwards to see his face. She almost felt his words before he said them. She imagined her pieces of gold shuddering against one another as they nestled farther into her cleavage. The rumble started in his chest, and it vibrated through her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She clenched her mouth closed. Giving this man any information seemed as bad as giving him more ammunition.

One of his eyebrows lifted. “Too tough a question? Let’s start with the easy ones then. What’s your name?”

She figured there probably wasn’t harm in saying her name. It’s not like she was important or anything. No one would ever be writing a ransom note with her name on it. “Lucinda Parks, but—”

“Well, Lucinda—”

She shuddered. “Don’t call me that. I hate it. Call me Cinda.”

“Well, *Cinda*, how did you get here?”

She clenched her jaw again, thinking how stupid she’d been. Everyone knew if a dog got tossed a scrap, he’d want more. She smiled sweetly, trying not to spit at him. “I’ve got two legs, don’t I?”

He cocked his head. “Oh, aren’t you the funny one? So you were out on a walk and just happened to stroll through these woods?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmm.” He studied her for a minute, his gaze touching for a moment on her forehead. Just when she thought he might let her go, his hand tightened on her, and his voice rumbled again. The tone scared the bejesus out of her. “Who do you work for?”

She jerked her arm, trying to shake off his hand. “I don’t work for anyone and don’t intend to. No one controls me, including you. Now let me go.”

“I’ll try the hard question again,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

Time for a different tactic.

She squinted at him, willing him to fear her. “What do you think I’m doing here? This is my claim.”

He smiled, kind of. “Oh, is that so?”

He lifted the rifle, nudged it against the brim of his hat, and the hat slid back on his head. Cinda had a clearer view of his face, but shadows still skittered across the hard surfaces and nestled in the slight lines framing his mouth and eyes, giving him a dark, gritty countenance. The only real light came from his eyes. He peered at her intently, those green eyes filled with a curiosity that felt alive. It

slithered over her skin and wormed through her gut. It made her wiggle a little against his body, and she shuffled her feet, trying to edge away. A hot, antsy sensation crept through her body, and her neck started to hurt from staring up at him so closely.

She gave her arm another little shake. "Why don't you take your hands off me and we'll talk?" She licked her lips because they'd dried up like a dusty road.

His gaze dropped to her mouth.

Irrationally, she wanted him to kiss her. She liked the look of his mouth. Despite that, she put on her stern, no-nonsense face, the one she wore when she dealt with Thomas Wilson. She thought about bringing out the razor to emphasize her point, but she didn't know if that would be necessary yet. He might be reasonable.

"Talk about what?" he asked.

She could barely remember what she'd said. She gave her head a little shake to clear her mind. "We'll talk about me giving you some supper, then how you'll be on your way."

He shook his head. "Not interested in supper."

She tilted her head. "You'll change your mind."

His brow rose. "What makes you say that?"

"You haven't tasted my cooking yet."

"I've got more important things on my mind than food. And just so we're clear, I won't be leaving any time soon."

She wanted him gone. She stomped her foot and tried to move backwards. He let her move a couple inches but seemed determined they share the same foot of space. "You can't stay here, with me. This is my claim, my house and my—" She slammed her mouth closed, pursed her lips and glanced toward the woods. She really had to learn to keep her mouth shut.

He leaned down and almost touched her lips with his. "Your *what?*"

She let out a quavering breath, wondering how to get out of this one. She pressed her lips together then blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "My creek."

"My ass," he muttered.

He yanked her away from the bank and spun her around. When he released her arm, he slammed his hand into her pocket. Cinda cried out, but the man ignored her. He burrowed his hand deep into her pocket, his fingers scrabbling through the fabric. It tickled her skin, and she almost laughed, but then realized in a situation like this, laughing couldn't be an appropriate response. He yanked out the rag, twisted Cinda around and dove into the other pocket. Cinda felt tears prickling the back of her eyes, but she'd be damned if she let the man see them. When he extracted the other rag, she shoved him in the chest. The immovable block of stone barely budged.

"Give those back, you goddamned thief! Those are mine!"

"They appear to be mine now. Let's have a little look-see, shall we?" He tucked the rifle under his arm and spread open one of the flannel pieces across his hand. He let out a low whistle. "Nice work, little lady. Saves me a bunch of time." He peeked in the other rag then dropped both into his pants pocket. He cocked his head. "Find 'em in the stream?"

"That's none of your business," she muttered. "I want them back. I *earned* them."

"You haven't earned anything," he said, "yet."

Oh my God. What does he mean by that?

Her eyes widened and locked on his. One of his brows rose.

She could be in serious trouble here. She twisted to run, but it didn't take much effort on his part to stop her. With a simple movement, he caught hold of her arm again and started dragging her toward the cabin. Cinda dug in her heels and yanked backwards, but she wasn't the biggest woman around, and this appeared to be the biggest man. They weren't evenly matched, and she wouldn't ever come out ahead. Why had she thought she even had a prayer of that?

“You can’t drag me into my own cabin!”

“I appear to be doing so, and it’s not your fucking cabin, sweetcakes.” He glanced behind him, and she shot one of her scariest looks toward him. She hated people calling her names like that. His gaze dipped down her body though he never broke his stride. “And those aren’t your fucking clothes. They’re mine.”

She smashed her body against his, hoping to catch him off guard. He never seemed to notice. “Prove it.”

“I don’t have to, and I couldn’t now if I wanted to. You’ve gone and cut them all to hell and back. You owe me now, doll.”

She clutched his arm and yanked backwards. “I don’t owe you a goddamn thing! You’ve got all my gold.”

“It’s mine, blondie. Always was, always will be. Just like the cabin and the claim.”

Okay, he could be lying to make her back off and leave him to her claim and her gold, but for some reason, she didn’t think he was. She thought he might be telling the truth, and that shocked the hell out of her. She wasn’t sure she’d heard much truth since they’d crossed the Ohio border. Not that the truth made any difference to her. She didn’t plan on leaving. She’d already decided that.

She shook her arm, thumped on his back and even tried kicking his legs out from under him. None of it worked. He just kept striding along, and Cinda kept on dragging behind him.

“Stuart! Get out here!”

The man came to a stop in front of the cabin, and another stranger came out the falling-down door and leaned against the frame. This must be the shouting/swearing/throwing-things-around man. Cinda gulped, partly because she feared the door would fall off and partly because this Stuart fellow was an exact replica of the dark, hunk-of-sin stranger that held her arm in a vise grip.

Oh dear God. I’m in deep shit.

The shouting man held a bowl toward his twin. “Mitch, you have *got* to try this stew.”

And the trouble kept on coming.

Chapter 3

Stuart had glanced out the door earlier and watched his brother train the rifle on the sweetest bit of honey he'd seen in just about forever. What he wouldn't give to get his hands on a piece of that. By rights, though, it looked like Mitch had gotten first dibs. Stuart didn't mind waiting for his turn as long as the afternoon panned out the way he wanted.

He wondered where the cute little gal had come from. Women were scarce in Deadwood and the Black Hills. Oh, sure, there were the businessmen's wives, but they were window dressing. A man could glance and peek at them all day long, but touching one led to a bullet in the head faster than spit hit a spittoon. Other ladies arrived weekly on the stagecoach, and though their arrival always caused a stir, a smart man learned pretty fast what thoughts swirled through those heads. These women flocked to camp for one reason only. They'd come to the middle of fucking nowhere, wearing their prettiest dresses and nice-smelling perfumes, hoping for a quick wedding, a gruesome accident, and a widow's inheritance. A man who planned to live out the week steered clear of them.

Other than that, if a man wanted to stare at a woman, or fuck one, he settled for a whore. This little bit of woman was no whore. He could tell in that sassy tilt of her chin and that blazing light that shimmered in her eyes. Even a day-old whore had lost that gleam.

This girl was cute as hell. With all that golden hair and tawny skin, she looked like a little hunk of gold, a real treasure buried then unearthed in the wilds of the Dakotas. Even with that frown on her face, she looked like sunshine, like happiness, like a life filled with

joy. He didn't know why she was here, who she was, or what her plans for the future might be, and he didn't give a damn about any of that. He'd already decided her future lay with them, and Stuart thought playing it loose and easy would be the way to win the prize. It was also the best way to deal with the obstacle he called brother.

Stuart took a step off the stoop, determined not to let his brother fuck this up. Because of his hot temper, that was Mitch's specialty with just about everything but especially women.

* * * *

Cinda watched as the man called Stuart walked toward them and held out the spoon toward the man called Mitch. Without letting go of her arm, Mitch leaned forward and tasted the contents of the ladle. He glanced down at her and cocked a dark brow.

"You weren't lying. You're a hell of a cook."

All of a sudden, like he'd just noticed she was there, the man holding her supper took a good hard look at her before he shot a questioning glance at his brother. "Who's this pretty lady?"

"Says her name is *Cinda*. Ever hear of a name like that?"

"Kind of pretty." Stuart glanced toward her. "Lucinda?"

Cinda smirked. "I take it you're the smart one."

Mitch grunted, but Stuart laughed. "So I've been told." He let his gaze roam over her face then gave his brother a hard stare. "Why'd you have to go and hit her? You know better than that."

Mitch lurched backwards. "I didn't hit her!"

Cinda's glance darted between them. "Oh no. There's been a misunderstanding. He didn't hit me."

"Really, are you sure? Because—"

"Fuck, Stuart! Why would you—"

"Seriously, he didn't." Cinda shook her head furiously. "My...I got yanked from a wagon and fell onto the ground."

Stuart reached out and gently touched the bruise on her cheek. “That’s a real shame. I hope he looks worse.”

“I didn’t get a chance. I got out when I could.”

“Good for you.” His gaze dipped down the length of her body then he shot a glance back to his brother. “Why the hell is she wearing your clothes?”

Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit. I guess everything does belong to them.

That didn’t mean she’d give up, at least not yet.

Mitch launched into some kind of tirade, but Cinda had some thinking to do. She’d already found enough gold to give her a decent start somewhere away from these parts. She may have claim jumped, but she’d worked hard and wanted it back. She also wanted more, enough to let her search for Miranda, buy her out of whatever trouble she might be in, and give her a nice little mountain of gold to tide them over for the rest of their lives.

Her stepfather wasn’t the smartest man in the world, but he always said everyone had a price, and a smart, enterprising person could always find something to trade. She would have to think this out. What was she willing to do to get that gold back?

Cinda thought she might have something as good as gold if she needed to bargain. The way Mitch had looked at her, and the way Stuart looked at her now, seemed to indicate they liked her looks. Most women might not fuck two men for treasure, but Cinda wasn’t most women. She didn’t know if she could go through with it, but she thought if she couldn’t find a better idea, she could. Besides, no one would ever have to know, and even if someone found out, a rich woman didn’t need to worry too much about reputation.

Mitch had finally wound down. He kicked at a rock and gave his brother a sullen look. The poor guy was pouting. “Fuck, Stu, I can’t believe you’d think that about me.”

Stuart shrugged. "I hoped no one resorted to violence, but I want to keep it that way." Stuart held out his hand. "I'll take the razor, sugarbutt."

"What razor?" she asked with as much innocence as she could muster. She'd reached her last level of patience, but she tried her best tactic. She widened her big blue eyes and fluttered her long, dark lashes. Men generally fell for it, but obviously these men had seen it all or gained strength from each other because they ignored her charms.

"The one I left near the basin." Stuart shoved a spoonful of pork into his mouth then swallowed. He nodded toward Cinda's feet. "I'm assuming it's in your boot."

Mitch swung in her direction. "Give it to him, blondie, or I'll have no problem locating it myself."

"Oh really?" Cinda smiled. "I dare you."

"You said that to the wrong man, sugarpie." He squeezed her wrist. "It's a word I take very seriously."

Cinda made a tisking noise and looked down at her arm. "Is that a red mark? You might want to watch those violent tendencies, Mitch." He made a growling noise in his throat and gave her arm a little shake. She ground her teeth together. "Fine."

She yanked up the trouser leg and shoved her hand into the boot. She dug out the razor then slapped it into Stuart's hand. "There's your stupid razor." She glared at him, using her big blue eyes to try to drill a hole in his skull. When he failed to drop dead, her gaze faltered, and she looked down at her feet. His intense green eyes disturbed her. One set had seemed bad and beautiful, but two sets staring at her wound a devastating path of fire through her belly. She would never survive the assault. Her irritation level, however, peaked every time they opened their mouths. She cast a quick glance toward Stuart, risking his eyes.

"And don't call me sugarbutt. I don't like it."

Stuart strolled back to the cabin. He tossed the razor through the open doorway, and Cinda heard it smack against the side of the basin with a sharp clink. He leaned against the door again like he had nothing better to do than eat all her food. Okay, maybe it was their food, but she'd made it, and she was hungry.

This has to stop now.

Cinda marched toward him. He kept eating. "I heard shouting and breaking. Did you wreck any of my stuff?"

"It's not your stuff," Stuart said. "It's *our* stuff. But, no, I didn't wreck any of it. I tripped over the bench you *moved* then burned my hand on the kettle. I appreciate you cleaning and all, but seriously, dollface, we're used to things a certain way and don't want some woman fucking up our happy home." He shoved more food in his mouth.

Cinda curled her hands into fists and stared up into the afternoon sky. The day was far too pretty to argue with two stupid men, and she had far too much to do to stand here all day listening to their inane chatter. But she couldn't stand those hideous names. Dollface, sugarbutt, blondie. It was never-ending, and she envisioned more to come. She whirled toward Mitch.

"I want my nuggets back."

He flipped the rifle up to lean it against his shoulder. "Our claim, our stream, our gold."

She glanced at the gun and decided to risk getting shot. "*My* time, *my* find, *my* gold."

Mitch laughed. "In your dreams."

Stuart laughed. "Jesus, Mitch. It's not even been an hour, and you're already talking about gold."

"I can't help it if she's a thief. Did you want me to ignore all that?"

She had no idea what they were talking about, but she wasn't interested. She slammed her hands on her hips and attempted to look intimidating. It probably wasn't very effective because she figured

she looked like a child dressed in her big brother's clothing. "How do I know for sure this is even your property? You could be lying. You could have come along like I did, found this cabin, and taken over the claim. That doesn't make it legal, and it doesn't make it yours."

"Wrong, sweetheart." Mitch sauntered toward his brother, took the spoon from his hand and scooped out a hunk of stew. He shoved it in his mouth, chewed thoughtfully and glanced toward Stuart. "It *is* pretty damn good."

"Told ya, brother." Stuart grabbed the spoon back. "This stew is the best I've ever had. We should hire her."

"Hire me? For *what*?" Cinda glanced between them. "Are you the dumbest louts in the Dakotas? I already told him I don't, and *won't*, work for anyone."

Stuart licked the spoon like he hadn't heard a word she said. "Cabin looks good."

"Is that so?"

Stuart nodded. "Except for the bench. I moved it back where it belongs."

"Women. What are you gonna do?" Mitch shook his head in some kind of mock sadness.

She ground her teeth together, trying to keep her mouth from opening and spilling out words she might regret. She'd dearly love to give him something to be sad about. She could think of plenty.

Mitch grabbed the spoon from his brother and dipped back into the bowl. "All in all, though, we could use a little help around here. Clean clothes, a tidy house, good food. All of that sounds pretty damn nice."

"Stop eating my food!" Cinda reached for the spoon, and Mitch held it above his head. She stomped her foot.

"If we're still here next winter," Stuart said, "a woman sure would come in handy on those cold, dark nights."

"That will *never* happen," Cinda said. "The day I fuck either of you will be the coldest day this earth has ever seen."

Mitch nodded thoughtfully. "The nights do get cold."

Cinda waved her hands between them. "Are either of you listening to me?"

They gave her identical, bored glances, then a tiny smile lifted the corner of Stuart's mouth.

"Hard not to," Stuart said. "You don't seem to shut up."

"What's on your mind, sweet thing?" Mitch asked.

She wanted to shout but kept her voice steady, almost reasonable. She awed herself sometimes with her restraint. She stared at Mitch for a moment, swung her gaze to Stuart then back to Mitch. "So, are you claim jumping or not?"

Mitch rolled his eyes. "No, angelface, we're not claim jumping. Why don't you take your pretty ass into Deadwood and stroll on by the claim office? Ask for Daryl Johnson. He'll be happy to show you the claim. It's signed, sealed, and locked in a vault in his office."

"Oh," Cinda mumbled. "That's probably not necessary."

Stuart leaned down and reached inside the door. Cinda watched as he tossed her satchel onto the dirt at her feet. "I packed up for you to save time. You've got about six hours of light left in the woods. You want to be on the main road before twilight. You'll probably make it before sundown if you get moving."

Cinda glanced at the satchel, and her heart fell all the way into the puddle of water in her boots. "Make what?"

"Deadwood," Stuart said.

Mitch flipped a coin in her direction, and Cinda caught it against her chest. "That ought to get you a room for a couple nights. None of our business what you do after that. Consider it payment for the work you did here." He turned around and headed toward the back of the cabin.

She slipped the coin into her pocket, staring at his back. It took her a minute to understand what was going on. Sometimes she felt a little slow on the draw, and this just proved it. She shook her head, trying to comprehend what had happened, then her mouth dropped

open. They seemed to be ordering her off the claim. They planned to keep her gold. Oh, no. That could not happen.

She steeled herself mentally then glanced toward Stuart, but he'd gone back to gulping the stew. She liked that they enjoyed it, and it had been a mighty nice gesture to toss her a coin, but if they thought she'd just up and leave, they didn't know her very well. To be honest, they didn't know her at all, but she could remedy that quick enough. Another glance at Stuart showed no hope there. That left Mitch.

"Wait!"

Mitch didn't stop so she stomped after him, her boots pounding on the dirt, announcing her pissed-off mood. He shook his head as he rounded the corner like that would make her go away.

Ha! It's going to take more than that, Mitch. I'm getting my gold back.

She ran the last few yards and came up short.

A small barn with an actual working door stood behind the cabin, and two horses rested in a corral. What these men lacked in their own comfort did not extend to their horses. Cozy nests of straw filled two of the stalls, and a third was empty, waiting for the small wagon. A water pump stood off to the right. Had she known about the pump, her washing up would have been easier. Mitch unhooked the black horse from the wagon and led the animal inside.

Cinda moved toward the other horse like she'd fallen into a dream. She couldn't take her eyes off the animal, and her hand reached up and slid down the golden flank.

"Oh, she's beautiful."

She glanced up as Mitch came out of the stable and couldn't help but smile.

He drew back for a minute, seemingly stunned that she could smile. His brow furrowed. "She is. Good animal, too."

Cinda moved around to the horse's face and trailed her fingers down the animal's nose. The horse seemed to like it because she nudged a little closer. "What's her name?"

Mitch made a weird kind of face. “We don’t really talk to them all that much. I mean, they’re horses.”

“Oh, every animal needs a name, and every animal should be talked to.” She gathered the horse’s face in her hands and laid her cheek against the animal’s nose. “I’m going to call you Goldy. Do you like that, girl?”

Goldy whinnied with approval, but Mitch made some kind of snorting sound. “Goldy? What kind of name is that?”

“A perfect one.”

Mitch leaned his arm on the railing. “And what good is giving a name to a horse you’re never going to see again?” He lifted his chin toward the south. “You’re leaving, remember?”

“About that...” She sidled around the horse but kept in contact with her because Goldy seemed to give her a little bit of strength. “Look, Mitch, um, Mr...”

She huffed then curled a fist against Goldy’s flank. Goldy didn’t mind and, in fact, gave Cinda an encouraging look. She took a deep breath. *Be polite, be nice, be sweet as apple pie with cinnamon on top.* She smiled.

“I’m sorry, Mitch. I don’t know your full name.”

“Mitchell Dare.”

“Dare? Hmm, I see. I suppose you’ve lived with dares all your life then. Well, Mr. Dare, I’d—”

“Don’t call me Mr. Dare. I hate that.”

She flipped a spiral of hair over her shoulder. “We wouldn’t want that, would we, *Mr. Dare*?” Obviously she could only be sweet for two minutes at a time. She knew it would probably come back to bite her in the ass, but she had trouble with impulses.

His eyes narrowed. “No, we wouldn’t, *Miss Candyass*.”

She sniffed and rolled her sleeves back up. They had fallen over her hands. “You have no idea if I have an ass like candy.”

He looked her over as though judging a livestock purchase. “It’s a pretty safe bet. I can’t see much, but you’re a nice-looking girl.”

She felt like slugging him in the face, but she smiled. “How sweet of you to say so.”

“Just saying the truth. Find it works in most situations. You should try it.”

Cinda smiled again, then turned her face and rolled her eyes. She whispered to Goldie, “He’s a real ass, but he said I was nice-looking. I can probably work with that.”

“Work with what?”

Stuart came around the side of the cabin, and Cinda’s face flamed.

“Oh, nothing.” She tried another smile. She thought her face might crack in half.

Stuart seemed to like her smiles because he smiled back. He bit into an apple then pulled another out of his pocket. He flipped it toward Cinda, and she caught it a lot easier than she had the coin. He seemed to have a magic pocket because another apple appeared. He held it out to Goldy who chomped it down quickly, then he went into the shed and gave another to Midnight—that was what Cinda had decided to call her.

She leaned around Goldy and raised her voice. “I’m making an offer to your brother.”

She took a bite of the fruit. When the sweet juice ran down her chin, she wiped it off with Mitch’s shirt sleeve. Mitch leaned back on the railing and tipped his hat off his forehead. It seemed to be his thinking stance. “You are?”

“Yes, I am. We just haven’t gotten to the actual details yet.”

“Or the topic at all,” Mitch muttered.

Stuart strolled out of the stable and began to unsaddle Goldy. “I have to warn you, doll, we’re not much for making deals.”

“But everyone has something they need.” Her gaze swung to Mitch.

He shook his head. “Not us. If we need something, we pay for it. We don’t rely on people, and we don’t want others relying on us.”

“Self-reliance is admirable,” she said. “I believe I have it, but I need some money or some nuggets—”

Mitch made a face. “Here we go,” he muttered.

“Look, I’m willing to work for it. I just want a bit of security. I have my reasons. If you’d agree—”

“No deal,” Mitch said.

“We like things the way they are,” Stuart said.

“I gathered that.” Cinda placed a hand over her heart. “I *swear* I won’t move the bench again, but I wish you’d reconsider. I think I could make your lives better.”

“Is that so?” Mitch rubbed his chin. Cinda wanted to slide her hand over that stubble and feel it for herself. She also thought she might like to run her tongue all the way up his body.

I wonder what he tastes like.

Stuart took the saddle into the stable then lounged against the railing next to his brother, one ankle crossed over the other. “How are you going to make our lives better? You already said you wouldn’t fuck us.”

Cinda’s brow furrowed. “I did?”

Mitch nodded. “I believe your exact words were...” He rubbed his chin again, and Cinda watched his hand, seemingly hypnotized. She took an involuntary step toward him then stopped dead, trying to root her feet to the ground. Mitch gave her a rather funny smile. His voice rose to a higher pitch in his best impression of her, but held a trace of impatience and menace. ““The day I fuck either of you will be the coldest day this earth has ever seen.””

Cinda took another step forward. “I said that? And you were listening?”

“We don’t miss much,” Stuart said.

She cocked her head. “Is that what I really sound like? All angry and mean?”

“Well, it wasn’t exact,” Mitch said. “I *am* a man.”

“I noticed,” Cinda murmured.

Stuart slapped his brother on the shoulder. “I thought it sounded exactly like her. Hey, remember that time in San Francisco when—”

Cinda tapped her finger against her lips, her mind whirling. She had no idea what they talked about. Whatever had happened in San Francisco had obviously been at Mitch’s expense. He flushed, his face consumed in a burst of color. She thought his blush seemed very boyish and endearing, but Stuart found it funny because he doubled over in laughter. Mitch looked angry for a fleeting moment before he joined his brother. They practically fell on each other as their laughter filled the woods around them. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard laughter like that—the sweet, all-consuming sound of two people who simply enjoyed each other’s company. She wasn’t sure she ever had. She and Miranda enjoyed being together but rarely had time to laugh. She wanted to be part of their laughter more than anything.

First things first.

Glancing between them, Cinda had no idea which brother she’d rather start with. Hell, they were identical, right down to that glimmer in their eyes and the smirks on their faces. She almost smacked her hand against her head. What was she thinking? Did she intend to fuck these men for seven gold nuggets?

Absolutely, if they’ll do it.

She figured she could start with the obvious bargaining chips first, just for her peace of mind and an attempt to salvage what might be left of her reputation.

The time for games had come to an end. She gazed at them with all the hope she felt showing on her face. She decided not to be coy, or arrogant, or angry. She had to win them over.

“So...about my offer,” she said.

They glanced at her like they’d both forgotten she was there.

“You haven’t made an offer yet,” Mitch said.

“I’m getting there,” she snapped.

Deep breath. Calm down.

"You liked the stew, right?"

Stuart nodded. "Sure did, and we could use a cook."

Mitch shot his brother a quizzical look. "But in another month we're—"

"Expanding," Stuart said. "Right, Mitch?"

"That's right." Mitch narrowed his eyes at Stuart. She thought Mitch might think a little more than Stuart, though she couldn't be sure.

She needed to reel in the fish while they tugged on the hook. "You liked the clean cabin, right?"

Stuart nodded again. "She makes some good points, Mitch."

"I already paid her for that." Mitch rolled his eyes. "Besides, I haven't even *seen* a clean cabin yet. Been too busy apprehending a thief."

"It's really just a misunderstanding," Cinda said. "I'm not a thief. I was merely taking advantage of an opportunity."

"To steal," Mitch said.

She threw her hands up. "I thought you were gone!"

"We *were* gone," Mitch said. "But being gone to Deadwood for supplies is a lot different than being gone back to Ohio."

"You're from Ohio?"

Stuart nodded, but Mitch just stared at her.

"I'm from Ohio, too." She took a step closer but put her hand on Goldy. She figured they wouldn't make a move on her for fear of spooking the horse.

"Good for you," Mitch said, "but that doesn't make us friends. You're still a thief."

"Do I look like a thief to you?"

Stuart looked her up and down. "I've seen pickpockets with better clothes, but Mitch has bad taste in flannel. But, since they don't belong to you, that means you stole them."

"I did not! I borrowed them."

Stuart shrugged. "Six of one, half a dozen of the other. You're not a real successful thief, are you?"

She huffed and kicked at a rock. "I've done okay so far. I couldn't pan for gold in my dresses. I only have two."

The brothers gave each other another one of the thicker-than-thieves looks they did so well. She was just about ready to leap across the stable yard and tackle Mitch for her gold when Stuart's gaze swept over her again, ignoring the clothes and lingering on the swell of her breasts and between her legs. Heat spiraled through her face, and that disturbing ache started in her privates again. A lazy smile spread over his mouth, and those dark green eyes locked on hers.

"Let's forget about whom those clothes belong to for a minute," Stuart said. "I'll bet you look a lot better out of them altogether."

She blushed. The heat raged over her body like a grass fire. "Actually, yes, I do. Would you be interested in seeing me naked?"

The smirk vanished off Mitch's face, and his mouth dropped open. "Holy fuck. Is that what this is all about?"

She shrugged. "If that's what you're interested in."

"I'm more than interested," Stuart said.

"She said she wouldn't fuck us," Mitch murmured.

"Don't listen to me," Cinda said. "As Stuart said, I never shut up."

Mitch tugged on his lips. Oh, as frustrated as she was with him, she wanted to kiss that mouth. *Please say yes. Please say yes.*

"I could be interested." Mitch led Goldy into the stable. He spoke over his shoulder. "But first I want to see the gold you have in your shirt. We'll talk after that."

"Gold? In my shirt?" She managed to keep the shock off her face, but stupidly she took a couple steps backward. Her gaze darted frantically, wondering if she could run and how far she could get before they caught her. In the heat of the moment and her fuzzy thoughts of fucking two strangers, she'd forgotten about her nest egg.

She batted her eyes, hoping it would be mistaken for innocent confusion. It didn't work. Mitch came out of the stable and advanced toward her. She backed up some more then whirled around and ran.

She careened around the front of the cabin, scooped up her satchel, and when she turned, she plowed right into a hard chest. Two strong hands gripped her arms, and she lifted her face. Stuart stared down at her, a slight smile on his face. How had he gotten around the other side of the cabin so fast?

"You're in for a bit of trouble now. Mitch hates to run."

She gulped. "You're pretty good at it."

"I'm good at a lot of things."

He plucked the satchel from her hand and sent it flying toward the cabin. He spun her around and yanked her back against his chest. She stumbled, and Stuart gripped her shoulders tighter, holding her gently but firmly. There wasn't any chance for her to escape. His heat skittered down the length of her back and something hard nestled against the cleft of her ass. She'd kind of wanted to experience the feel of that at some point, but she wanted it on her terms, not theirs.

Mitch sauntered around the corner of the cabin, wearing that hard, emerald-green stare. He bounced her gold nuggets in his hand. She heard them rattle and clack in his fingers and saw the teasing glint of that glorious color as it reflected the sun's rays back to her. She stared at them, thinking how stupid she'd been to think luck and fortune came that quickly or easily. He slid them back into his pocket, destroying all the hope she'd had.

He came closer and closer until he practically touched her. Damn, now she was trapped between them, wedged between two hard, incredibly arousing bodies. Not only was she a poor thief, she seemed to be equally as bad at getting herself out of tight scrapes. She should have listened more to her stepdaddy when he talked because he could generally get out of anything. He seemed to live from one tight scrape to another.

She also really needed to learn to run faster.

The Gold Digger

55

Oh, I am doomed here.

Chapter 4

Mitch's gaze raked over her with a sort of lazy insolence that warmed her up hotter than a June bride. As his stare lingered on her breasts, Cinda's nipples hardened, and that dull ache in her privates became a fluttering pulse that dampened the skin between her thighs. It could have been the combination of his gorgeous eyes and Stuart's body pressed up against her, but she found it hard to draw a breath, and the moisture between her legs got slicker. Thoughts of gold vanished from her head, but obviously these men weren't so easily distracted.

Mitch looked past her to his brother. "I think we should search her."

Stuart's hands tightened on her shoulders. "We have to be sure. We can't have claim jumpers strolling in here and stealing us blind, no matter how pretty."

"Wait..."

Cinda forgot what she wanted to say. The words dried up in her mouth, and the heat swarming through her body burned up any in her head. Mitch reached out and, despite his large fingers, expertly popped open the top button of the flannel shirt she wore, then undid the rest quickly. It didn't really surprise her. It was his shirt, after all. A slow smile spread across his lips as he studied her chemise. It didn't offer an ounce of protection, especially since she'd removed the pin. He tugged at a couple laces, and her breasts spilled out of the linen. He caught them in his hands and gave them a gentle squeeze.

Another burst of flame blossomed on her cheeks as both men whistled softly. Mitch brushed his thumbs across her nipples, and they

pebbled into hard little nuggets. Warm breath feathered against Cinda's hair as Stuart peered over her head at the pale globes nestled in his brother's hands. Mitch stared quietly, seemingly entranced by the feel of her skin.

Cinda closed her eyes for a minute and simply enjoyed the feel of his rough fingers on her flesh and the hard tug of her nipples straining toward his touch. She leaned into his hands, wanting more than the movement stopped. She opened her eyes just as his gaze lifted to hers, and when she caught the glimmer in his eyes, she realized she'd been had. Damn, these men were good.

He plucked the rag out of her cleavage, fingered it for a moment then opened it. His lips tightened as he dropped the nuggets into his pocket. His eyes hardened. "That was enjoyable, but I'm running out of patience. Got any more hidden?"

"No!" The word rushed out too fast. She could tell by the glance Mitch shot Stuart that he'd long since stopped believing a word she said. "Honest. I'm telling the truth."

"Uh huh," Mitch said.

Stuart reached down over her shoulders, and his warm hands gently massaged near her collarbones. "I say we strip her down to be sure. If she's telling the truth, and we wasted a little time, we still get something out of it. Who knows? She might like it."

"In your dreams." She shot a glare over her shoulder. "I wouldn't like it one bit. Not with that attitude, mister. Find someone else."

"There she goes with that talking again," Mitch said.

"Didn't she say something about ignoring it?" Stuart said.

"Not *all* of it," Cinda snapped.

She clutched the chemise, trying to cover herself up, but dang it all. She'd grown some in the last few years, and it took a bit of time to stuff herself back into a chemise she'd had since she was fifteen. She might have been a late bloomer, but when she blossomed, she'd gotten enough for two girls. Her hands fumbled and blundered their

way across the fabric, trying to get the laces tied, cursing under her breath.

Stuart laughed. “Now, little filly, don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

“I don’t think she’s wearing knickers,” Mitch said. “And if she were, I’ll bet they’d be wet.”

Oh, they thought they were so amusing. She’d had just about enough of Mitch’s lazy drawl and shot him a dirty look.

Stuart inhaled deeply, and she made a fist, stopping just short of pounding it into his face. “I’ll take that bet. She’s creaming herself. I can smell it.”

He must have winked at his brother because Mitch winked and smiled. He had an adorable smile. It crinkled the corners of his eyes and made her want to kiss him. Of course, thoughts like that did her no good around these two. She clenched her jaw and held in the scream building in her chest because she couldn’t stop that wetness between her legs.

She continued to struggle with the laces, mumbling under her breath.

“Need some help?” Mitch asked.

“Help’s not gonna do it,” Stuart said. “She needs more cloth. It’s like trying to cram ten pounds of coffee into a five pound bag.”

“You two are so hilarious,” Cinda said. “Do you perform nightly at one of the Deadwood theaters?”

“No time for that,” Stuart said. “We have gold to find.”

“Or steal from others,” Cinda mumbled.

“So you think we’d do well in theater?” Mitch smiled down at her, and Cinda gave him her sternest glare. “If the gold runs out, we’ll keep it in mind. Hey, Stu, remember that time in St. Louis?”

Stuart burst out laughing. “I swear that man nearly shit when—”

Oh, she wished she had been in St. Louis. She wanted to live in their world. Why didn’t they just invite her in, instead of playing this childish game with her?

Stuart continued to regale them with a convoluted story about a man who tried to bilk them out of gold. Everything came back to gold. Mitch had other things on his mind. He reached out and plucked a lace she'd just spent half her life re-tying.

"Hey!" She twisted away and practically snarled at him. "Don't touch me."

* * * *

She sounded like a wounded bear cub, angry and unpredictable but cute as hell.

Her voice made Stuart think of the rustle of prairie flowers in a wild summer breeze. Cinda seemed a combination of gentle innocence and determined resilience, like the hardy blossoms that poked through the hard-packed dirt of the Dakota hills. There was an elegant beauty in their natural ability to rise above what earth decreed and flourish despite harsh conditions. Cinda had that same appeal. He wondered what kind of life this woman had led that made her seem so pure and unblemished, yet so full of fiery independence and strength. Wildflowers went through hell to carve out their existence in this territory, and Stuart suspected Cinda had seen a little of her own. Those bruises on her face told part of her story.

He hoped they would hear the rest of her story in time. For all he knew, it matched their own. He sensed a wounded soul, one that had tried to give and been rebuffed so many times the hurt had left scars inside. Luckily, he and Mitch had grown up together, and what they'd never received from their parents—love, stability, and generosity—had been found in each other. Stuart figured, like he and his brother, Cinda had long since stopped trying to gain what she most desired and lived with the consequences. Something, however, had forced her to trek onto the prairie and into the Dakota forests. A woman didn't jump from the frying pan into the fire without a damn good reason.

And any woman who would willingly jump into fire was worth her weight in gold.

When Mitch plucked at another lace, she smacked his hand away, and he laughed. Obviously, Mitch didn't care what Cinda thought because he nodded toward Stuart. Stuart slid his hands down from her shoulders to trace across her arms until he touched her wrists. He enveloped them in a warm grip and drew her arms down to her sides.

When he cupped her hands in his, her little fingers curled around his instinctually. Her fingers were rough and scratchy. She'd probably worked hard in the past, and definitely had since she'd arrived in their camp. He could heal her skin if he made her life more comfortable, but he wished he could heal her soul as easily. It might take a bit of time to fight his way through the prickly exterior to the soft gentle soul beneath, but he knew it was there and hoped to find it. He'd need Mitch's cooperation and help. He thought by the look on Mitch's face his brother might have similar ideas on his mind. Mitch might be a hard-ass, but he liked wildflowers, too.

They could do with a little beauty in their lives. He hoped Mitch could control himself long enough to let the beauty in.

* * * *

You dumb son-of-a-bitch. You had to go and touch her.

Mitch had been around plenty of women in his life, but from the first moment his body had collided with this great-smelling bundle of womanly flesh, his cock had decided it wanted to get closer. It lurched up, straining toward her like it'd never been in a pussy in its thirty-odd years. Mitch couldn't seem to convince it otherwise. He tried to will away the sensation, but that pounding ache in his balls reminded him time couldn't go backwards. He'd touched her, and now he'd pay the price. His dick swelled, growing bigger and harder until it throbbed against the denim with the steady rhythm of a shaft drill.

She hadn't been truthful with them. Mitch had no idea who she was, who she worked for, or where she'd come from, yet none of that seemed to matter. His dick had a mind of its own and wanted this woman no matter the consequences. Mitch thought getting to know her a little better sounded like a great idea.

Now he had a problem, and with each glance at the little blonde woman, it got harder not to fall prey to her obvious charms. He'd never been one to trust women all that much, but that smile that skimmed her mouth from time to time could undo him pretty fast if he let it. That challenge in her eyes made his cock twitch and his heart thump in a strangely pleasing way. She looked like a girl who'd given and given and never gotten back in return. She'd take what she could get and be happy for it. To Mitch's way of thinking, that seemed a pretty unfair existence.

He could change her life if he wanted to. He thought he'd like to give it a shot, or at least see where things led. She felt good under his hands, smelled like summer wind and reminded him of a pretty yellow flower poking out of hard-packed prairie dirt.

He and Stuart had been on the mining trail a long time, since they'd set off from Ohio at thirteen to escape what life had handed them. They'd followed gold and silver strikes from one territory to another and through wilderness that could have broken lesser men. They'd worked for others until they'd saved enough to strike out on their own. They now had enough gold in St. Louis, Cheyenne, and Deadwood to last them lifetimes.

Mining had become a habit, something they did because they enjoyed the challenge and loved the excitement of finding something no one else had ever seen. They'd never given thought to the future beyond traveling to the next town that sprang up in the desert or carved itself into the side of a hill. Looking into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen, Mitch thought it might be time to think about settling down and seeing how much happiness that gold could bring.

They were treasure hunters, and he'd begun to think that this girl that had fallen into their laps might be the greatest treasure they'd come across in a while.

But thoughts like that usually got him into trouble, and he really wasn't in the mood for trouble today. Keeping alive was hard enough.

* * * *

Cinda tugged at the laces. She'd had enough of Mitch's drawl, those sparkling eyes, and his warm, rough hands, too. She wanted to stay, and she'd thought it would easy to convince them. Watching the emotions play over Mitch's face, however, she saw it might be tougher than she suspected.

She lifted her gaze back to Mitch, determined to make him see her side. Her breath caught in her chest. Staring into her eyes, almost hypnotizing her with that green gaze, he reached up and closed the folds of her chemise. She stiffened.

"You can relax. We aren't going to hurt you, honeybunch."

She dropped her gaze, trying to break the spell, and stared at the wide green expanse of his flannel shirt. "Don't call me that," she whispered. It was the largest sound she could make, and she barely heard it herself. But he must have.

"Cinda..."

Her name sounded magical spoken in his soft, lazy drawl. Her lashes fluttered as her gaze rose back to his. He stroked a finger down her cheek.

"Yes?" she murmured.

"Is this what you want? For us to touch you?"

She couldn't seem to answer his question. Either answer seemed wrong. She swallowed thickly. "I'm not sure."

The rough calluses of his fingers sent tingles flying over her skin, and her privates clenched viciously inside as the ache ground through her, spreading from her pelvis to radiate through her entire body. She

trembled, but it wasn't out of fear. Stuart loosened the grip on her wrists, and he twined his fingers around hers. He leaned down and spoke against the skin of her neck.

"You'd like us to touch you, wouldn't you?"

Now that she had a horse named Goldy, having them touch her was all she'd ever wanted. She'd worry about getting the gold back later. The touch of these men was a treasure of a different kind, and she wanted to experience it all.

Now or never.

Cinda rested her head back against Stuart's chest and tightened her fingers around his. She glanced up at Mitch and decided that, for once, she would take something for herself. No matter what she'd been told for most of her life, she deserved it. She gave Mitch her most challenging look then smiled.

"Well, Mitch? What are you waiting for? I dare you."

The soft growl that rumbled out of his mouth told her she was in for an interesting afternoon.

Mitch trailed a finger down her throat and dipped inside her chemise to slide over the tip of her breast and down to the belt around her waist. He followed the movement of his hand with his gaze. Every place he touched sparked with a sizzling heat that left a pathway of fire over her skin. Nothing had ever felt so good, and nothing in life had prepared her for the grinding ache that unfurled in her pelvis. When Mitch cupped his hand between her thighs and curled it around her most private area, more moisture leaked out. It dampened the borrowed trousers. She wondered what would have happened in a dress. She rocked her hips toward his hand and made some kind of funny sound in her throat that she barely recognized, some kind of pleading noise. She'd never begged for anything but decided to make an exception. If they stopped, she'd be so disappointed and never forgive herself for being too prideful to beg.

"I'm throbbing." Without her consent, the thought just tumbled into words and fell out of her mouth. She knew she should keep

thoughts like that to herself, but she'd never had much control over that.

Stuart skimmed his hands over her almost-bare shoulders. "Where, darlin'?"

"Where he's touching. Between my legs."

Stuart chuckled. "If your pussy's throbbing, sweetheart, we're doing something right. Does it feel right?"

"Oh, yes..." She closed her eyes and rolled her head against his shoulder. "My pussy...is that what it's called?"

"Hmm," Stuart said, "guess we'll have to take things a little slower."

"How much slower can we go?" Mitch said. "I haven't done anything yet, and she's wet. I can tell. Feel her."

His hand slid away, and Cinda's lower lip pushed out in a pout. She opened her mouth to protest, but Stuart reached around and cupped his hand around her pussy. She relaxed into the cradle of his palm, rubbing against it, gentle nudges that eased the itching a little.

"That feels nice," she murmured.

"Then you're really going to like the rest," Stuart said.

She glanced up to find Mitch studying her face. It probably should have made her feel self-conscious, even uncomfortable, but she found it intensely arousing, and it spurred her to want more, to share everything with these men. Mitch looked ready to eat her alive, and she liked it. She liked it a lot. "Tell me about the rest."

Her voice sounded dreamy, and Mitch gulped as his gaze dipped to his brother's hand. Stuart shifted his palm a little, moving it up and down in a slow, steady rhythm, gliding over a spot that sent ripples through her lower body and a spurt of liquid to drip from between her thighs.

Land sakes alive, but these men knew her body better than she did. Her heart did a fluttering little flip, and her hips jerked forward. A breathy gasp escaped from her then she laughed.

"I think I'm going to like the rest. It feels—"

Mitch gripped her shoulders and yanked her upper body toward him. His mouth closed over hers, devouring her lips and stealing every thought in her head and breath in her body. She slumped in his hands, caught against the warmth of Stuart's palm, and just let Mitch take what he wanted. She didn't seem to have the wherewithal to respond and wondered at that, but not for long. She just let herself enjoy her first real kiss. She'd dream of a real kiss all her life, one that made her mind fuzzy and her body tighten. The slide of his tongue into her mouth was heavenly. The texture of his lips felt like raw silk, gliding smoothly over hers, nipping and tugging at her lips then slamming back to crush and ravage. His hot breath and the warm, wet kiss tingled every nerve she had and made the flesh between her legs swell and pulse with anticipation.

Slowly his lips left hers, reluctantly maybe. She could only hope. When Mitch finally pulled away, he stared into her eyes. She stared back, confused, excited, trembling but wanting him to do it again.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He smiled a lazy smile. "You talk too much."

"How would you know? You don't listen." She reached up and grabbed his face. She captured his mouth with her lips, not sure what she was doing, but doing it just the same. When she'd felt his tongue slip into her mouth, she had all but lost her sense of balance, and now she wanted to do the same to him and steal a little of his control. A thrill went through her at the sense of power she felt when she heard the sound he made. He wrapped his hands around her shoulders and nearly crushed her body to his, and she swore, in that moment, she was so lost she knew she'd never leave this claim on her own. Not even with her gold. Not even with her horse. They'd have to hog-tie her and deliver her to Deadwood strung on a wooden pole.

He pulled away and raised his face. He looked as stunned as she felt. His brow furrowed then he nodded to Stuart. "Keep going. I'll be right back."

She turned her head to watch him stride away, but then Stuart grabbed her attention by undoing the belt and sliding his hand inside her pants. His finger slid between her pussy lips, and the impossible happened. She forgot for a minute Mitch existed.

* * * *

What the fuck are you doing?

“Jesus, I have no idea.” He checked on the horses and glanced in their water buckets by habit. “That was a kiss. A real fucking kiss. You don’t know her, where she came from, what she’s doing here, and you fucking kissed her.”

She kissed you back.

She had given him the sweetest, most passionate, most sincere kiss he’d ever gotten in his life.

“You, my man, are in serious trouble here.”

He dropped all the gold nuggets into a jar and sat it on the work bench. He stood, staring blankly at the back wall of the stable.

“She’s after the gold. That’s all she wants. She doesn’t want Stuart, and she doesn’t want me. She’s a thief, a claim jumper, and probably a gold digger.” He and his brother had run across more than one woman hanging around a mining camp looking for any prospect to turn a financial tide, and he’d fallen for one once, hard. He couldn’t make that mistake again. “Damn, she doesn’t *feel* that way.”

Goldy nudged him, reminding him that Stuart was alone with Cinda, that time was flying, and when something fell into his lap, he’d be a moron not to accept it. Goldy seemed to like the girl, but Goldy’d known her less time than he had.

Goldy didn’t know that women couldn’t be trusted, especially once they’d seen the gold. Gold fever played havoc with a person’s mind.

* * * *

Stuart's fingers danced over the tiny nub between her legs, putting pressure on the sensitive little peak until she felt her legs start to tremble.

"Oh God..." She clutched his arm. Her nails dug into the flannel of his shirt, and she heard a tiny rip. She guessed she'd be doing a little mending tomorrow, but she'd worry about that later, much later. For now, Stuart had her caught in some kind of sensual madness she never knew existed. She wouldn't have walked away if Mitch came out and offered her gold back. She drew in a ragged breath. "What are you touching?"

"Your clit," he whispered and lifted his finger. "Do you like it?"

"I love it. Touch it again."

He tapped against her clit with his fingertip. Each touch made her hips jerk and her body quiver. Her knees felt like they would buckle any minute. She felt herself reaching for something that she couldn't even name, something that shimmered at the edge of her imagination, like a mountain of gold, like a beautiful party dress, like a— Damn it! She felt like a dog chasing a rabbit. Each time she reached toward it, the cagey little thing slithered through a log, and she lost it. She couldn't quite get it in her grasp. Her body tensed, and she tightened her hand on Stuart's arm.

"Be patient, babydoll. It'll come."

"When? What?" she cried. "Whatever it is, I want it now!"

"Just relax. Enjoy every sensation. When you least expect it, you'll get it."

She pouted again, rolling her head on his chest. His fingers smoothed over her clit again, trying to appease the ache. "I'm not very good at patience."

"I noticed." He dipped his head toward her, and she lifted her face. His lips met hers in a soft, gentle kiss. His tongue explored the inside of her mouth, and she closed her eyes and let him do all the

exploring he wanted. He was her guide, her scout, her fellow adventurer and—

She tore her mouth away as her body trembled violently. The sensations ripped through her body like water from a busted dam, pouring through her, cascading over her skin, rippling and splashing through her blood. Her pussy spasmed, then clenched, the muscles clamping on emptiness but pulsing with the manic beat of her heart. She'd never felt anything like it in her life. Delightful little shivers spread over her body, followed by a flash of heat that nearly melted her from the inside out. Her limbs quaked then trembled then seemed to hang limp. She slumped in Stuart's arms, listening to his soft laughter.

"I see you found it."

"Holy hell. Did I ever."

"It gets even better," Stuart said.

She smiled at him. "Oh, it couldn't possibly."

He lifted his finger from her clit long enough to slide through the juices coating her slit until he found the opening. A little swirl of his finger made her lift to her tiptoes and push back into him. He chuckled, and the sound vibrated from deep within his chest. He slid one of his fingers inside her pussy, and she pushed against his hand, eager for more.

"Tell me what you want, Cinda."

He knew what she wanted, but he was going to make her ask for it.

"More. I want more."

"More of what?" A second finger joined the first. "This?" He moved his fingers in and out, while he pushed the heel of his hand against her clit, stroking with a hard, rhythmic movement.

She gasped. "Yes, more of that. More fingers...more..."

A third finger joined the other two, and she felt stretched. He had big hands and long fingers.

She reached behind her and ran her hand across the front of his trousers. Now here was something that hadn't managed to elude her like that damn imaginary rabbit. Hard, long, big, throbbing... and all for Cinda Parks. And since she'd been having the best luck of her life recently, she had an identical one somewhere near the cabin. Damn, it was good to be her.

Where had Mitch gone anyway?

She slipped her hand inside Stuart's pants. "How do you want me to touch you?" she asked, unsure of what to do, but eager to please. She wanted to give him back the same pleasure he'd given her.

He made a low sound like he was in pain when her fingers wrapped around his organ.

"Do you know what it's called?" His voice was measured, like he was trying to hold on to his control. He put his hand over hers, wrapping her fingers around him.

"Oh yes," she sighed. "It's called a cock." She couldn't believe anything could be that hard and feel so soft.

"Stroke it. Like this."

He demonstrated, guiding her hand fully up and down his length several times. She wanted to take her time and explore him, to run her fingertips over the velvety soft skin of his cock, but she didn't think that was what he had in mind, so she turned to face him. Much as she wanted to look into his eyes, she couldn't for the life of her keep from glancing down to what she held in her hand. Oh mercy me. There was no way that was going to fit in her body. She drew back a little, and Stuart tilted her face up to look at him. Something must have shown on her face because he gave her a little smile.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm not worried," she murmured. "Just a little surprised by the size. I mean I've only seen one, and it wasn't quite this pretty...or big."

She looked back down at the cock in her hand, giving an experimental little stroke back and forth. He swore softly under his

breath, and she set a rhythm that seemed right. She didn't know how she understood that, but she knew she did the right thing. And, if she had any doubts, Stuart's low, whispered encouragements would have erased them.

She licked her lips, wondering what it would be like to slide her tongue over that silky skin. From very near, she heard Mitch clear his throat. She dropped her forehead against Stuart's chest then turned her face toward his brother.

Mitch shot a disgusted look toward Stuart, and Cinda backed up a step. Mitch's gaze dropped down to the hard cock jutting out of Stuart's pants. "I see you started without me."

"Your last words to me were 'keep going', so I did."

"When did you start listening to me?"

"I listen when you get a good idea. Besides, you've been gone so long, I thought you fell down the mine shaft."

"The shaft's on the hill, dumb ass."

"Could you two argue later?" Cinda said. "We're kind of in the middle of something here."

* * * *

Stuart peered at his brother. "Something wrong, Mitch? You look a little...something."

Mitch had that look on his face. He'd been thinking too hard again, and Stuart could take a wild guess on what thoughts galloped through his brother's head. Mitch had never been the trusting sort, but the last woman they'd hooked up with had really screwed Mitch up good. He still blamed himself for several pounds of gold that vanished into the streets of Denver along with Missy Carter. In Stuart's way of thinking, losing a little bit of gold had been worth it to get rid of the bitch. He'd put up with Missy because Mitch had fallen for her hard and fast. She had a body to tempt a preacher and a set of angelic

dimples that Stuart knew immediately would be trouble. Trouble seemed to find Mitch like he wore a lightning rod.

"I'm fine." Mitch glanced at Stuart's cock. "And I can see you're more than fine."

"I'd be more than fine, too," Cinda said, "if someone would touch me."

"She's a greedy thing," Stuart said. "She came already, but she's obviously a little self-centered."

"I liked it!" Cinda cried. "And you promised me more."

Mitch reached out and lifted a curl off Cinda's shoulder. "You have the prettiest hair."

Cinda rolled her eyes. "And eyes like cornflowers. I know. Thanks, but what about the rest of me?" She wiggled her hips.

Mitch stared at her like he'd suddenly lost his concentration. Stuart swallowed a laugh. So Mitch was over dimples and suddenly had a thing for long, shiny hair. Well, Stuart had to admit Cinda had pretty hair, and it happened to be the color of gold, their favorite color.

She ran her hands down her pants. "I'm all itchy now. If you want to touch something, touch this." She grabbed Mitch's hand and pulled it between her legs. Mitch moved closer as though pulled by an invisible string and curled his hand over her. She lifted her face. "You could kiss me again if you want."

He dipped his head down.

"I hate to butt in here," Stuart said.

Mitch's gaze slid toward him. "I'll bet."

"You kind of interrupted things." He motioned to his cock, stiff, swollen, and jutting out from his body. "She was stroking me, and I kind of liked it."

"I kind of liked it, too," Cinda said. Mitch's hand must have hit her clit because she let out a little moan and shivered. "But I think I like this even better." She leaned toward Mitch, grinding her pelvis against his hand.

“Still and all...” Stuart said.

Cinda threw her hands in the air. “Oh for land’s sake! We’re wasting time here talking.”

“Going somewhere?” Stuart asked.

“Yes, no, well, I hope not, but—”

Mitch’s gaze raked over her body. “I’m not giving the gold back if you fuck us.”

“Who said anything about the gold?” Cinda snapped.

“You seemed a little fixated on it earlier.”

Cinda flushed. “A girl can change her mind.”

Mitch’s eyes narrowed. “Is this part of the deal? ’Cause we haven’t agreed to anything yet and—”

“Forget the deal! We’ll talk about the deal later. You can’t start something with me and not finish it. That’s just not fair!”

Stuart stifled his smile. If she’d forgotten the gold, and Mitch was thinking about her hair, things were looking up. He saw a lot of stew on the horizon. He pressed against Cinda’s back, eager to get back to business. His jaw dropped when Mitch said, “I can’t do this. You need to go.”

Chapter 5

Cinda closed her eyes and pressed a hand against her forehead. What had Mitch said? They had both hypnotized her. Her head felt light, and her body still trembled. When Stuart took a step backward, she shivered and shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Mitch leaned toward her and drew her chemise closed. “Get out of here.”

Something had gone wrong. She only had one chance to fix it. She tugged on the laces and tied them as best she could. Her mind whirled as she wondered what she could do to get things back on track. This hadn’t gone the way it was supposed to. Not at all. What had she said?

Don’t mess this up, Cinda. Be nice, be sweet.

Both brothers turned and headed back toward the cabin. Oh no. She started to follow, her fingers flying as she tried to close the buttons on her shirt.

Stuart stopped and turned. “Time for you to go.”

“But, I want—”

Mitch glanced over his shoulder and let his gaze drop down her body. Something flickered in the depths of his eyes, but Cinda had no idea what it might mean. He looked both sad and angry at the same time. He studied her for a moment. “Don’t bother. You’re not getting the gold back.”

“I don’t want—”

Mitch shook his head. “No lies, doll.”

She slammed her hands on her hips. “I don’t lie.”

“There’s one right there.” Mitch gave her a tiny smile. “Hit the road, sunshine. See ya around.”

He spun around and stomped into the cabin. Stuart reached down and grabbed her satchel. He tossed it to her, and it slammed into her chest, almost knocking her over. She caught herself before she fell and rushed toward him.

“Talk to him, Stuart. Make him let me stay.”

He gave her a glance that seemed a little apologetic. “It won’t do any good.” He nodded toward the stream. “Better get out of these woods before dark. You can’t trust people in the hills.”

He turned and followed his brother inside.

Cinda slid the satchel over her shoulder. “I think I could have trusted you.”

She heaved a sigh, glanced up at the sunlight then started down the hill toward the stream. She swiped at the tears that leaked out and decided she’d keep her gaze on the water.

* * * *

When Stuart barreled into the cabin, Mitch stood with his hands flat against the wall of the hearth, staring into the small pile of dead ash. Stuart slammed his hat down on the table. “What the hell is the matter with you? What were you thinking?”

His brother grunted. “I was saving your sorry ass.”

“My ass? Look closer, brother. I liked her. I wanted to keep her around.”

Mitch shrugged and glanced over his shoulder. “It’s better if she’s not.”

“Better for whom? Did you get a good look at her?”

“Hard not to,” Mitch grumbled.

Stuart clenched his fists. If he’d ever wanted to punch his brother’s face more than right that moment, he couldn’t remember

when. “How long do you think she’ll survive in Deadwood on her own?”

Mitch spun around. “That’s not a problem. Someone will take her in.”

Stuart kicked a chair away from the table and fell into it. “No, not a problem at all. And that’s exactly why it’s a problem. Did she look like a whore to you?”

Mitch refused to look at him.

“Did she?” Stuart repeated.

“No.”

“At least you’re not fucking blind,” Stuart said. “But you know what, Mitch? You just guaranteed that little woman will be a whore before the end of the week. Hell, the next time we go into town we can pay her a visit and—”

“Shut up, Stu.” Mitch ran a hand through his hair. “She would have stolen us blind.”

“She wasn’t stealing, she was settling in. Did you look around this place? She was nesting, Mitch. And she’s either the most hard-working or the luckiest woman I’ve ever seen. She’d have been an asset.”

“We can’t keep her here. Women don’t mix in our lives, and no matter what we think of her, she doesn’t fit.”

“She could have fit,” Stuart said softly.

“Where? With you?”

“Maybe.” Stuart leaned back in his chair. “What’s wrong with that?”

“And where exactly does that leave me?”

“Is that what this is all about? You think she’d pick me over you? Hell, how do I know she wouldn’t pick you? That charming personality of yours practically guarantees she’d fall right into your arms.”

Mitch clenched his hands into fists. “I’m warning you to shut the hell up.”

“No, for once, you’re going to listen to me. Sit down.”

Mitch looked ready to kill him, but he dropped into a chair. Stuart opened his mouth, but the sound of Cinda’s voice made him snap it closed.

“I think you should both sit down. I have something to say.”

Mitch jerked and twisted toward the door. Stuart smiled as she marched across the floorboards and tossed her bag on the bed.

“I need money, and I’m willing to do anything to get it. Let’s barter.”

“You have nothing we need,” Mitch said.

“That’s not true. You like the way I look. I know you do.”

Stuart’s gaze swung between them. Mitch set his lips in a firm line then said, “If we want a whore, we’ll go to Deadwood.”

“Did I say anything about being your whore?” Cinda slammed her hands on her hips and glared at Mitch. When her gaze swung to Stu, he put his hands in the air.

“I didn’t say a word.”

“Maybe not,” Cinda said, “but you’re not helping.”

Mitch pushed away from the table. Cinda winced when his chair screeched against the floor. “Why should he help you? He’s *my* goddamn brother! What the hell do you want from us?”

Cinda blew out a disgusted breath. “I told you. I need money. Look, I want out of this territory, and I—”

Mitch flung his arm toward the door. “So leave.” When she stood her ground, he bolted to his feet, stomped toward the door and grabbed his hat from the peg. “Do you want a ride down the hill? I’ll be more than happy to deliver you to town just to get rid of you.”

“No, I don’t want a ride to town! I want to stay here. Please, Mitch, let me stay.”

“And have you ruin my life? Not a chance.”

Mitch stepped off the threshold, and Cinda snatched at his arm. He lurched away like she’d touched him with a branding iron at the exact moment a loud crack echoed through the cabin. Mitch stumbled

backward a few paces then fell to his ass in the dirt. Brow furrowed, Stuart rose slowly to his feet, his gaze locked on his brother's face where a trickle of blood etched its way down his cheek. For a crazy moment, he wondered where the blood had come from. Finally, he understood.

Stuart lurched to his feet and shouted "Get down!" just as another violent crack echoed through the cabin. The bullet ricocheted off the dirt and slammed into the cabin wall, splintering the wood.

Mitch managed to get to his knees and teetered precariously. Cinda tumbled out the door and dropped down beside him. She covered her head as another bullet exploded a log behind her then began tugging on his arm. "Mitch, come on! Someone's shooting at us."

Stuart dodged across the cabin, keeping low. He grabbed the rifle from near the door, yanked open the barrel, and found it empty. Cursing and snarling, he began to search the drawer for bullets. Jesus, Mitch had bullied her with an unloaded rifle.

"Cinda, come inside. I'll get him."

She completely ignored him and gathered Mitch's face between her hands, forcing him to look at her. Stuart saw that his brother's eyes had clouded over, and Mitch was completely oblivious. He was barely aware of the woman kneeling in front of him. He blinked several times and frowned.

"My head hurts." He started to sink toward the ground, and Cinda shoved her hands under his arms, trying to pull him back up. He straightened for a moment then closed his eyes and leaned toward her.

"Mitch." She shoved him back up and gave him a little shake. "Come on. Stay with me."

His eyes snapped open then narrowed as he peered at her. "You." The word oozed from his mouth like it was wrapped in filth. He jerked away in disgust, his voice a low, dangerous growl. "Don't touch me. Thief."

"Stop being so mean," she growled back. "Let me help you."

“I don’t want your help.”

The two glared at one another. In any other circumstances, Stuart would wait to see whose head exploded first, but one of them was liable to end up dead. Stuart slammed some cartridges into the rifle, his gaze roaming between his brother and the forests beyond.

Mitch swayed. “I can’t trust you. I can’t trust any of you.” He pressed his fingers against his temple. “Ow.” He pulled his hand away and stared at it stupidly. “I’m bleeding.”

“You’ve been shot. We’ve got to go in the cabin.”

“You’re lying. You’ll say anything to get that gold.”

Cinda’s breath burst out of her lungs. “Stop it, Mitch, you’re scaring me. Come on!”

When another shot rang out, and a bit of the door exploded in front of him, Mitch jerked like a marionette. He glanced around like he’d come out of a dream only to find himself in a nightmare. He gave Cinda a little shove and tried to push himself up, but stumbled and collapsed back to the ground. Stuart reached out, grabbed Cinda’s arm, and yanked her into the cabin. She slid along the floor and tried to scramble to her feet. He gave her a stern glare, and she froze. He tossed the rifle toward her. She caught it easily.

“Cover me.”

He dashed outside, and Cinda squeezed off a shot toward the trees. Stu tucked his shoulder under Mitch’s arm and man-handled his brother into the house. Once inside, he dropped him and slammed the door shut. He turned to Cinda and reached for the rifle.

“Friend of yours?”

Cinda rose to her feet. “I don’t know.”

“Anybody who might be looking for you?”

Her glance darted toward the open window just as another shot rang out. She dropped down then pressed her lips together. “Possibly.”

“Great. Just great.” He slammed the shutters closed then nodded toward Mitch who swayed slightly as he tried to get to his feet. “He’s bleeding pretty bad. See what you can do.”

Cinda took a step toward him, and Mitch plastered himself against the wall, shaking his head.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Mitch,” she said softly. “Let me see.”

Stuart cast a glance toward his brother. Mitch lifted his hand and felt his temple again. He winced slightly but then steeled his face against emotion. At least the life had come back into his eyes, and he seemed to know what was happening.

“I’m okay,” Mitch said. “It just grazed me.”

“It grazed you hard enough to knock you on your ass.” Stuart slid his rifle through a small gap in the shutters. “Another inch and we’d have located that brain of yours.”

“Ha ha,” Mitch said.

Stuart peered through the slit and studied the dooryard, trying to gauge where the shots had come from. He was aware of Cinda working behind him. He heard the sound of cloth ripping and a strangled sound from his brother when Cinda pressed the makeshift bandage against Mitch’s head.

“Christ, woman! That fucking hurts!”

“Oh, stop being a big baby,” she cooed.

Stuart cast a glance behind to see her lead Mitch to the table and push him into a chair. His brother looked pale, and blood had already soaked through the cloth and trickled down his cheek. Stuart tried to concentrate on the task at hand and not think about how close that bullet had come to ending his brother’s life. He tossed some strands of hair out of his eyes and focused once again on the woods.

“When I get you cleaned up, I’ll make us a nice dinner,” Cinda said.

“It’ll probably be poisoned,” Mitch muttered.

“Only yours,” she said. “Now relax.”

After about ten minutes, he heard Cinda toss a couple pieces of wood inside the stove. Stuart stood at the window for several more minutes, listening to the soft murmurs of Cinda's voice. He blinked, trying to force some moisture back into his eyes.

"Press harder, Mitch. We have to get the bleeding stopped. Are you feeling dizzy? Just let me...No, don't pull away. I'm just going to clean it a little bit. Then I'm going to look around for a sewing kit. Do you have one?"

"Oh no," Mitch said. "I'm not letting you sew me."

"Rather bleed to death?" Cinda said.

Mitch made a grunting sound.

Stuart wiped a bead of sweat away from his eye. He glanced toward her. "What are the chances your friend wants you dead?"

She froze then pressed a clean cloth against Mitch's temple. "If it's who I think it is, it's my stepfather, and he wouldn't want me dead."

Stuart frowned. "Then what is he doing?"

Her jaw clenched, and she shook her head, her golden curls cascading around her shoulders. "He's trying to scare me into coming home."

"Why? What's he hope to gain?"

"He plans to sell me. Apparently, there's good money in whores."

"Son of a bitch," Stuart said. "Is he the reason you ended up falling out of a wagon?"

Cinda nodded but refused to look at him. Mitch stared at her until she finally glanced his way. She chewed on her bottom lip.

"No wonder you wanted out of this territory," Mitch said.

"Seemed like a good time to get lost," Cinda said.

"Well, he's a dumb son of a bitch." Mitch shook his head. "His plan's going to backfire. I don't know any woman who'd go home just to be sold off."

"I'll have to," Cinda murmured.

Mitch's forehead crunched, and he grimaced. "Why?"

“Because he wasn’t shooting at me,” Cinda said.

Stuart closed the shutter and heaved a sigh. “That bullet nick your brain after all, Mitch? The stepdaddy doesn’t give a damn if we’re dead.” He turned around and walked toward them.

Mitch’s gaze locked on him then he glanced at Cinda. “But she would.”

“Exactly,” Stuart said. “That was a warning. I suspect he’ll give her a couple days to get home before he tries it again. I think he fired off a couple shots and left. I imagine he was somewhat surprised he actually hit you.”

“If one of us is dead, he loses his leverage,” Mitch said.

Stuart nodded. “There hasn’t been any movement out there, so I’ll check on the horses and get some water for coffee.” He lifted the pot off the stove and turned toward the door.

Cinda grabbed the pot out of his hand. “I’ll do it. There are a few things I want to look for. You find me a sewing kit.” She started toward the door then turned. “I know enough about healing to keep Mitch alive. I can also cook, do laundry, and keep this place clean while you do your mining. We can try it for a few days and see how it works. If you’re happy, you can pay me what you think it’s worth then I’ll be out of your hair. If you want to fuck, I can do that, too, though I’m probably not very good at it.”

“It’s easier than falling out of a wagon,” Mitch said with a smile.

“And a lot more fun,” Stuart said.

Cinda’s lashes flickered as a blush stole over her face. “We can do that if you like. I can see how I might like it. Either way...” She straightened up and lifted her chin. “I won’t be a bother, and I’ll keep my hands away from your gold. That’s a promise.” She glanced between them. “Is it a deal?”

Stuart cast a quick look at his brother. Mitch looked curious and a lot more open-minded than he had an hour before.

Mitch nodded. “I think we can call it a deal for now. We can negotiate the details later.”

“Good then. Keep that cloth pressed on your face. Stu, find me a needle and thread. I’ll be right back.” She vanished out the door before either of them could say a word.

“Didn’t take you long to change your mind,” Stuart said.

“Bullets have a way of making you look at things differently. She’s had a hell of a life. She deserves better.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you not all women are like Missy Carter.”

Mitch ran a hand through his hair and stared out the door. “Spose not.”

“Seems a fair trade. We’ll get some clean clothes and a few good meals out of the deal, and she’ll get a little money to get out of the territory.”

“If she doesn’t get us killed first.”

Stu nodded. “That could be a problem.”

“I’m willing to risk it.” Mitch pulled the cloth away from his wound and tilted his face. “How’s it look? Will I live?”

Stuart smiled. “You just might. Let’s hope she’s a good seamstress, too, so you stay pretty.”

Chapter 6

Mitch woke to the feel of a soft hand caressing his face. He vaguely remembered being stitched up, having supper, and Cinda insisting he get into bed. He'd protested, saying he felt good, but had done as she asked. He remembered the feel of her hand as she checked his bandage then...nothing.

He tried to open his eyes but immediately closed them when a burst of pain shot through the side of his head.

"I imagine you have a headache."

He shielded his eyes against the dim bit of light coming through the window and peered through half-closed lids to see a halo of golden hair and the soft smile on Cinda's face.

He tried to smile but found very few of his face muscles worked. "It feels more like the top of my head has been blown off."

Stuart chuckled. "Close, but not quite."

Squinting, Mitch glanced toward the sound of his brother's voice. He opened his eyes wider and saw Stu at the table, shoveling eggs into his mouth. He rose on one elbow, wincing at the pain that spiked through his head. Cinda held a mug toward him.

"Drink this. It won't numb all the pain, but it will help a little."

He sniffed at the concoction and grimaced at the stench that wafted from the mug. "I hate to ask. What is it?"

Cinda smiled. "Just an old family recipe my grandmother taught me. Drink up. I guarantee you'll feel like a new man."

He glanced toward his brother's breakfast plate. "I'd rather have what he's having."

Cinda nudged the mug closer. "Later. Come on. Be brave."

He let her tip it toward his lips and managed to gulp it down. When she gave his shoulder a little shove, he fell back onto the bed.

The next thing he knew, sunlight streamed through the open doorway. He gingerly sat up, anticipating the stab of pain and found that the headache had receded to a dull throb. He was alone in the cabin, but he smelled the delicious aroma of venison stew. He swung his legs to the floor, tested his balance and helped himself to some lunch. When he finished, he shuffled toward the door. The dooryard was empty, so he headed around the cabin to the barn.

The doors were open, and the stalls were empty. Mitch glanced toward the work bench. The jar of nuggets sat exactly where he'd left it, completely untouched. There was no way she could have missed them last night when she'd checked on the horses, and if she'd been the one to let the horses out this morning, the nuggets would have been winking in the dark shadows at the first touch of sunshine.

She could have been long gone, with both a horse and a small fortune.

When he stepped out of the barn, he heard familiar singing. He smiled and headed toward the sound.

He found her in the clearing behind the barn. She had strung a line between two trees and had just begun to hang her laundry. Beneath her dress, her hips swayed lightly in time to the rhythm of her song. It was the prettiest sight he'd ever seen. The horses grazed in the distance. He started toward her and stopped when he saw his brother come up the embankment carrying a basket filled with wet clothes.

Stuart put the basket down beside her then wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled his face into her neck. She giggled and squirmed but didn't protest when Stu reached down and cupped his hand between her legs. Mitch watched his twin gently massage her pussy through the fabric. Cinda leaned back against him, her head on his shoulder. When she raised her face and Stuart leaned down to kiss her, Mitch whirled around, deciding he'd seen enough.

"Mitch!"

He froze and waited. When he felt her hand on his arm, he turned around.

* * * *

Mitch looked so hurt, so betrayed. It was the last thing she wanted. In fact, she'd gotten it into her head that if they'd let her, she wanted to stay with them permanently. With both of them. It might be wrong, but she didn't care. She had no idea what she'd gotten herself into by climbing that little embankment and walking into their cottage. All she knew was her body begged for the feel of their hands, and her lips loved the touch of their mouths.

"How are you feeling?" She reached up to touch the bandage, but he stopped her.

"Never better." He cast a suspicious glance toward Stuart. "But I should go back to the cabin. You don't need me."

"You don't have any idea what I need." She tilted her face toward him. "Can I show you?"

When he nodded, she took his hand and led him back toward the blanket she and Stuart had spread out after lunch. She walked to the center and tugged off her boots, tossing them into the grass. Slowly, she unbuttoned her dress. When it puddled around her ankles, she stood before them naked and willing. The warm summer air stirred her hair and felt good on her bare flesh. That fluttering between her legs begged for attention. It was all up to them.

A delicious energy coursed up and down her skin and made her tremble with a desire she'd never felt. She wanted their hands to touch every inch of her, both inside and out. But right now they stared at her like two little boys peering at a frothy confection in a bakery window. She knew how that felt and determined the best thing to do would be to hand it to them to see the delight on their faces. She had no trouble taking charge.

She cocked her hip and gave them a smile. Their gazes roamed over every inch of her flesh. "I seem to be the only naked one. It's going to be difficult to fuck me with your clothes on."

That got them moving. Denim and flannel flew around her, and she took advantage of their activity to take a peek in the bakery window herself.

If she thought she'd been hot yesterday with Stuart's hands on her, she'd been wrong. As she watched, they revealed aching temptation with each movement of their hands. She'd been right about the muscles under the clothing. Sleek muscles rippled beneath chests covered with dark fur. She wanted to press her face against their chests and rub her cheek over their skin to see how it felt. She'd seen plenty of miners since arriving in the Dakotas, and none of them looked like these men. They obviously worked hard for what they earned. She'd heard them say something about a shaft and wondered why they chose to dig when gold littered their water source.

Their upper bodies were darkened by hours spent in the sunlight as though they'd dug through a mountain and beyond. Maybe they had. They seemed like determined men. Below their waists, their skin tones lightened, but even there, their skin was far darker than hers.

She licked her lips as she inspected long, strong legs and back up to the large cocks that swelled toward her, the veins dark and pulsing.

"You two look good enough to eat."

"I was thinking the same thing," Stuart said. He turned to his brother. "You up to going first?"

"Absolutely."

Mitch took a step toward her. Cinda had no idea what Stuart had meant, but by the look on Mitch's face, she might be having a good afternoon. Her pussy fluttered again and clenched down hard. Her hand had a mind of its own, and was way ahead of her own thinking, because it slipped between her legs, and her finger stroked over the swollen nub of flesh. Delightful little pulses racked the lower half of

her body. She couldn't believe how wet she'd become. Her pussy felt slick, slippery, and drenched in juices.

Mitch dropped to his knees in front of her and gripped her hips. When he lifted his head, she saw something dark and seductive in his gaze, something that made her heart pound. She thought that no matter what he planned to do, she would let him and beg for more.

"Move your hand," he said.

She obeyed immediately. Her hands fluttered restlessly for a moment, then settled on his shoulders. Stuart moved behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist.

"What are you going to do?" she murmured.

"Don't worry," Stuart said, "you'll like it."

Cinda stared into Mitch's eyes. "I don't doubt that for a minute."

Mitch didn't say another word. He moved his hands closer to her heat. They slid slowly over her hip bones and downward, inch by inch, leaving a trail of twisted fire that sparked and sizzled along her skin. Both thumbs skimmed over the soft hairs above her pussy then downward to stroke against the lips. Cinda shivered when he spread the lips apart and leaned toward her.

At the first touch of his mouth, Cinda bucked in his hands. He dropped gentle kisses on each lip then on her clit, where his lips tugged a little before his tongue swiped over it.

Cinda dropped her head back against Stuart's chest and pressed her hips closer to his brother's face. When she felt Mitch's tongue swipe the entire length of her pussy, she shuddered violently and nearly collapsed. His tongue dipped inside, licking and stroking the soft skin. Cinda almost twisted away at the intense pleasure that spiraled through her body, but she held herself still by willpower. She wanted this. One wrong movement might make him stop.

Slowly, Mitch tugged her forward as he lowered his body to the blanket. Cinda followed and felt Stuart's hand guide her downward until she was straddling Mitch's face. Mitch curled his hands around her ass and seemingly held her up by magic because Cinda almost

dissolved into a puddle. Stuart must have sensed her muscles threatening to collapse because he straddled Mitch behind her and cupped her elbows. She closed her eyes and surrendered to them.

Mitch licked and sucked every inch of her pussy. His tongue continued to dart inside her then skipped away to swipe at her clit, causing shivers of sensation to prick through the already spiraling pleasure. When his lips latched onto the pulsing nub and sucked hard, his fingers slid over the cleft of her ass. She wondered briefly what he planned to do, but she couldn't seem to get her mind to focus. As he dipped one finger toward her small hole, she clenched her muscles but relaxed immediately when her fluttering pussy begged for her attention. She lifted up as her entire body tensed, but Mitch followed her movement, and his finger pushed inside her ass.

Her eyes shot open. "Oh God, what are you doing?"

"Little busy here," Mitch muttered.

Stuart leaned down and kissed the side of her neck. "He's getting you ready, darlin'."

"Ready for what?"

"We'll tell you later," Stuart murmured against her neck. "How does it feel?"

"Strange...but kind of nice."

Mitch slowly thrust his finger deeper then withdrew, only to slide inside again. The movement of his finger brought with it a grinding pressure and an intense need, but for what, she didn't know. All the while he fucked her ass with his finger, he stroked her pussy with his tongue. The strangeness vanished, and she let herself be swept to wherever they wanted her to go.

She clenched on his finger and dipped lower against his mouth. He sucked her clit harder, and, as her body tensed, she suddenly lifted then crashed downward. Her body trembled and shook in another wave of that incredible pleasure. Mitch continued to suck her until she thought she'd go mad. She fell back against Stuart, her entire body a boneless heap of pulsating joy. She struggled to capture a breath and

lay quietly for a few minutes. Stuart kissed her shoulder as Mitch continued to lap at her pussy juices.

“You were right. I liked it. I liked it just fine.” She stared down into Mitch’s half-closed eyes then swept some hair away from his brow. “Can I do that to you?”

Stuart laughed. “Darlin’, we’re counting on it.” He moved to the side of the blanket and stood up. Cinda scooted off Mitch and went to kneel before Stuart.

“Um, I hate to break this to you, Stu,” Mitch said, leaning up on an elbow, “but I kind of did all the work here. Shouldn’t I get to go first?”

“You call that work?” Stuart asked. “I’m jealous as hell.”

Mitch dropped back to the blanket. “You should be. Best pussy I ever ate.”

“How did she taste?” Stuart asked.

“Like honey and sunshine.”

Cinda laughed, leaned down, and ruffled his hair. “You keep up all these pretty compliments, and you’ll never get rid of me.”

“Wasn’t planning to,” Mitch said.

Cinda’s eyes widened, and her heart suddenly raced. She glanced between them. “Really?”

Mitch smiled. “We’re still in negotiations, remember?” Cinda nodded. “Worry about it later. Stuart’s getting antsy. He wants his dick sucked. The faster you get him done, the faster you’ll get to me.” He gave her a wink.

She turned her attention back to Stuart. His cock rose hard and long against his tight, muscled abdomen, twitching slightly as it waited eagerly. She’d felt it earlier, but now it seemed to offer a chance to have a whole new experience. She brushed her finger around the silky tip, one of the softest things she’d ever felt. She circled softly, dipping down to touch the small ridge then moving back up to play around the swollen head. Her finger came away wet,

and she stared at it for a moment then rubbed it against her thumb, enjoying the slide of her fingers against each other.

Cinda cupped his sac in her palm, feeling it tighten in her loose grip and liking the slow roll of his balls against her hand. It was even nicer than the feel of gold nuggets in her hands. She ran the flat of her hand along the long length, amazed at the softness that covered such hard, sturdy flesh. She licked her lips, aware that both men watched her. She felt naughty, almost wanton. Surely nice women didn't do this in broad daylight while another looked on. A little tingle went through her skin because she knew, whether right or wrong, she'd passed a milestone in her life and could not go back. She wondered if she even would if she could erase these last few days.

Erase the most wonderful days of my life?

She laughed.

"He does have that effect on most women," Mitch said.

"Fuck you." Stuart shot a glare toward his brother.

Cinda ran her finger over Stuart's sac again, and he shivered. She glanced up. "Don't mind me. I just get funny thoughts sometimes."

She licked the length of Stuart's cock, one long, quick slide then traced the swollen veins slowly with her tongue. She'd never tasted anything quite like it in her life and wanted to sample more. When Stuart clenched his hands at his sides, Cinda reveled in the new power that surged through her. Who would have thought one little swipe of her tongue could have such an effect? Oh, no, she could never go back to that other life. Not after this.

She rose higher and took his cock in her hand, pumping up and down, feeling the smooth glide of the silky flesh beneath her palm. Stuart seemed to like it because he moved his hands to her hair, and Cinda felt the tenseness of his fingers as he slid them to the back of her head. She cast a quick glance toward Mitch. He lay on his side, head propped on one elbow, watching intently. His large cock also jutted towards his stomach, and he lazily stroked the shaft, his hand sliding up and down in slow, steady motions.

When Cinda lowered her mouth over Stuart's cock, he lurched forward, and his cock slid farther into her mouth. Cinda tensed for a moment then opened her mouth wider and allowed it to slip deeper. She tongued the soft flesh as her lips closed around the shaft then she began to suck with a rhythm that made Stuart's fingers tighten in her hair. She felt the pulsing of his flesh in her mouth, tasted the bitter flavor of his juices, heard the hitch in his breath, and knew she was doing it right. She reached between his legs and ran the back of her nails over his sac, loving the way they pulled up slightly. She followed their movement, and Stuart sucked in a breath. She was going to make him come and hoped it would be memorable. Even Mitch's voice could not pull her from her mission.

"Fuck, Stu. You should see how hot she looks with your dick in her mouth."

"You should feel it," Stuart said.

"Maybe next time," Mitch said. "I'm almost done here."

Cinda slid her gaze toward Mitch and saw his hand moved furiously now, pumping his cock in hard, fast tugs that defied her imagination. It looked painful, but she doubted a man would put himself through pain to gain his pleasure. Gripping Stuart's hips, she took her cues from Mitch and began to move faster on Stuart's cock. She bobbed her head faster, sliding his cock in and out of her mouth in quick, steady strokes. Each movement shoved her nose against his groin where his coarse hairs tickled her, and each withdrawal brought her to the tip where she coiled her tongue around his head and sucked hard.

Stuart's breathing changed. She glanced up to see his chest rising and falling in hard, erratic movements. She met his hard, green stare. He seemed in another world, lost somewhere in the pleasurable sensations that coursed through his body, but he gave her a tiny smile that thrilled her heart and made her confidence soar. She wrapped one hand around his ass, letting her finger explore between the cheeks, and he bucked toward her, driving his cock deeper into her throat. She

swallowed against the sudden invasion, and Stuart cupped the back of her head, holding her tight. Within seconds, his cock pulsed wildly, and a burst of fluid shot to the back of her throat. She swallowed again, gulping down his cum as his hips pumped toward her. Gripping his ass harder, she dug her fingers into the skin, holding him tight and forcing his cock even farther into her throat.

Stuart trembled then slumped forward, his hands sliding over her shoulders. His cock beat several more pulses, and she pulled away slowly, sucking the head before his cock popped from between her lips and slapped against his body. She glanced up and met his smile. He knelt on the blanket and yanked her against him, giving her a gentle but thorough kiss on the lips then collapsed in a heap.

Cinda turned in time to see Mitch drop back to the blanket. He still held his softening cock in his hand and thick ropes of creamy fluid covered his stomach. He smiled and said, "Best sex I never had."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Cinda said.

Stuart raked sweaty hair away from his face. "That was something else."

"Hey, quit hogging the girl," Mitch said.

Cinda dove toward him. She slid up his body, feeling the warm slide of his cum against her stomach. "There's plenty of me for both of you."

"That's the kind of thing I like to hear," Mitch said.

* * * *

Stuart practically staggered to his feet. He felt as though his strength had vanished. "Let's get dressed."

"I'm feeling a little bit lazy here," Mitch said. "Why don't you get dressed and let us take a nap?"

He curled his arm around Cinda's shoulder and tugged her closer. Stuart knew life couldn't get better than this. He watched Cinda snuggle into his brother's body like she'd always been there, a bright,

shining treasure in their otherwise boring existence of work, work, and more work. Not that he minded work because he loved it, and he loved the results of their work even more. He and his brother were wealthier than two men had a right to be. He studied the woman lying on the blanket. He could change her life, and she could change theirs, as well. But he had to be sure. For Mitch's sake.

Stuart tugged on his pants. Mitch might be a lost cause, but Stuart knew how to get Cinda's attention.

"I was thinking of taking a ride up to the clearing to check on the mine shaft."

Cinda bolted upright. "A ride?"

Stuart cocked his head. That wasn't exactly what he'd expected. "We could walk, but I thought—"

Cinda lurched to her feet and reached for her dress. "On the horses?" She stumbled on the blanket, trying to get her legs into the dress then shoved her arms into the sleeves before Stuart could comprehend what she'd said. Had she missed the words *mine shaft*? A mine shaft potentially filled with *gold*? She struggled with the buttons for a moment and was halfway done before she realized she'd missed one. She huffed.

Stuart shrugged into his shirt. "Sure, on the horses. They like that clearing. There's a bigger stream up there and a pond. We could even go for a swim if—"

He grinned because Cinda had once again buttoned her dress lopsided. She plopped to the blanket and tugged on her boots. Mitch leaned up on one elbow to watch her.

"Can I ride Goldy?" Cinda hopped to her feet. Stuart had never seen a woman dress faster in his life, though he had to admit she hadn't done a very good job. She looked adorable, but he'd have to get her some clothes that fit. She put her hands on her hips and glanced between them. "Can I?"

Mitch seemed to be lost in some kind of haze. "Can you what?"

“Ride Goldy!” She grabbed his hand and tried to tug Mitch to his feet. “Come *on*! I’ve never ridden a horse before.” She finally gave up and dropped Mitch back to the blanket. She spun around and raced toward the horses.

Mitch sat up and raked the hair back from his face. “What the hell is going on? I was pretty comfortable here.”

Stuart stared as Cinda led the horses back toward the barn. They followed her without leads. He heard excited babble drift around the corner of the cottage. He shook his head. “That is *not* what I expected.”

Mitch yanked on his pants, lifting his ass to pull them up his legs. “We were at the shaft two days ago. Can’t we take a day off once in a while?”

Stuart shook his head and peered at Mitch. “Are you fucking with me? Just yesterday—”

“Forget about yesterday. Why do you want to go to the shaft?”

“I wasn’t actually planning on working.” Stuart glanced toward the rear of the property. “I was kind of...testing her I guess.”

Mitch tugged on his boots and glanced up as he laced them. He tugged so hard on the laces, Stuart hoped they didn’t break. It would be hard to work with unlaced boots and another trip to Deadwood wasn’t slated for a couple weeks. Mitch’s eyes spit green fire. “Testing her? What the hell is wrong with you?” Stuart glanced toward the back of the cottage, wondering the same thing. “How are we going to get her to stay if you don’t *trust* her?”

Stuart’s brow drew down, and he swung his face back toward his brother. “*You* trust her? That doesn’t sound like the Mitchell Dare I know.”

“She hasn’t touched the jar of nuggets out in the barn.”

Stuart shrugged. “And that means something to you?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Last night she could have grabbed the gold and high-tailed it down the mountainside. If she’d have been in league with that shooter, they’d have been long gone. I sure as hell

wasn't in any condition to chase her, and you wouldn't have left me there after being shot. She knew that."

"So you trust her now?"

"Maybe," Mitch said, rising to his feet. "Besides, Goldy likes her."

"Who the hell is Goldy?"

"Our horse, dumb ass. If Goldy likes her, it's good enough for me."

"Since when do you give a damn what a horse thinks? Jesus, Mitch, I'm confused. What about Missy?"

"Fuck Missy. Not every woman has an agenda."

"We don't really know if Cinda has an agenda yet. I'd wager she's got some kind of secret, something she needs a lot of money for. She seemed pretty determined to keep this claim and everything she found."

"She earned it." Mitch clapped Stuart on the back. "You've got to learn to be more trusting, brother."

"I have to learn to be more trusting? Are you shitting me?"

"Let's go!" Cinda's urgent voice burst from the back of the cottage, prompting Mitch to reach for his shirt.

"Another gold digger would come in handy around here," Mitch said, shrugging into his shirt. "And she's the prettiest one I've ever seen."

He walked away. Stuart smiled.

* * * *

Mitch rounded the corner and saw that Cinda had already attempted to saddle both horses. He gave the job a cursory glance then proceeded to tighten the straps. Cinda cooed softly to Goldy, running her hands over the horse's face, then moved to the other.

"Midnight, Goldy, and I can't wait to see the clearing," she said.

He watched as she ran her hand down the black horse's flank. Dark as midnight. He shook his head, smiling. "I'm glad everyone is excited, but the horses have seen the clearing plenty of times."

Cinda bounced on the balls of her feet. "But not with me. Every experience is different depending on the company, right, girls?" Cinda poked her head around Midnight's face. "Don't you agree, Mitch?"

He nodded. "I imagine you're right. I'm kind of eager to see the clearing today, too. It's very pretty up there."

"Do you own it?"

"Yep. Stuart and I staked out a very large claim. We studied the area and followed the traces until we determined where the mother lode might be."

"What's that?" Cinda scrunched her face.

"The mother lode is the principal vein. The source of the gold, usually buried in rock either deep in the earth or inside a mountain. We determined it was inside the mountain and had gradually eroded, washing some of the chunks into the stream in front of the cabin."

"The ones I found aren't valuable?"

"Sure, they are. Nuggets are great and can make a man rich—"

"Or *woman*," Cinda said.

"Or woman," he said, nodding. "But there's more money to be had in finding the mother lode. Everyone wants to discover a mother lode. There's a huge thrill that comes with finding the vein."

Cinda put her hand over her heart. "I can't even imagine *more* thrill."

"You're right. I remember my first glimpse of gold, winking and glittering in the water."

Cinda laughed. "Oh, I wasn't thinking of *that*." She blushed and ducked her head toward Goldy. "I was thinking of...well, you know."

Mitch walked toward her and cupped her face in his hands. He dropped a gentle kiss on her lips. "You're one of a kind, aren't you?"

She smiled prettily. "I'm not sure you could handle two of me."

Mitch's brow rose. "But you think you can handle two of us?"

“I like a challenge,” Cinda said.

He leaned down to kiss her again, this time more thoroughly, but at the sound of Stuart’s voice, his hands slid from her face.

“I like a challenge, too,” Stuart said. “Let’s get going. I feel like a swim.” He slid a rifle into the carrier, grabbed the reins, and led Midnight out of the stable.

“Come on, pretty lady,” Mitch said. “Grab your horse, and let’s go.”

He loved the look that sparked in her eyes. She took the reins in her hands, and Goldy followed her out of the stable.

Mitch glanced at the jar of gold nuggets again and smiled.

Chapter 7

Cinda has never been more excited in her life. Her body could barely contain all the feelings that swamped through her. She'd done so much in the last day. She'd found gold, gotten her first real kiss, and had two men licking and stroking every part of her body. Now she knew that, even after all of that, life could get better. Being on the back of an animal that trusted you seemed like the greatest gift of all. She leaned forward and ran her hands across Goldy's mane then leaned back into the shelter of Mitch's arms.

They traveled up an incline, a small foothill that led to the higher hills beyond, then through a strand of woods for about an hour. She swayed in rhythm with Goldy's movements, feeling the soft breeze on her skin and the sunlight on her face as it winked in and out of the trees. She let Mitch's scent envelop her in a sea of aroma, the musky smell of his skin, the tangy and sharp smell of his cum on their flesh. His hand felt warm and strong where it nestled against her belly. Stuart rode ahead on Midnight. He occasionally glanced over his shoulder and gave her a smile. She'd never had a better day in her entire life.

They broke through the strand of trees to enter a large clearing filled with colorful wildflowers and dark green grass. Sunlight blazed in the center and dappled the shadows with sparkling glints of gold like nuggets in the dark waters of a stream. Across the clearing, a small river wound through the grassland, gurgling in riotous abandon and capering over rocks that dotted the bed here and there like giant stepping stones. The water collected into a large pool before it

escaped the other side and ripped through the landscape to plunge down the face of a shallow cliff.

Cinda's mouth dropped open.

"I've never seen anything so pretty in my entire life," she murmured.

Mitch leaned down to snuggle his face in her neck. "Look in a mirror lately?"

She giggled and lifted her face toward him. His mouth settled over hers in a heart-stopping kiss. His arms tightened around her, and his mouth pressed hard against her lips, his tongue sweeping inside to capture hers.

"We're here," Stuart said.

Mitch reluctantly lifted his mouth from hers and gave his brother a hard stare. "You have the worst timing, you know that?"

Stuart laughed and slid from Midnight. He looped the reins around a nearby branch then strode toward them. He lifted his arms, and Cinda swung her leg over and jumped into his arms. He held her against his chest, and she wound her arms around his neck. Tilting her face, she settled her mouth against his and gave him a long, leisurely kiss, vaguely aware that Mitch had dismounted and stood tapping his boot against the ground.

"It's going to get a little tedious taking turns," he said.

Cinda glanced up with a smile. "Who said anything about taking turns?" She wiggled in Stuart's arms, and he released her. She dropped to the ground and gave them a smile. "No one said you couldn't both have me at once. I assume that's possible, right?" Their mouths dropped open. "You said earlier you were getting me ready, so I figured it out on my own. But after our swim."

She turned and raced toward the pond. She stripped off her clothes as she ran, leaving a trail of cloth and footwear. She glanced over her shoulder, laughing as she watched them follow.

She dove in, and her heart nearly stopped at the icy chill of the water. When she surfaced, the breath stuttered in her chest, and she

pulled in a huge gulp of air then dove back down. She swam underwater to the center of the pool, relishing the feel of the icy water on her hot skin. She burst upwards, flinging hair away from her face. She treaded water, trying to find enough breath to speak. Her teeth chattered. "You didn't warn me it was so cold."

"You didn't ask," Mitch said. He cautiously entered the water, sinking lower and lower as he walked away from the bank.

"Smartest thing she's probably ever done." Stuart followed Mitch into the water and dove underneath. When he surfaced near her, he shook himself like a wet dog. Mitch was still only waist deep. Stuart turned to Cinda. "He's such a pussy."

"I'm wounded, remember?"

"And you're a lot smarter than we are," Cinda said. "I think my heart stopped."

She swam for several minutes, circling them and watching as Stuart splashed his brother with water, trying to get him to take the plunge. Finally, Mitch dove beneath the surface and came up sputtering.

"Jesus, that's fucking cold. Why do we come here?"

Cindy kicked and swam toward him. "Because it's the most beautiful place on earth?"

Mitch smiled. "That could be it."

Cinda rolled to her back and floated, staring upwards at the deep blue sky. The hot sun blazed down on her chilled skin and warmed her slightly. She closed her eyes and drifted in peace and silence, the only sounds coming from the two men as they swam through the pond with smooth, even glides, sending tiny ripples splashing over her body. She thought about their hands, their mouths, and the hard cock that she'd licked and sucked. Her stomach clenched with a grinding ache. Her pussy spasmed, and her clit began to vibrate as she remembered their heated touches and the thrill of their tongues seeking hers.

She wanted them. Now.

She rolled over and began a slow crawl to the edge of the pool. She walked onto the bank, smoothing her hands over her body to push away droplets of water, then wringing out her hair and pulling it over her shoulder. She turned to find both men treading water in the center, their eyes locked on her with heated gazes.

“Anyone want to warm me up?”

They didn’t answer. They started to swim, each glancing at the other as their arms plowed through the water. When they reached the bank, they both stumbled trying to get out of the pond. Cinda dropped to the grass and stretched her arms over her head. She wiggled her body and lifted her hips.

“I’m all yours. Do what you like.”

The men dropped to the grass. Cinda thought the day couldn’t get better, but she was wrong.

* * * *

Mitch gazed down at the beautiful woman stretched out beside him like the best present he’d ever gotten in his life. Her hair shone in the sunlight, blazing against the dark green of the grass, the luminous shimmer he’d previously associated only with gold. The sunlight paled in comparison to the brightness of the smile that skimmed her lips. Her blue eyes seemed a beacon, luring him closer, promising him everything.

He dropped to his knees and cupped her breast, and her body arched toward him, pressing the rounded mound of aching temptation into his hand. The softness of her skin continued to amaze him. He leaned over and sucked a nipple into his mouth, and she gave a soft moan as she threaded her fingers through his hair and tugged him closer. He sucked hard, drawing her skin into his mouth and tasting the cool freshness of the water mixed with the taste of hot, enticing woman.

Reaching between her legs, he pushed two fingers into her pussy. They slid in easily, gliding on the moisture of her body. The warmth felt incredible on his cold skin. He suddenly wanted to eat her again, push his tongue into her recesses to lick her juice, and suck her swollen clit to feel the burning throb as it pulsed in pleasure. Her pussy spasmed, and her inner muscles gripped his fingers. Despite his frozen skin, his cock burst to life, growing, lengthening, and pounding in want. What he really wanted right now was to thrust into her, feel her muscles clench around his cock until he was drained and milked dry. He wanted her legs to wrap around his and feel the tightening of her body as she came. He needed to see desire and pure want in her eyes. Then he would know he'd made the right choice.

He circled her clit with his thumb, and she rolled toward him, gripping his cock in her hand. It pulsed wildly, wanting to bury in her soft, warm flesh. He lifted his face, her nipple popping out of his mouth with a wet noise. She raised her hand and cupped his jaw, staring into his eyes.

"Fuck me, Mitch. Put your cock into me and make me come." She tugged on his dick, drawing it toward her heat.

Her eyes blazed with dark blue fire, simmering with heat. His body burst into flames beneath her gaze. He rolled, and she moved smoothly, her hips lifting as she straddled his thighs. Holding his cock, she lowered herself down onto his body, his dick sinking into a hot, burning pussy that clenched around him and felt like nothing he'd felt in his life.

When Cinda moaned, and her head dropped forward, he was lost.

* * * *

Stuart watched his brother's cock being engulfed inch by inch by Cinda's swollen pussy. The soft blond hair above her pussy glistened with her juices in the rays of the sun. He'd never seen anything so arousing in his life. He raked the hair back from his face, staring as

Mitch's hands wrapped around her hips and slowly lifted and pulled. Cinda rode him, her thighs clenching and releasing as she rose then dropped back down, each time sinking farther onto the hard, pulsing cock that drove into her.

He thought vaguely of leaving them alone to enjoy some time together, but her words came back to him like a bolt of lightning splitting through a dark sky.

No one said you couldn't both have me at once.

If that hadn't been an invitation, he didn't know what was. Time to take matters into his own hands and see what fate brought.

He moved behind them and swung one leg across Mitch's. His brother cast a glance toward him then immediately went back to gazing at the face of the woman above him. Stuart slid his hands around her, cupping her full, bouncing breasts, and squeezed. She rolled her head, and her damp hair skittered across his chest, tickling and causing his dick to lunge against her back. He flicked her nipples with his thumbs then took them between his fingers, rolling and tugging to match the rhythm of his brother's thrusts into her pussy. She flung her head back against Stuart's chest, and he saw her bite her lip, tugging that luscious flesh into her mouth.

"Harder," she whispered.

Stuart didn't know if she meant him or Mitch, but he twisted her nipples harder, and she jerked backwards at the same time Mitch gave a powerful thrust. She groaned and slumped forward, almost limp against his hands.

He moved one hand between her legs and began to finger her clit. Her body shivered then almost quaked in his arms. She was so wet, so ready, and so lost in the sensations pulsing through her pussy. He slid his finger up and down over the wet, swollen nub, gathering her juices then moved his hand under her ass.

When she lifted, he ran his wet finger between her cheeks and plunged into her small hole. She jerked upwards and clenched against him but immediately pressed backwards, pushing his finger deeper

inside. He let her set the movement. As she rode Mitch, his finger slid in and out of her hole with swift but gentle thrusts. He moved his other hand back to her breast, gathering it in his hand, and felt the thundering beat of her heart.

He took advantage of her preoccupation. He removed his finger and heard a soft sound of protest escape her lip. He spit on his hand, then reached again, spearing two fingers inside of her. She gasped but pushed backwards with a groan.

“Lord’s mercy, Stuart. More. Give me more.”

He aimed to please. He withdrew and spit again, then thrust three fingers into her, twisting gently. She rolled her hips, forward then backwards, then side to side, forcing his fingers deeper as her ass clenched down hard.

“Your cock, Stu,” she murmured.

He lifted his gaze to Mitch who looked back with hooded eyes and smiled. Mitch reached out and slid his finger down Cinda’s clit. Cinda clamped down hard on his fingers, and Stuart couldn’t wait another minute.

He tugged on his cock and withdrew his finger. He wiped his pre-cum between her ass cheeks then spit again, coating his dick as best he could. He lined up the head, and as her body trembled with Mitch’s stroking, he shoved forward, his cock sinking an inch into her ass.

Cinda’s head dropped forward, and her hands curled into fists against Mitch’s chest. “Don’t stop. Deeper.”

Deeper was something Stuart could do. He wasn’t a miner for nothing.

* * * *

Cinda tensed for a split second then let her mind loose. She concentrated on the touch of Mitch’s finger gliding over her clit. The sensations crested and swelled, forcing all other thoughts from her mind as he pressed in small circles, driving her higher and higher to

chase that elusive rabbit. When her body trembled again, she knew it was close. She drove backwards just as Stuart drove forward, impaling her on his cock. Mitch continued to finger her clit until the wave swamped her and pulled her under, deeper and deeper until her breath stuttered and she gasped for air. Her body released with a violent shudder, her pussy pulsing against Mitch's cock, gripping tight. Mitch came with a shudder of his own, his cum bursting through her with such force his cock throbbed with a terrifying rhythm within her. Mitch gripped her hips, yanking her down hard and held her tight as his cock beat against the walls of her pussy.

Stuart continued to move, his cock gliding in and out of her ass with a pressure and grind that threatened to steal her control. But as Mitch's cock pulsed with tiny aftershocks, he continued to rock inside her. She leaned forward and rubbed her clit against the coarse hairs on Mitch's pelvis. The scratch and slide of them tightened her clit into a hard bud that began to pulse once again. When she felt Stuart's hand tighten on her waist, digging hard into her flesh, she pressed hard and came again with a violent explosion of sensation. Her pussy and ass muscles clenched, and Stuart bucked against her.

A wave of warm liquid shot into her then dripped down the crease of her ass. She drew in a deep breath and practically collapsed against Mitch. He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his chest.

Slowly Stuart withdrew from her, and the warmth and pressure of him vanished. Vaguely aware of the splash as he dove back into the pond, she nestled closer against Mitch until she felt his lips in her hair.

"You're a treasure," Cinda murmured, "both of you. I never thought I'd be so rich."

Mitch just tightened his arms around her.

"You about ready to cool down?" She rolled over to find Stuart staring down at them.

“Not at all,” Cinda said. She’d never felt so wonderful, so warm and at peace.

“Oh, I think you are.”

Stuart hunkered down and reached out. Icy water dripped down on her heated flesh, causing her to jerk into a sitting position. Mitch pulled her back to the grass, and Stuart held out a smooth, flat stone and laid it on the tip of her breast. Her skin erupted into goose flesh, and the nipple pebbled. He trailed the stone down the valley between her breasts, across the taut, tense line of her stomach and into the crease of her pussy lips, touching the cold rock to the hot, swollen nub of her clit.

She reached up and yanked Stuart toward her, devouring his mouth with hers. His tongue slid into her mouth, sweeping through every inch of it as he plunged two cold fingers into her pussy. He curled them upwards, stroking and teasing, and trying to coax her into an orgasm. She was happy to go anywhere he led. When Mitch reached out and pressed down on the cold stone against her clit, she shivered, and he slowly rubbed it back and forth.

Stuart stopped teasing her. His fingers slid in and out of her wet pussy with determination, thrusting hard and fast as Mitch tightened the rock on her clit and moved it in tight little circles. She arched her back, and her legs tensed. Her body exploded in another rush of dizzying sensation. She trembled and gasped, her heart thundering with a wild, primitive beat in her chest. She didn’t know where this side of her had come from, but she had every intention of keeping it forever.

Mitch leaned down and gave her a kiss, followed by his brother. The sun felt so warm on her sweaty skin. When they drew away, she was so sated and satisfied, she curled up on her side and tucked her arm under her head. She watched them both dive back into the pond but couldn’t stop from drifting off to sleep.

* * * *

She blinked her eyes and sat up. The men had disappeared, but Goldy and Midnight chomped contently on some blades of grass. She grabbed her clothes and pulled them over her body, noticing the slight twinges in her over-used muscles and in her thoroughly satisfied private parts. Not that she was complaining because she wasn't. She'd happily feel like this every day for the rest of her life.

She patted the horses, peering through the dim light. The men hadn't been kidding when they said sunlight disappeared early in the woods. The sun had already ducked behind the hills and bathed the clearing in heavy shadows. She went to the pond and splashed some water on her sweaty face then tucked her hair behind her ears. After glancing around, she decided to walk a little bit north to see the creek.

She'd walked about ten minutes when a glimmer of dazzling light caught her attention. Her heart sped up, and she hunkered down. There, amid the rocks and debris, lay a chunk of gold the size of her palm. She dipped her hand into the icy water and scooped it up, pressing into the sides, examining it from all angles. She held it up to what meager light she could find.

It's bigger than the others. And so beautiful. I could make a fortune with this.

"But it's not mine," she said. "I don't have a claim."

She gave it one last look then reluctantly pushed it into her pocket and continued walking. After another few minutes, she heard Mitch's voice. "There she is!"

She turned to see them rounding a bend around a strand of trees. She sauntered toward them, digging the gold out of her pocket. She put her hands behind her back and gave them a big smile.

"Wanna see something?"

"Love to," Stuart said.

She held out her hand then turned her fist over and opened her fingers. Both men glanced at the gold then at each other. The looks on

their faces made her stomach feel funny, and her heart sank. They didn't trust her after all.

"I wasn't going to keep it," Cinda said. "Really I wasn't. Just saying the truth. Mitch said it works in most situations, and I should try it. Since I found the nugget on your property, it belongs to you. Take it." She swung her hand back and forth between them but they ignored her. She shook her fist. "Guys? Please. Someone take it before I change my mind."

Stuart glanced at the gold again then peered at her. He cupped her elbow and pulled her closer. "Where did you find it?"

"Where? Well...right here." She swept out her arm to encompass the entire stream.

Mitch's brows drew down. "In *this* stream?"

She nodded. "I figure maybe it's just too heavy. It sank down and hasn't managed to travel very far yet like the smaller ones could."

Stuart finally took the gold from her hand. "Cinda, this stream doesn't converge with the one by the cottage."

"It doesn't?"

Stuart shook his head. "No. It goes through the pond, drops down a ridge, and parallels the small one, but in the ravine behind the cottage."

Cinda pursed her lips. "What does that mean?"

Mitch smiled. "It means, sugarbunch, you may have found another vein."

Her eyes widened. "Really? That's a good thing, right?"

"A very good thing," Mitch said. "We might all get a little richer."

Stuart tugged on her waistband and pulled her closer. He dropped the chunk of gold into her pocket. Puzzled, she reached inside and wrapped her hand around it. "I'll hold on to it till we get back to the cabin. It's safe with me."

"It's yours," Stuart said. "Partner."

Cinda squealed with delight and launched herself into his arms. He caught her easily against his chest and swung her in a circle. “Partner? Really? That’s the best name you’ve ever called me!”

Mitch shuffled his feet in the grass then toed a rock and flipped it into the stream. “There might be another one, even better.”

For a moment, Cinda froze. She gazed into Stuart eyes and saw a shock she thought must mirror her own. Both of them twisted their faces toward Mitch at the same time.

“Mitch?” Stuart said. “What are you thinking?”

Mitch flushed. “I’m thinking if we’re going to have a partner, it should be more permanent. Three can dig better than two, and I swear, this girl has a gift.”

Cinda nodded enthusiastically. “I do have a way of finding nuggets.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Mitch said.

She wrapped her hand around his neck and tugged him closer to them. Her heart thumped erratically in her chest, and she could barely breathe, but she forced the words out. “Then what did you mean?”

“I meant...Cinda Parks, you’re the most amazing woman I’ve...*we’ve* ever met. You’ve brought more light and laughter into our lives than I ever dreamed possible. When a man’s been through as much life as we have, he starts to know what he wants and needs. And, Cinda, I...*we* need *you*. I can’t imagine waking up tomorrow and not having you here to share our lives. Would you have an interest in becoming Mrs. Dare?”

Cinda tugged him toward her. “Mitchell Dare, you have such a way with words. But you talk too much. Kiss me.” His mouth swooped down hard on hers.

“Longest speech he ever made,” Stuart said.

When Mitch lifted his head, he said, “Shut up, Stu.” He glanced up shyly at Cinda. “Is that a yes? Will you marry me, us, whatever?”

“Yes! Yes! It’s an absolute *yes!*” She dove into his arms then wrapped her arm around Stuart and pulled him into the hug. She

kissed them each on the cheek. "I don't know how being with two men works legally, but I figure we can buy our way out of any problems, right?"

"Damn right," Stuart said. "A little gold goes a long way. I'd say with two mother lodes, we could make you queen of the Dakotas, maybe even the entire continent."

Cinda smiled. "I don't want to be queen. I just want to be Mrs. Dare. I can't imagine there's anything better than that."

Chapter 8

She wore the best of her two dresses, a blue calico print that almost fit her. Her breasts strained against the confines of the fabric, and every time she took a deep breath, the buttons threatened to burst. She put her grandmother's brooch on a ribbon around her neck and brushed her hair until it shone. She piled it up high on her head, allowing small ringlets to cascade down her neck. She felt pretty and special, but more importantly, she felt loved. Her heart hadn't stopped fluttering since Mitch had asked her to become Mrs. Dare.

They mounted Goldy and Midnight for the ride to Deadwood. Cinda nestled back against Stuart's chest, scarcely believing that by the end of the day she would be a bride, probably the most unusual bride in the history of the Dakotas, or maybe even the continent. How many women were lucky enough to find one good man, let alone two?

Of course, one thing remained unresolved.

An hour after they'd left the cabin, Mitch and Stuart launched into the same topic they'd been arguing for the past three days.

"I'm telling you," Stuart said, "she should marry me."

Refusing to get caught in their discussion, Cinda held in a laugh and let her gaze wander over the shafts of sunlight peeking through the trees. She didn't care which man she married, for in her heart, she knew she'd be married to both.

"Any particular reason she should marry you?" Mitch called over his shoulder.

"I usually handle the business transactions."

Mitch grunted. "This isn't exactly business."

"It's a partnership of sorts," Stuart said. "That puts it in the realm of business."

Cinda let her gaze slide toward Goldy who ambled slowly down the incline in front of them then looked up to the man in the saddle. Mitch stared for a moment into the trees.

"That's exactly your problem," Mitch said. "A marriage might be a partnership, but there's a lot more to it than that."

"And you're an expert?" Stuart asked.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, Mitch tugged on the reins, and Goldy came to a halt. Mitch turned in the saddle. Her heart sped up as his gaze fell on her.

Mitch tipped his hat back. "I'm no expert, but I *do* know that what I feel for this woman falls well outside the parameters of business." His gaze shifted to Stuart. "Besides, you owe me."

"For what?" Stuart asked.

"I could have shot her dead the first day, no questions asked. I think I should get a prize for that."

Cinda laughed and tilted her face to Stuart.

He rolled his eyes. "He has such a twisted view of life. I give up. Mrs. Mitchell Dare it is."

* * * *

When they reached the bottom of the incline and broke through the tree cover, Deadwood appeared right in front of them as if by magic. Overwhelmed by the size and amount of people, Cinda could do nothing but stare in wonder at the amazing collection of structures lining the rutted paths serving as streets and the odd characters roaming between the buildings.

"It's so much bigger than Sturgis," she murmured.

Stuart tightened his arm around her waist. "It gets bigger every day. The telegraph came through last winter, and I'd be willing to bet we have a railroad soon."

Mitch led Goldy onto what appeared to be the main street, and Midnight followed. Cinda's gaze roamed over the banks, saloons, merchants, and dealers. The streets teemed with people moving in all directions, and horses vied for a clear path to travel any distance at all. Several rough-looking men stood at an outdoor stall, haggling over the vendor's pricing for packets of meat wrapped in bundles. Another group of unsavory-looking men leered at her from an alleyway, and she caught a flash of a frowning face before one of them rounded the corner into an alley. She pursed her lips, thinking the man looked rather familiar, but then decided she couldn't possibly know him. She knew very few people in the Dakotas and absolutely no one in Deadwood. She turned her attention back to the sights and sounds surrounding her.

Miners and loggers strolled from the livery and headed down to the edge of town where an array of small buildings flanked a meandering, rutted path near a large dancehall. Each tiny structure had either a closed door or one opened to reveal a rather scantily-clad woman. Cinda gulped as she realized these were some of Deadwood's whores. This had been the offer Barney Dent had made to her, and had she not fled, her stepfather would have sold her as another occupant.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" Stuart asked.

"For changing my life."

"Seems that goes both ways, doll." Stuart pointed toward the largest building she'd seen since she'd arrived in the Dakotas. "That's where we're heading. The Deadwood Hotel. Might not be the best place to have a honeymoon, but it's the closest we'll get to civilization without a very long stagecoach ride."

"It looks beautiful." Cinda smiled as she gazed at the two-story clapboard building. A wide, covered balcony wrapped around the top floor and offered a view of the entire town. She hoped their rooms led out onto the porch. She envisioned her two husbands wrapped in the

light of the stars twinkling in the night sky. She sighed and leaned back to look up at Stuart. "Will I be Mrs. Dare tonight?"

"That's the plan," Stuart said. "We just have to settle in and find the preacher."

Cinda glanced around, looking for a church steeple, but the most visible landmark of any other town she'd ever passed through seemed noticeably absent in Deadwood. "Does the town even have a preacher?"

Stuart laughed. "Not exactly your traditional kind, but he can usually be found down near Chinatown at the cribs." Stuart nodded in the direction of the small buildings where the whores plied their trade. "Not much call for daily services around here, but he does like to check in with the girls and make sure they're being taken care of. He rotates Sunday services in the larger saloons."

Mitch slid from Goldy and lifted his arms. Cinda jumped down, and he swooped her up and gathered her close. She laughed and kicked her legs.

"I'm a big girl, Mitch. I can certainly walk a couple of feet."

"Wouldn't want you to get those shiny boots all dirty, sweetcheeks. You worked too hard to look this good for us."

He strode through the mud and settled her on the wooden walkway then went back to Goldy and grabbed the saddlebag. He handed the reins to Stuart.

"We'll get the room while you settle the horses and find the reverend." He gave Stuart a hard glare when his brother glanced down the street. "Don't get sidetracked."

Cinda followed Stuart's gaze. "Stuart Dare! Would you visit a whore on your wedding day?"

The brothers laughed as Stuart tipped his hat and gave her a wink. He nudged Midnight and angled her toward a clear path in the throng, Goldy following. Mitch tossed the saddlebag over his shoulder.

"Stuart wouldn't let a whore suck his dick if a free fuck came along with it. But don't let him near the hardware store. He'll come

out with more equipment than we need, and some of it we won't even be able to use." Sure enough, Cinda watched as Stuart slowed down in front of the hardware store on the corner, leaning down to peer into the smoke-hazed glass. "He never saw a tool he didn't like."

Cinda turned and wrapped her arm around Mitch, snuggling into his chest. "And I've never saw a Dare I didn't like."

"You haven't met them all," Mitch said. "Believe me, you'd change your mind."

* * * *

They checked into the hotel, and Mitch got them a room that opened onto the balcony. They arranged for a celebration dinner to be served that evening, and when Stuart returned an hour later with the preacher and a shiny new ax in tow, Cinda became Mrs. Mitchell Dare. The disheveled and somewhat forgetful preacher almost walked out of the hotel with her most treasured thing—her new marriage certificate. She practically tackled him to the ground to retrieve it and stuffed it into her bodice with a happy smile. She slid her hands through her new husbands' arms, trying to act as though something this wonderful happened every day in her life. Her gaze, however, kept returning to the thin gold band that now adorned her finger. A wife with not one but two husbands.

They had their meal in a private alcove tucked off the main dining room and nestled behind a red velvet curtain. The table had been laid with bone china and crystal glasses, and glistening candelabrum held tall candles that sputtered and flared, casting a soft amber glow in the room. The Deadwood might not have been as elegant as a Cincinnati hotel, but Cinda thought it couldn't possibly be any more romantic. Her new husbands wore satin waistcoats and string ties, and she doubted more handsome men existed this side of the Mississippi, and possibly not even on the other side.

A tall, lanky man swept in and out, bringing a platter of beef roast, bowls of potatoes and vegetables, and a heaping basket of fresh baked bread. Stuart ordered several bottles of wine, and they took turns offering toasts and sipping from each other's glasses. The men seemed determined to fill her so full she couldn't move. Cinda's excitement made it nearly impossible to eat, but she dutifully took each bite they offered her, savoring the delicious meal, mostly because she hadn't cooked it herself.

The server brought in a cherry cobbler and cut them huge slices. As he slid the final plate onto the table, the velvet curtain swung back, and a young man, not much beyond a boy, sidled inside. He paused, and Cinda eyed his small frame as he hovered in the shadow, drawing back against the curtain.

The young man cleared his throat. "I'm looking for Mitchell or Stuart Dare."

Stuart set his wine glass on the table. "You've found them both."

Cinda tilted her head and studied the boy. He shot a glance toward her and worried his bottom lip with his teeth. The boy wore his broad-brimmed hat down low on his brow, and in the shadow of the brim, she had a hard time making out any features at all, except that he seemed fair and petite for a male, no matter how young. He shoved his hand forward, and Cinda saw it trembled slightly, rustling the paper he held toward them.

"Telegram, sirs," he said.

Mitch leaned forward in his chair. "How did you find us here?"

The boy shuffled his feet. "The operator saw you coming into town, sir."

"Where'd you come from, kid?" Stuart said. "Haven't seen hide or hair of you in the telegraph office before."

The boy jerked forward like a puppet and dropped the telegram on the table. "I-I arrived in town last week, sir. On the stage from Cheyenne. This is my first day of work." He pulled the hat lower on his brow. "Should I wait for a response, sir?"

“Don’t know yet.” Stuart reached out and plucked the message from the table. He glanced at Cinda as he unfolded the paper. “Sorry for the interruption, doll. Can’t imagine what this is. Our agents only message once a month, and our manager already checked in.” Stuart perused the paper for a moment then lurched to his feet. “Son of a bitch!” The chair rocked precariously then crashed to the floor. The boy uttered a terrified squeak and backed away from the table.

Stuart crumpled the paper in a tight fist then shoved it against Mitch’s chest.

“Do I need to ask?” Mitch said.

“Just read the goddamn thing,” Stuart snapped.

Mitch unrolled the paper then gave Stuart a disgusted look. “Would have been easier to read without all these wrinkles.”

“Is there a response, sir?” the boy asked quietly.

Stuart stalked around the table and grabbed his hat. “You can bet your sweet ass there’s a response, and it’s probably going to take more than one. I’ll go to the telegraph office myself.” He flipped a coin in the boy’s direction. As the boy dove for it, Stuart practically knocked the kid over as he flung back the velvet curtain and vanished. The coin dropped to the floor, and the boy grabbed the edge of the table, trying to steady himself. When Cinda reached to help him, his head snapped up. His eyes widened, then he jerked away from her, and his sudden movement caused the hat to tip back on his head. The glow of the candlelight blazed brightly across his face, and Cinda peered into a pair of large brown eyes shaded by long, dark lashes. Dark brown hair, thick and straight, tumbled down to fall onto thin shoulders. The sweet, pretty face and silky locks did not belong to a boy.

The young woman slammed the hat back on her head and furiously tucked her hair back up. Mitch continued to read the telegram, completely oblivious. Cinda nodded as the girl continued to stare at her. Finally she captured the coin, pressed it into the girl’s hand, and gave her a wink.

“Thank you, young man.”

“Thank *you*, ma’am.” The girl studied Cinda for a moment. “Do I know you? Have we met?”

Cinda shook her head. “I’ve never been to Deadwood before.”

The girl tilted her face, and a dark curl slipped out from under her hat. She pursed her lips, then spun on her heel and vanished through the curtain.

“Deadwood sure is interesting,” Cinda said.

Before she had a chance to contemplate the girl posing as a boy and her curious reaction, Mitch slammed the telegram to the table and leaned back in his chair. “Fucking hell,” he muttered.

“Is there a problem with one of your other mines?” Cinda asked.

“Worse,” Mitch snarled. “Our sister is getting on a goddamn train as we speak.”

Cinda’s eyes widened. “You have a *sister*?”

* * * *

The last thing Mitch wanted to do was ruin the evening by talking about the ball of fury otherwise known as their sister, Charlotte. He avoided the subject of the telegram for as long as he could, but when Stuart had been gone nearly an hour, he started to talk. Cinda nibbled at the cherry cobbler and sipped wine, listening intently and nodding occasionally.

They’d struck out from Ohio right before their thirteenth birthday. He and Stuart had no regrets as they said farewell to a farm suffering from neglect and a mother and father they hoped to never see again. Years later, however, they ran across a farmer they’d known in Ohio who’d also set out for greener pastures and the promise of the west. He told them their ma had delivered a baby girl several months after they’d left the Dare homestead. They tried to head back east several times with every intention of getting their sister out of a loveless and unforgiving home, but each time, something stood in the way. The

war raging between the states made it increasingly harder to journey the waterways and cross boundaries, and the vast expanse of prairie unsettled by the Indian uprisings made overland travel nearly impossible. They knew even if they did manage to get to Ohio, the risks of returning to the west with a young child were too great. Charlotte was eleven when they finally arrived at the farm on the outskirts of Cleveland, and by then, she was a recalcitrant and surly pain-in-the-ass.

Their parents had balked, refusing to allow them to abscond with the only help they had on the farm, but the sack of coins Stuart had thrown onto their scarred wooden table had done the trick. Mitch packed Charlotte's things, Stuart scooped her up, and they both listened to her scream and swear halfway to the Mississippi. They settled her into a school for young women in St. Louis, left enough money to provide for anything and everything she'd ever want, and set out for another strike.

Yearly visits had proven difficult, but somehow each summer they'd managed to get back to St. Louis. Charlotte had grown into a beautiful young woman, though her stubborn, sometimes nasty, streak continued. She now held a teaching position at the academy because Stuart had paid them to hire her.

Mitch couldn't imagine what Charlie had gotten into her head. They'd hoped when they returned to St. Louis later this summer, they'd find her engaged to be married. So far each trip had been a disappointment in that regard, and even Stuart's well-placed incentives hadn't done the trick. The girl was now over twenty-one and seemingly warded off men like the plague.

Her charming personality might have a lot to do with that.

"So Charlotte is coming here?" Cinda asked.

Mitch shook his head. "Not if Stuart has anything to say about it."

The curtain billowed, and Stuart appeared. "Apparently, I don't."

Mitch cocked a brow and chuckled. "Didn't go well, huh? Did you expect it to?"

“No, but a man can dream.” Stuart slammed his hat on the table. “The last message that came through the wire was ‘Fuck you, Stuart.’” He slumped into his chair. “I sent a response and waited another twenty minutes. Nothing. Charlie can be such a bitch.”

Cinda smiled. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Prepare yourself,” Stuart said. “Sounds like she’ll be here in less than a week. She’s gotten on the train to Cheyenne, then it’s just a matter of a couple days on the Deadwood coach. Maybe we can delay her arrival, or hire someone to scare her back to St. Louis.” Stuart ran his hands through his hair.

“Charlie doesn’t scare easily,” Mitch said.

“Maybe a road agent,” Stuart said.

Mitch shook his head. “Not a good idea. No point in asking for more trouble. Hiring a road agent involves dealing with some dangerous scum.”

“The Kane brothers?” Stuart said.

“They’re out of the business,” Mitch said. “Heard they’re buying one of the saloons here in town.”

Stuart rubbed his forehead as though stricken by a sudden headache. “What’s the West coming to if the Kane brothers are settling down? Sam Culpepper?”

“You’d put out a bounty hunter on your own sister?” Mitch asked. “That’s pretty nasty, even for you. Besides, we don’t know that she’s done anything illegal yet.”

“Jesus, Mitch, I’m getting desperate. We don’t need her here. Our lives will be hell.”

“She *is* more loveable from a distance,” Mitch said.

Cinda laughed. “Oh, she can’t be that bad. You two actually seem scared of her.”

Stuart ran his hands over his face. “Charlie Dare is the most ornery female I’ve come across in my life. She’ll have the worst denizens of Deadwood quaking in their boots, *including* the road agents.” Stuart slid his hand over hers. “Enjoy the quiet tonight. The

Dakotas will never be this peaceful again. After being with you, I'm not even sure I want to be in the same territory with Charlie, let alone the same household."

"She's *living* with us?" Mitch's eye twitched.

"You think I like it?" Stuart asked. "What do you want to do? Make her bed with the horses? Believe me, I thought of it, but I'm not that cruel. Those horses are good animals."

"We can wait here in town for the stage," Mitch said. "When it arrives, we can knock her out and have someone take her back to Cheyenne."

Stuart nodded. "That could work."

Cinda glanced between them. "Before you panic, why don't we wait and see what she wants?"

Mitch shook his head furiously. "No matter what it is, it can't be good."

"We have days before she arrives," Cinda said. "She could even decide to stay in Cheyenne. But I'm looking forward to it."

"You'll change your mind," Mitch said.

"I'd like to talk about sisters later, if it's okay," Cinda said. "This is our honeymoon, and I'm starting to feel a little neglected." She toyed with the buttons of her dress, slowly plucking them open one by one. "Let's go upstairs. Maybe I can take your mind off your troubles. Make you forget your sister for a little while."

Mitch shoved his chair back and stood. "What sister?"

"She's got me so twisted up I can't think straight," Stuart said. "I'm not in the mood right now."

* * * *

Stuart ignored the funny look on Cinda's face as he wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. The new Mrs. Dare seemed utterly baffled at his lack of interest, and that smoke coming out of Mitch's ears didn't bode well for the evening. His brother looked ready to

protest, but Stuart headed him off at the pass. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a chunk of gold, one of Cinda's nuggets, and laid it in their wife's palm.

"Let's see if we can get richer," Stuart said. "Money puts me in a good mood."

Cinda's blue eyes sparked with genuine enthusiasm. "We're going to gamble? I've always wanted to gamble. I watched my stepfather plenty. Can we play dice? I like the sound they make."

"Darlin', you can play any game you want." Stuart steered Cinda toward the curtain, holding it back as she stepped through into the bustling lobby. Mitch grabbed his arm.

"And what game are you playing?" Mitch asked. "You're not in the mood to *fuck*? How on earth is that even possible? Look at her!"

Stuart's gaze slid over their beautiful wife. She offered a radiant smile to an older gentleman who tipped his hat, then ruffled the head of a little girl that flew past her. For a split second, he wondered when he'd lost his mind.

"Something's wrong, Mitch. I don't know what it is, but even that *fuck you, Stuart* didn't have the right amount of spunk in it."

Mitch's brow furrowed. "You got that from a couple of clicks over a line and a piece of paper?"

Stuart plunged his hands in his pockets. "I don't know what I got besides a bad feeling."

"So you think Charlie's in some kind of trouble?"

"When isn't she?" Stuart sighed. "If trouble's within a hundred miles, it'll find her."

They followed Cinda out the door into the balmy evening. Smoke and haze hung over the street from the lit torches that dotted the roadway. The sounds of raucous laughter swelled from several saloons, and drunken men, and several women, swayed along the wooden walkway, smashing against the clapboard buildings before they righted themselves. Cinda pointed off to the left, toward the brightly lit interior of the Bella Union.

Stuart forced Charlie from his mind and followed his brother and wife toward the biggest, busiest, and most opulent gaming hall in Deadwood. As they moved with the throng of disparate people through the open doorway, Stuart decided Charlie could wait a few days to ruin his life. He had to admit that out of all the women in the Bella Union, Lucinda Parks Dare was the prettiest one of all. He led Cinda toward the cages where they exchanged the nugget for chips. Mitch pulled a cloth from his pocket and tied them up inside, and Cinda clutched the treasure to her chest as she surveyed the poker games and roulette wheel then headed straight for the dice table.

She peeled off her shawl and tossed it to Mitch. She then tucked some hair behind her ears and gathered the dice in her hand, dropping them into the cup. She closed her eyes, muttered something Stuart couldn't hear, and rolled the dice like a veteran gambler. Mitch and Stuart stood back, sipping on whiskey, while Cinda proceeded to win twenty dollars in chips.

"At least someone's having a lucky day," Mitch drawled.

"I have to admit, despite the setback, we're having a pretty good one, too."

"Darn right," Mitch said.

When she turned to them with a huge smile on her face, holding an additional fifty dollars in chips, Mitch wrapped his arm around her. He leaned down to whisper in his ear, but Stuart caught it even in the din of the crowd. "You ready for that honeymoon, candyass?"

"I am indeed, Mr. Dare. Let's get the hell out of here."

Stuart poured himself another shot as Mitch led Cinda to the cage to cash in her chips. He was ready for the honeymoon, too. His cock stood at full mast and throbbed with a blinding intensity. It was amazing what watching a beautiful, happy woman could do to a man. She could even make him forget a pain-in-the-ass sister.

* * * *

Cinda linked arms with her husbands' as they strolled along the walkway. The sounds of their boots knocking against the wood made her feel safe and content, three harmonious sounds all moving in the same direction. A man came out of the hardwood store and intercepted them. He asked to speak to the brothers for a moment concerning some equipment Stuart had ordered that afternoon. Mitch laughed, and the three men lounged against the wall to talk. Cinda stood quietly, rubbing her coins through the cloth, loving the roll of them between her fingers. The gentle movement calmed the rather erratic beat of her heart.

"Mrs. Dare?" The quiet whisper caught her attention, and Cinda turned her face to find the young delivery girl from the hotel peeking around the corner of the hardware store.

Cinda glanced over her shoulder then took several steps toward her. The girl held up her hand.

"Don't come any closer," she said, "and don't look at me."

Cinda nodded and peered into the busy street, watching a group of dirty cowboys stagger down the center of the street, tripping over one another.

"There's a man following you," the girl said. "He's been watching you since you came out of the hotel."

Cinda lowered her head and pretended to count her coins in the glow of the torch. "What's he look like?"

"Fifties maybe, tall, thin, light-colored hair."

Cinda tilted her head, and her finger skimmed over the coins again. She smiled though her heart stuttered in its beat, and heat swelled through her body. She hummed for a moment then muttered, "Sounds like the last man I ever wanted to see again."

Cinda heard the girl draw in a deep breath as though wrestling with a decision, then she blurted out, "He's the last man Miranda wanted to see again, too."

She started to twist toward the girl, but stopped herself. "You know Miranda?"

“Yes, ma’am. We became acquainted with the telegraph operator at the same time. Mr. Hawkins is a fine man. When I arrived, he bought my contract. He offered me expenses to any city I wished to go I chose to stay and work for him. Miranda went to Cheyenne. She said she wasn’t sure even Cheyenne was far enough away.”

“If I have anything to do with it, she’ll be safe there.”

“You must be Cinda.” Before she could say anything, the girl continued. “You look very much alike, ma’am. She spoke of you often. Miranda aimed to get a position in Cheyenne and send for you. Just wanted you to know, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Miss—”

“Matthews. Melanie Matthews.”

Cinda tilted her hand, and several coins rolled from the cloth and landed on the planks. She hunkered down and picked up one, then deliberately rolled two into the dirt beyond the hardware store. She dropped her chin and glanced to the side. “Good night, Melanie. Go buy yourself a dress tomorrow. And maybe a prettier bonnet.”

Cinda heard a soft laugh then the shuffle of feet. A small shadow darted forward and snatched at the coins. She felt a hand on her elbow and rose to her feet. Mitch peered down.

“Think we can get to that honeymoon without another interruption?”

“I’m not sure,” Cinda said. “Did your brother want to do some more shopping tonight?”

“Hell, no,” Stuart said. “Let’s go start our honeymoon.”

Chapter 9

Mitch lit the gas lamps, and the room filled with wavering golden light. Cinda reached into her bodice and pulled out her marriage certificate, spreading it on her palm and smoothing it to remove the wrinkles. Afterwards, she tucked it and her coins into the saddlebag as Stuart opened the doors to let the breeze clear out the stuffiness of the room. Though nearly midnight, the town of Deadwood swelled with the sounds of riotous camaraderie and occasionally a spark of animosity as shouts and curses filtered into the room.

Cinda nearly jumped out of her boots when two blasts of gunfire burst through the night. She'd become a quivering bundle of nerves throughout the evening, and though she couldn't quite understand why, she accepted it as new-wife jitters. Her life had changed with the signing of the marriage certificate. She no longer belonged to Thomas Wilson, a truly good and wonderful thing, but now she belonged to the men whose eyes hadn't left her since they'd entered the room. She wasn't sure what she should do next. She knew how to be Cinda Parks, daughter, gold digger, and claim jumper, but not how to be Cinda Dare, wife.

As she reached up to unbutton her dress, the lamplight caught the new band of gold on her finger. Who knew when she'd decided to seek treasure it would come in the form of two sweet and sexy miners? She'd never dreamed when she found her first nugget, her most valuable piece of gold would fit around her finger in a thin circle. She held out her hand and stared, watching the glint and sparkle of the light play over the ring, then traced it with her thumb.

“We can get you a better ring.” She lifted her face to find Stuart staring at her with a sheepish, almost embarrassed look on his face. “The mercantile didn’t have a very good selection, and I was kind of in a hurry.”

“Spent too much time in the hardware store,” Mitch muttered.

Cinda cupped Stuart’s face, dragging him down for a kiss. “It’s a perfect ring. I wouldn’t want any other, and it’s not every day a woman gets a new ax as a wedding gift.”

“He’ll probably get a pick for our anniversary,” Mitch grumbled.

“Then we’ll have a matched set,” Cinda said. “I can’t think of a better present. We are gold diggers after all.”

Stuart stripped off his tie and dropped it onto the desk then stared out the door, surveying an argument brewing down on the street. “This place is going to hell in a hand basket faster than any place we’ve seen.”

Mitch glanced toward his brother. “Gold brings out the worst in some people and lures the bad ones faster than a whore’s cheap perfume.”

Stu nodded. “This town attracted every one of them. I’d like to set up the operation and get out. We can reap the rewards somewhere else.”

Mitch cocked a brow. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“We have a wife to protect now.” Stu flung his hand toward the balcony. “Kind of hard to do with the vermin I see roaming this town.”

Cinda hugged his arm. “I appreciate that, Stu, but I don’t need protection. Despite what happened at the cabin, I can take care of myself.”

“We don’t doubt that, sweetcheeks,” Stu said. “But—”

“Besides,” Cinda said, “doesn’t every mining town have its share of vermin?”

“Not like this place,” Stu said. “Deadwood drew every piece of scum that crawled out from under a rock, and not all of them came for

gold. Every thief, gunslinger, gambler, outlaw and bounty hunter north of the Rio Grande has come to reap the rewards.”

“If we’re planning to leave, maybe we can get out before Charlie shows up,” Mitch said.

Stu burst out laughing. “Now there’s a good idea if I ever heard one.”

Cinda walked out on to the balcony and peered over the railing. The argument had escalated into a fist fight. Two men circled one another on the street below, while a crowd of onlookers cheered them on. Both men had taken several hits, but one looked ready to fall to the dirt. The sounds of tinny piano music drifted on the air, and the voices of merchants hawking their wares vied with a chorus of bawdy tunes from the dancehall next door. On the other side of the street, three women strolled through the open doorway of a rowdy saloon and lounged against the clapboard walls. None of them wore enough fabric to qualify as clothing, but their lush bodies drew the men toward them like magnets, and within moments, each had made a financial transaction and led the men back into the saloon.

Cinda whirled around and leaned against the railing. “I want to stay here.”

“Seriously?” Mitch asked.

Both men came out onto the balcony. Mitch peered dubiously into the street below, and Stuart scratched his head. “Cinda, we can make a home anywhere. New York, St. Louis, San Francisco. Why on earth would you want to start our married life in this godforsaken place?”

“Deadwood is full of life and energy. It’s exciting. I feel alive here.” She shrugged. “Granted, it could use a little bit of sweeping to get rid of some dirt, but I’d like to make it home. Have a family here.”

“I have to say, she dreams big,” Mitch said.

“I think we can make a difference here,” Cinda said. “We can turn it into a town worth living in.”

Stuart stared up and down the street and sighed. “That’s probably going to take more work than drilling a mine shaft, and probably take more money, as well.”

Cinda nodded. “Possibly, but I think it will be worth the investment.”

“We’re not spending our money on anything else,” Mitch said. “Except Charlie of course. It’s cost us a fucking fortune to keep her employed. So you want us to become philanthropists?”

“Something like that.” Cinda shrugged. “I’d need to do some more thinking on it, but investing in this town and providing things to the permanent citizens here could turn this town into something special.”

Mitch glanced into the street, and Cinda watched him study the loser of the fist fight who lay face down in the dirt. His opponent didn’t look much better as he staggered to his feet. “A real hospital might be a good investment.”

“That would be an excellent start,” Cinda said.

Stuart put a finger under her chin and tilted her face toward him. “Then why the long face, darlin’? Does it have anything to do with Charlie?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m sure Charlie and I will get along fine.” Mitch grunted, and Stuart’s brows rose. “Well, maybe not fine, but don’t worry about us. We’ll work it out between us. I’m just hoping...” She paused, not sure what she wanted to say. The fact that Thomas Wilson lurked around Deadwood, possibly looking for her, made her breath catch in her chest.

“Hoping what?” Stuart asked.

She looped her arms around his neck. “I’m hoping I can be a good wife for you, for both of you. I never want to bring you trouble.”

Stuart yanked her toward him. “Too late for that, darlin’. You *are* trouble, but you’re exactly what we’ve been searching for. Cinda Parks Dare, the day you walked onto our claim made discovering a

mother lode seem like finding a coin on the street. You are the best treasure we've ever found in our lives."

Cinda smiled. "That's something coming from two gold diggers."

Mitch winked and walked back into the room, talking over his shoulder. "Three gold diggers now. The Dares will be a force to be reckoned with in this territory."

"I'm only interested in one at the moment." Stuart reached behind her neck and untied the ribbon. The broach slipped into his hand, and he traced it with his finger. "This is a beautiful piece. Those are gold chips around the edge."

"I always hoped they were real," Cinda said softly. "My grandma deserved to have gold. I never knew my grandfather, but she loved him greatly."

"Where's your grandmother now?"

"Still in Ohio, I think, though I can't really be sure."

"We'll find out for you," Mitch said.

"I would love to see her again. I've often thought if I could find even half of the happiness she'd had, I'd be content for the rest of my life."

"We're going to make you happy, Cinda," Stuart said. "We'll work hard at it, every day for the rest of our lives."

Cinda tilted her face. "I know that, Stuart. Why don't we start on that right now?"

"Doll, I thought you'd never ask."

Stuart took her hand and led her back into the room. Mitch had already stripped off his shirt and plopped into a chair to tug off his boots.

"I figured we'd done enough talking for the night," Mitch said. "We can finish up the business dealings in the morning. If that's okay with Stuart." He rolled his eyes.

"It's more than okay." Stuart gently laid her grandmother's broach on the dresser then shrugged off his vest and tugged at his tie. He continued to remove his clothes, his gaze locked on Cinda's hand as

she began to unbutton her dress. “Need some help, Mrs. Dare? I’m always looking to be a philanthropist.”

“He’s the selfless one.” Mitch grabbed her hand and pulled her between his knees. He started working on the buttons of her dress. “I, on the other hand, am the impatient one in the family. And I’m eager to see what I haven’t seen since this morning.”

He slid his finger from her throat to her cleavage, dipping between her breasts. The slow, gentle movement tingled Cinda’s skin, and her nipples beaded, eager for the touch of his hand. Stuart came up behind her and slipped his hands inside her dress, drawing it off her shoulders and pulling the sleeves down her arms. Mitch cupped her bare breasts, and caressed the peaked nipples. Cinda leaned closer, and his mouth locked on one, sucking hard and forcing a little cry from her lips.

Her pussy fluttered and sent pulses of heat through her pelvis. She pressed back against Stuart, and his rigid cock poked against the folds of her dress, prodding and searching for an entrance. Mitch continued to suck on her nipple with a hard, rhythmic motion that nearly brought her to her toes. He squeezed her other breast with the same pulse, his fingers biting into her skin and causing tiny ripples of pain to blend with the courses of pleasure that spiraled through her body.

She raked her fingers through Mitch’s hair, holding him close, and he drew more of her breast between his lips. Cinda gasped at the spike of sensation that shot through her. Her pussy muscles clenched on emptiness, and wet heat pooled between her thighs. She wanted to be filled. She clutched at the dress still draped at her waist, drawing the fabric up her leg, then pushed her hips backwards.

“Fuck me, Stuart.”

He didn’t answer, but she felt the sweep of his hard cock between her ass cheeks then lower to brush between her legs with tantalizing slowness. She shivered as the warmth of him slid through her juices, spreading her pussy lips. She reached between her legs and ran her finger over the smooth, silky head, damp with the pre-cum that leaked

from the tip. She moved her wet finger to her clit and rubbed in even strokes as Stuart continued to rock against her, teasing her pussy lips.

Unable to take another minute of torture, Cinda cupped the head of his cock and guided it to her heat. He thrust into her pussy, and she nearly collapsed at the exquisite sensation of the hard length of heat that pressed inside her. He slid his hands over her hip bones, and his palm settled over her hand, his finger touching hers to force harder strokes against her clit. His cock pulsed and teased the muscles of her pussy. She trembled as ripples of bliss skittered over her skin and wracked her lower body. Mitch continued to suck on her nipple, drawing every bit of energy from her body and forcing her to clamp down hard on Stuart's cock.

Mitch licked her nipple, and Stuart's finger continued to rub hers against the hard, swollen clit that ached and burned. The orgasm ripped through her, and she came with a violent shudder between her two husbands. Slowly, Stuart lessened the strokes until she jerked several times and nearly collapsed against Mitch. When Stuart withdrew, his still hard cock nestled against her, and he leaned down and whispered, "We're not finished with you yet, Mrs. Dare."

He turned her around and pushed the dress down her legs. She stepped out, and Mitch drew her down onto his lap. She lay back against his chest with a sigh and closed her eyes. Mitch opened her thighs wide and reached around to finger her throbbing clit. Immediately, her hips bucked up, eager for more then came down to feel Mitch's hard length nestling between her ass cheeks. She heard Stuart move then his voice behind her.

"Open your eyes, honey."

Her lids fluttered open, and she found herself staring into the looking glass that stood opposite the chair. She saw her flushed, glowing face, and her hair lay in sweaty, golden ringlets against her neck. Her gaze swept lower over pale, quivering breasts tipped by hard, rosy nipples, across stomach muscles that trembled in anticipation and finally locked on her pussy. The lips were swollen

and open wide, plump, juicy folds against a pink, glistening channel waiting to be speared by a hard, pulsing cock. The very sight of it made her wetter. The moisture leaked and dropped tiny beads of fluid on her skin. Her hard, rosy clit peeked out from the damp hair above her pussy. A wave of heat flooded through her at the way she looked—wanton, sated, pulsing with desire, aching with the need to be fucked.

She met Mitch's eyes in the mirror then watched as he slid his finger over her clit and shoved three fingers into her pussy. Her body arched upwards, and she stared with wide eyes as his fingers plunged in and out, faster and faster, coated with her slick juices, until the rhythm forced her to clamp down hard. Mitch plunged his fingers into her, and she tensed as her body bucked against Mitch as she rode another orgasm. Her breasts shook and her thighs quivered as wave after wave of pulsing heat burst through her body, pulling her higher and higher into a mind-numbing spiral of pleasure. When the sensations began to taper, Mitch slowly pulled out his wet fingers and swept them up over her clit to gently rub the hard nub.

Mitch met Stuart's eyes in the mirror and nodded. Stuart tugged her to her feet then lifted her, cupping her ass in his hands. In the mirror she saw Mitch coat his cock with her juices. The sight of his hand rubbing over his hard length, the pulsing veins, and the smooth head made her heart pound. When he nodded again, Stuart tugged her ass cheeks apart and gently lowered her toward Mitch's cock. It slid into her ass with a gliding pressure that brought a bit of pain, but the promise of pleasure. She forced herself to relax and concentrated on the throbbing ache that had begun once again in her pussy. Mitch groaned as he settled inside her, then spread her thighs wide and draped her legs over the arms of the chair.

"Look at yourself, darlin'."

He put his hands under her ass and lifted her up and down. She watched his cock slide in and out of her ass, entranced by the sight of

their bodies merging then separating. She reached between her legs and touched her clit. A river of fire shot through her.

“My pussy is throbbing.”

Stuart settled to his knees in front of Mitch. He gripped his cock and shoved it inside her, thrusting hard. His hands covered her breasts and squeezed, tugging on the nipples and pinching her skin as he thrust in and out of her. His movements forced her back, impaling her deeper on Mitch’s cock and causing exquisite sensations to grind through her pelvis. Stuart stilled, and Mitch clutched her hips, lifting then tugging, then forward and back to fuck her with both cocks.

Stuart lapped at her breast, his tongue sliding over the peaked nipple and drawing a moan from her as his cock drove deeper and deeper inside her. Her ass clenched against Mitch’s cock, trying to hold him inside, and her pussy muscles throbbed against Stuart’s cock, wanting, needing to feel him as deep as possible. She became so overwhelmed with sensations she couldn’t tell where the feelings came from, only that they spiraled and blazed through her with the heat of a raging fire.

Cinda ran her hands over her body, squeezing her breasts, tugging at her nipples, pulling them tighter and twisting them with a rhythm to match the pounding of their cocks. She glanced in the mirror to see Stuart’s strong back, his tight ass clenching with his movement and his hard thigh muscles rippling as he moved. The sight of it made her hot, but when she looked and saw he watched his cock, slick with her juice, sliding in and out of her pussy, her body trembled at the naked want in his eyes. She touched her clit, one little slide over the nub, and her world exploded.

Her pussy clenched down hard, and Stuart jerked forward, thrusting hard and fast, his hands clenching on her hips. As her pussy muscles pulsed, Mitch yanked her down, and both men came with agonizing groans, their cum spurting deep inside her body with rapid pulses. Stuart grabbed her face and gave her a searing kiss, even as her body shook and the aching spirals of pleasure continued to twist

through her. Mitch's hand settled in her hair, caressing the strands that flowed down her back. Slowly Stuart withdrew then lifted her from Mitch's lap.

He carried her to the bed then got a cloth and dipped it into the wash basin. He wiped it over her sweaty face, down her aching breasts and washed her hot, aching pussy. The cool water felt wonderful against her warm skin. When he finished, he drew the sheet over her body and went back to the basin to wash up.

Mitch rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. "We're going to have to order a mirror before we leave town."

Chapter 10

Cinda looked at the cloth-wrapped bundles spread out on the bed. She'd never had so many clothes in her life, not even if she counted up her *entire* life. Before they left town, the men had taken her to the mercantile. They bought her dresses and skirts and blouses in all sorts of fabrics and colors. She had new boots, a winter coat, new underclothes and several bonnets. She'd tried to protest, wondering where they thought she'd wear them, but they'd insisted and been so pleased to see her try them on that she relented and let them have their way. She thought it far more likely she'd be wearing her new mining clothes. She glanced at the denim boy's pants and flannel shirts. Searching and digging would be far easier in clothes that actually fit.

Stuart and Mitch had taken care of the horses then decided to check out the mine shaft, leaving her to unpack. They'd mounted additional pegs on the walls for her new clothing, and Stuart had said the bed, mirror and other household things they'd ordered would arrive in several weeks. The brothers had also purchased a piece of property at the edge of town and had arranged for construction to begin on a new house. A home of her own.

She picked up the envelope lying on the bed and held it against her chest. She didn't need to read it again. She'd already memorized it.

She spun around, her new cornflower blue dress flying around her legs. Every day recently just kept getting better and better, and she also had seventy whole dollars to call her own.

"But I don't need to worry any more. I have this."

Cinda kissed the envelope then whirled around, trying to determine where to keep her most treasured possession. Her mouth dropped open when she came face to face with Thomas Wilson lounging against the open doorway, a rifle cradled in his arms. Her stepfather raked stringy hair away from his face and let his gaze sweep over her.

“You’re lookin’ good, Lucinda. That color suits you. Matches your eyes.”

Cinda’s jaw clenched as she eyed the rifle. “I’ve rather been expecting you, and now that you’re here, I have only one thing to say. Get the hell off my property and out of my house, Thomas Wilson.”

“Yours, huh? Not much of a house.” Wilson glanced around, then pushed himself away from the doorjamb and sauntered toward her. “Payment for services rendered?”

“You’re a pig.”

“I’m surprised to find you here, almost as surprised as seein’ you in Deadwood with the Dare boys.”

“Leave them out of this. This is between you and me.” Cinda kept her hands behind her back, her fingers clutching the marriage certificate in a death grip.

“You’re right about that,” Wilson said. “And it’s time to make it slightly more personal.”

Cinda backed up. “I asked you nicely to leave, but if you force me to repeat myself, the second time is going to involve pain.”

“You don’t scare me, missy. Never did.”

“I think you’re lying about that,” Cinda said. “I think I scare you plenty, but if you want to take your chances with my patience, keep going. I might let you live.”

Wilson laughed. “*Let* me live? I’m the one holdin’ the gun. Damn, girl, you must get your arrogance from your grandma. That woman never had a lick of sense. She never knew her place.”

"I don't want someone like *you* talking about my grandmother. Now get the hell out of here before Mitch and Stuart return. If they find you here, you're a dead man."

"Don't think they'll be back any time soon. Saw them headin' up the hill. Now do me a favor. Get off your high horse and get to searchin'. Nuggets, coins. It don't matter. I'll take any of it. Then pack up your shit. You're comin' with me."

"No, I'm not." She started toward the door.

He lifted the barrel of the gun toward her. Cinda froze. "The gun says differently. Now, get to searchin' before my finger gets itchy. You owe me for wastin' my time. That first offer didn't pan out when you disappeared."

She leaned back against the table and traced her hands across the surface, searching for anything she might throw at him. "I'm so sorry to hear that. How terrible for you. Your reputation must be in tatters."

"You haven't changed in ten years. You're such a bitch."

"Stop forcing me to be one." Cinda smiled and batted her eyelashes. When he clenched his jaw, she stood up straighter. "Just so you know, I'm not leaving this house. And I'm certainly not going anywhere with a bastard like *you*."

"You're lucky I'm a patient man." He strode toward her and shoved her back hard against the table. He pressed against her. "Now shut your mouth and get your ass movin', girl. I'm not goin' to say it again. You three looked pretty cozy at the saloon. Where's the money you won? Seems it's the least you can give me since I've lost my fifty dollar finder's fee."

"If I get it, will you leave?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

Cinda shoved her body against his. "Then get off me!"

He gave her an arrogant smile. "Not 'til you say please."

She hissed the word through clenched teeth. "Please."

Wilson smiled. "That's my girl."

When he didn't move, Cinda shoved him in the chest with one hand. He stepped back and laughed. She went to the bed and slipped the envelope with her marriage certificate under one of the clothing bundles as best she could. Grabbing her new reticule, she ripped the strings open and poured the coins into her hand. She held them out toward him. Disgust swept through her when she saw her hand shaking. "It's all I have. Seventy dollars. Take it and get out."

"It's a start." Wilson tilted his head. "But I'm sure there's more than that. Heard tell the Dares have a pretty prosperous strike here. Seems to me there could be some nuggets lyin' around." He ambled about the room, lifting lids off pots and rearranging things around on the shelves and tabletop.

"There aren't any nuggets. Take this and go." She pushed her fist out again. "It's all you're going to get. Be grateful for it."

She strode forward and shoved her hand against his chest, opening her fist. The coins dropped to the floor and danced across the planks. He ignored them and lifted the lid on the kettle.

"Anything they've found lately would have to be hidden somewhere on the property," Wilson said. "I didn't see them go into the bank. Get the nuggets, Lucinda, then pack your shit. We're leaving."

"I'm not going anywhere with you. You don't own me. I'm a Parks, and you're a Wilson."

He lunged toward her and smacked the side of her head. "Wrong, wrong, wrong. You seem a bit confused, so let me clarify it for you." He gripped her hair, yanking her toward him. Cinda cried out and cringed, moving backward when he pressed his face close to hers. "I do own you. I don't care what your fucking name is. The day I married your good-for-nothin' mama, you became mine. I can do whatever I want with you."

She spat in his face. His lip curled up.

"You seemed to need some remindin'. I thought my little visit the other day might clear your head, but you're still in some kind of fog

because you seem to think your life has changed.” He shook his head sadly. “Lives don’t change, Lucinda. Especially not a life like yours. You should have come home when I gave you the chance. Now I can’t guarantee I’ll be nice to you.”

A horrible laugh rumbled in his chest. The sound of it made her sick.

He pulled her face so close she felt his hot breath wash over her face. She tried to twist her face away, but he curled his fingers tighter. “You’ll be comin’ to Deadwood with me. I made a few connections last night. I think once they see you, you’ll be their new favorite girl.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Cinda whispered.

“Oh, it is, missy, and those stupid men you wrapped around your finger can’t do a fucking thing about it. I might even make sure of it before we leave.”

She forced herself to meet his eyes. “Don’t you touch them.”

“I don’t think you’ll be the one givin’ orders, Lucinda.” He gripped her hair tighter, and her knees buckled from the pain. He shoved his face into the crook of her neck. “You smell good. Maybe I’ll keep you for myself.”

Cinda closed her eyes and squeezed them tight, trying to keep the tears at bay.

“We’ll leave this worthless hill in this worthless territory. Seems only right we take a bit of the gold. For your services.” He nuzzled closer, and his lips roamed up her neck. “You know where it is, don’t you, baby girl? Come on. It’ll make your life a lot easier if you tell me.”

Cinda clenched her jaw and tried to nod. “Yes, I know where it is. If you let me go, I’ll get it.”

Wilson drew away and wrapped his fingers tighter. He gave her head a little shake. “Nothin’ funny now.”

She tried to shake her head, but his grip was too tight. She squeezed her words through tight lips. “No, nothing funny.”

He released her, and she stumbled against the table. He stepped around her and pulled the envelope out from under the bundle.

“No! Don’t touch that!”

“Is it a bank draft? Are those two dumb asses *payin’* you for fuckin’ them?” He flipped open the envelope and yanked the paper out. He looked at it for a minute then shook his head. “It’s a goddamn marriage certificate. You slut. You married one of them without my permission? Without givin’ me my share?”

Cinda darted forward, but he lifted the paper higher. He shoved her again, and this time she hit the table with a force hard enough to knock it across the floor. She caught herself before she fell, darted across the room, and grabbed Stuart’s razor off the wash stand. She whirled and ran toward him, swinging the blade just as her stepfather lifted his face. The tip sliced through his shirt, and he lurched backwards with a cry of alarm. He stared at her, his eyes wide.

“Damn, Lucinda. Don’t be like that.” He crumpled the certificate in his hand and dropped it to the ground. “What’s wrong with you, baby girl? Did I pull a knife on you?”

“No, you brought a gun instead.”

“Well, hell, I wasn’t going to use it unless you made me.” He lifted his shirt and studied the slice in the dingy cotton. When he raised his face back to hers, his eyes blazed with something she’d never seen before. She’d always known her stepfather was a cruel man, but the man before her carried a danger she’d never seen before. “You need someone to tame you, bitch. Looks like I came to collect you just in time. And we’re going to have a good time.”

She held the razor in front of her, her knuckles white around the handle. “Stay away from me.”

“You’re done giving orders.” He angled the rifle toward her. “Don’t make me shoot you. Get those nuggets. It’s time to share.”

“I don’t want to share,” she snarled. She dodged toward him, jabbing the blade several times in his direction. He jumped backward.

"I want you out of my life. Take that seventy dollars and get out of this territory, now, today, before I slit your sorry throat."

"That's not going to happen, Lucinda. You see, there was a very good reason why I brought the gun. I brought it just in case things didn't work out. I thought you might decide to be difficult. I'm not afraid to pull the trigger."

"Put it down."

"Not a chance."

She drew back her arm and flung the blade as hard as she could. Wilson screamed as the razor drove into his upper chest. He started to raise the rifle but stopped. Before she could turn around, she heard the voice behind her. "You should have listened to the lady, Mr. Parks."

She glanced over her shoulder. Mitch pointed his rifle directly at the center of Thomas Wilson's chest. She swiveled her face back to her stepfather. Wilson lowered his gun, pulled out the blade and pressed his palm over his wound. His wide gaze swept between her, Mitch, and the barrel of the gun.

"Drop the razor, Parks," Mitch said. "Then kick it under the table."

Wilson opened his fingers, and the razor clattered the floor. "First off, the name is Wilson." He kicked the razor, and it sailed across the planks. "This is all just a slight misunderstandin' that started a couple days ago."

"Was that the day she ran from your house or the day you shot at me?"

"That didn't mean nothin'," Wilson said. "Just tryin' to get her home is all. Lucinda took it in her head to run off, but her mama wants her home, and I've come to collect her."

"She's not interested in going back," Mitch said. "She's staying here."

"She's my stepdaughter."

"She's my goddamn *wife*," Mitch snarled.

“Well now, we can talk about that. There’s the matter of the dowry. If you give me my share, I’ll be on my merry way.”

“Your share of what?” Mitch asked.

“The claim, the gold, the—”

Mitch strode forward and slammed the barrel of the gun into Wilson’s chest. A strangled noise came from her stepfather’s throat as he doubled over. Mitch swung the gun again and knocked the rifle out of Wilson’s hands. He kicked it toward Cinda and took a step back.

“I don’t think that will be happening, Mr. Wilson.”

Wilson surged toward the rifle, but Cinda beat him to it. She dropped down and reached for the gun. When Wilson dodged toward her, Mitch rammed the barrel of his rifle into Wilson’s back, then swung it in an arc, slamming it down onto Wilson’s shoulder. The man howled in pain and slumped to the ground.

Mitch laughed. “How dumb are you, Mr. Wilson?”

Cinda grabbed the rifle from the floor and aimed the gun directly at his head.

“Go ahead,” Cinda said. “Try it again. I dare you.”

Mitch shoved the gun barrel between the man’s shoulder blades. “I don’t think I’d take that dare if I were you. While you’re on your knees, pick up those coins.” When Wilson didn’t move, Mitch jammed the barrel harder. “If you don’t pick them up, you’re going to be splattered all over that wall. After that, I’ll let Cinda do what she likes with your carcass. We have some pretty big buzzards around here.”

Wilson reached out and began to pick up the coins, rolling them in his hand. When he stood, Mitch shoved the rifle against his back again, and Wilson groaned.

“Now give them back to Cinda. Nice and easy like.” Mitch smiled, but it wasn’t comforting, and it made Cinda’s stomach flutter. Wilson gulped. “Give them back the way a *caring* man might hand something to his stepdaughter.”

Wilson held the coins out with a shaking hand. Holding the rifle firmly with one hand, Cinda opened her palm, and the coins slid into it, cold against her skin. She curled her fingers around them then took a step back, flipping her skirt to get it away from him quickly. She didn't want his stench on anything in her new life.

"Nice work, Mr. Wilson," Mitch said. "Now get your ass out of this cabin, off this property and out of the Dakotas. I'll be swinging by your place tomorrow, and I better find it uninhabited. If I don't, you'll be taking a tumble from a wagon, and it won't be an easy landing."

Holding his arm against his chest, Wilson nodded. He shot one more glare toward Cinda then sidestepped around Mitch. He sidled out the door, and Cinda heard the furious scramble of boots hitting dirt and tearing down the path. Stuart yelled "I didn't hear you say congratulations!" before he erupted into riotous laughter.

Cinda let out a huge breath, laid the rifle on the table, and slumped into a chair. She dropped the coins on the table where they circled and twisted before spinning to a stop, collapsing into an untidy pile. She plunged her face into her hands and rubbed her eyes furiously.

"It's over, honey," Mitch said gently. "Don't cry."

She raised her face and laughed. "I'm not crying. I'm so angry I can't see straight. If I see him again, I'll kill him." The thought of seeing Thomas Wilson again made her heart pound, not from fear, but because she knew if she did and could get to a rifle, she wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

"Quite a stepfather you got there, Cinda." Stuart clomped across the room and started slamming through cupboards. "I'm glad to know we've all risen above the level of our parents. That was a little intense." He grabbed a tin of biscuits from the cupboard.

"I could have used your help in here," Mitch said.

"I had your back. You seemed to be doing fine. She seemed to be doing fine, too, but I'm glad we got back before she gutted him."

Cinda glanced toward the door. “Had he moved again, I would have killed him.”

“I’ve no doubt about it,” Stuart said. “You’re a hellion, Mrs. Dare, but we don’t need the complication. I’d rather have him alive when the sheriff picks him up.”

Cinda frowned. “Picks him up from where?”

“Home,” Stuart said. “I reported his ambush on us here to the sheriff. Normally he wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about a little gunplay, but Mitch and I happen to have a lot of money in Deadwood. I told him to setup a stake-out on Wilson’s property today because we figured he’d make a move as soon as we returned. Mitch saw that girl following us last night.”

Mitch nodded. “Would have been better if I’d have seen Wilson. I could have taken care of him last night and delivered him to the sheriff myself, but I didn’t know what he looked like.”

“You were listening to me and Melanie?”

“Hard not to, honey,” Mitch said. “You might be a great gold digger, but in the spy business, you’re a little bit obvious.” He paused and lifted her chin. “Who exactly is Miranda?”

“My sister,” she whispered. “She’s the reason I needed money. She’s disappeared, but Melanie thinks the place to start looking is Cheyenne.”

Stuart smiled. “Then we’ll take a trip to Cheyenne.”

“But Charlie—”

“We’ll wait for her,” Stuart said, “and find out what problem she’s caused this time. But believe me, after spending a few minutes with her, you’ll be begging for a trip to Cheyenne.”

Mitch reached out and lifted her chin. “It’s what you want, right?”

She nodded.

“Then it’s what we want, too,” he said.

She leapt to her feet and hurtled into his arms. She hugged him as tight as she could, burying her face in the flannel of his shirt. She

heard the crinkle of paper and peeked to see Stuart trying to flatten out the marriage certificate.

“This piece of paper is worth a fucking fortune. You’re going to have to take better care of it, sweetcakes.”

“I will.” Cinda glanced up shyly. “How much of a fortune?”

“More than you can imagine,” Mitch said. “And a third of it is yours now.”

“A fourth. Remember we have to think about Charlie.” Cinda leaned back in his arms. “And if I have an idea on how to spend some of it?”

“What you got in mind?” Stuart asked.

“I’d like to talk with Mr. Hawkins at the telegraph office. I have a feeling he could use a little help with some charity work he’s been doing. I gathered from Melanie he’s helped quite a few women.”

“A worthy cause,” Mitch said. “And there’s plenty, enough to fund a similar organization in every major city if that’s what you want. Your share alone would—”

Cinda reached up and covered his lips with her fingers. “I changed my mind. I don’t want to know how much. I never want to know. Whatever it is, it can’t be worth as much as what I found here.” She reached out and pulled Stuart closer. “I knew when I found that nugget, my life would change, but I had no idea how much. I swear to God, I must be the luckiest person alive.”

Stuart laughed. “You won’t be saying that in a couple days.”

“Oh, yes I will,” Cinda said. “Nothing will change the way I feel right now, not even Charlie Dare.”

She studied her two handsome husbands, and her heart began to pound in an entirely different way. A week ago, if someone had told her there were better things in life than gold, Cinda would have scoffed at the idea. She’d since discovered there were at least two better things in life—and they looked identical.

Love. So much better than gold, and so much easier. All she had to do was stake a claim. No digging required.

Cinda laughed, but she'd been laughing a lot lately, and that suited her just fine. She whirled around and ran to the bed, diving onto the lumpy mattress. She rolled over and held out her arms.

"Come and show me how lucky I am. I dare you!"

It was a phrase they couldn't resist, and she planned to use it a lot.

THE END



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