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Collection

Bonnie Parker

# HER VIGILANTE PASSION



## *Siren Ménage Everlasting*

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

# **HER VIGILANTE PASSION**

*The Lost Collection*

**Bonnie Parker**

**MENAGE EVERLASTING**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

HER VIGILANTE PASSION

Copyright © 2010 by Bonnie Parker

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-835-3

First E-book Publication: May 2010

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

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Siren Publishing, Inc.

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# **HER VIGILANTE PASSION**

**BONNIE PARKER**

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## **Chapter One**

*Texas – 1886*

Life couldn't get much better than this. Lara Franklin felt certain of that fact as the horse she rode side-saddle moseyed along at the direction of the hard-bodied male pressed against her. Strong arms stretched on either side of her body, caging her in a possessive embrace, the wide hands holding fast to the horse's reins.

She breathed deep, reveling in the mixed scents of sagebrush and thistle, but the innate spice of man captured her attention above all else. Awareness fluttered in her belly, arousing a perverse urge within her pussy that never quite waned when in the presence of her man.

"It's such a beautiful day." There wasn't anyone or anything around to threaten her peace with the man she loved.

Lara angled her face into the sun beating down on her from high in a cloudless sky. A gentle breeze stroked the spring air, relieving the heat of the day and caressing her skin as passionately as her lover's touch. She closed her eyes and listened to the birds singing their harmonious songs. Pure happiness wound through her, and she smiled.

Blindly, she reached for Adam. His heart beat a steady rhythm against the palm she splayed on his stalwart chest. She rested her cheek on the top of her hand and tipped her head back to look upon him.

“Say more of those lovely words to me.”

Adam Stonewell fixed his gaze on her, sending a delicious shiver clear to her toes. The brim of the Stetson he wore shaded his green eyes. He licked thin lips set in a line of easy concentration, and Lara stifled a moan.

*You’re one seriously sexy cowboy.*

She bit her tongue on the compliment, knowing it only embarrassed him when she said so even if it stayed true. Hair as dark as coal and smooth as spun silk peeked beneath his cowboy hat. It framed a lightly wrinkled and virile face tanned by hours in the sun. Hard muscles and rigid planes pressed against her, making her head dizzy with lust. At her hip, the bulge of his cock grew stiffer by the moment. Each step of the horse caused her body to stroke his shaft through the material of his wool trousers.

Lara’s concentration locked on his lips, on the glistening moisture left behind by his tongue. An echoing wetness saturated her feminine folds.

“Why, Miss Franklin, I don’t know what words you mean?” His teasing nuance said otherwise, as did the gleam that kindled in his amazing eyes. “Might you be referring to ones such as ‘cattle’ and ‘fence’? For we are supposed to be riding the fence now to check for troubles and to be sure our cattle cannot escape.”

“Hmm, those will do only if you can find a way to turn them into poetry. Somehow I doubt even you can find romanticism in tattle and tense.”

Adam’s smile traced sexy paths around his eyes. “Tattle and tense, eh? What an interesting choice of rhyming words. I tell you, were I not such a gentleman, I *could* find poetry in them.” He wagged his brows suggestively. “Though I can’t say how romantic it would be.”

Lara’s mind scrambled over the possibilities. She knew of only one way he could make her tense, and it had nothing to do with a fence. Unless he were to bind her to it as his hands teased her bare



flesh, denying release to the needy ache in her feverish pussy. Oh, she would be forced to tattle on him then for torturing her so, though she didn't know whom to tell. The cattle certainly wouldn't care.

Her fingers dipped between the buttons of his shirt, lightly fondling the wiry hair that speckled his chest. No one would ever believe such a story of Adam Stonewell anyway. His way of securing a woman lay in sweet, passionate love. She dubbed him her gentle cowboy long ago, sturdy enough to run his family's ranch but soft enough to steer the heart.

"A rhyme such as that is always romantic, no matter the words."

Adam's long lashes blinked once over eyes that glinted with passion and promise. He bent his head, brushing a featherlike kiss to her lips. "This is the very ecstasy of love," he said softly, his tongue wandering across her lower lip.

Lara's belly danced as sticky juices seeped from between her sodden folds. Not poetry, but a line from a play. She recognized it the moment the words rolled from Adam's tender lips. "Yes," she whispered because the statement rang true. Being with Adam this way, alone on the open lands of the Stonewell ranch, nestled between his legs even hampered by the clothing they wore, could be described as nothing short of both ecstasy and love. "More, please, Adam."

"More?"

Lara could only nod. She wanted more, more lyrical words, more of those arousing swipes of his tongue, *more*.

Adam sat up straighter in the saddle though his head remained down. His gaze seemed almost hypnotic, and she felt herself falling under his spell. "She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that?"

Lara's eyes grew heavy at the sexy, poetic slide of his voice as he began to recite another part of the Shakespeare play. "Yes," she cooed. "That's it. Finish it, Adam. Say the whole of it."

"Her eye discourses, I will answer it. I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks." He paused, the modulation of the words fondling her like a physical caress. "Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven having

some business, do entreat her eyes to twinkle in her spheres till they return.” He tipped his head up, casting a glance to the sky before meeting her gaze once more.

“What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars as daylight doth a lamp. Her eyes in heaven would through the airy region stream so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night. See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.” He released one of the reins to trail the backs of his fingers down the side of her face. “O’ that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek.”

Lara leaned her face into his touch as he lowered his head again. His lips brushed first her forehead, then the tip of her nose, and finally her mouth. He kissed her as he always kissed her, slow and sweet. His tongue softly coaxed her lips to part, requesting entrance into the recesses of her mouth. When she eagerly obliged him, his tongue swept inside her mouth, tangling with her tongue in a dance as old as mankind.

His large hand dipped beneath her hair to cup her nape, holding her fast as he explored her mouth in languid licks that sent bolts of erotic madness to her breasts. Her nipples beaded to hardened points against the firmness of his chest. Her already saturated pussy hummed from the need to be blessed with the same treatment he showed her mouth. The heat built in her inner core to an almost unbearable degree. It seemed unfair how easily he could turn her mind, her body, her very *soul* into a pulsing essence of desire.

“Please.” The word left her on a breathy sigh as his mouth moved from hers to trail kisses along her jaw to her ear.

“Please, what, my love?” The evidence of his own growing hunger sounded in his low whisper. He released her nape to glide his palm over her shoulder, down her arm, to cover the hand she placed on his chest.

Lara’s head fell back and to one side, exposing more flesh for him to taste. “I need you.”

“You have me, my lady. Can you not feel how my heart beats for you?” His hand pressed hers more firmly to his chest.

She could. The rhythmic, rapid thump of his heart beneath her palm felt as though it kept time with her own. “Inside me, I need you inside me.” She pulled her hand free, turning it as she slid it down between their bodies to cover his penis. He felt hard and sure, his trousers seeming to strain in its effort to contain the increasing size of his cock. He sucked in a breath. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, feigning innocence. She folded her fingers around as much of his shaft as she could through his britches. “I need this inside me.”

He groaned, the sound rumbling from low in his throat, and lifted his head to stare down at her. A faint smile curved the corner of his mouth. “Will you ever tame your blunt speak and brash actions?”

“Would you love me the same if I did?” She already knew his answer. Compassionate and pliable he might be, but her spitfire tenacity proved long ago to be something he craved.

“I would love you no matter if you were paralyzed and mute, but I would change nothing about you even if I could.”

“Good, then guide this horse to a private spot of land so you can fuck me.”

That got a growl out of him followed by a soft chuckle. He picked up the discarded rein and did exactly as she bid. He brought the horse to a stop near a tree away from the better-traveled areas of the land. He helped her off the horse first, picking her up with a gentle ease and lowering her to stand on her own feet at the horse’s side. Then he dismounted and gave the horse a pat on the rear to send it grazing. His arms wound around her waist, and he slowly reeled her in against his front. His eyes darkened to the color of emeralds, the desire swimming in their depths pulling her in for a dive.

“Under the greenwood tree, who loves to lie with me?”

If she didn’t know better, she would think him part gypsy the way he so effortlessly cast her under his spell time and again. She answered him by catching his hands in hers and tugging him beneath

the tree. When she released his hands in favor of going for the buttons of his shirt, he caught her wrists.

“You make me want to go wild sometimes.” He leaned in to bury his face where her neck and shoulder met. His lips closed on her collar bone, gently nibbling, licking, caressing.

Lara’s head lolled to one side. “Yet you never do.” Icy shards of white-hot rapture rained through her, adding to the fires in her breasts, in her clit, and channel, until her whole body felt ravenous with need. She wanted to touch him, but his grip held firm. Perhaps he just might bind her after all. The idea sent her insides shivering with anticipation.

“It’s not my way.” He let go of her, but rather than feeling disappointed, she moaned in sheer elation as his hands molded her breasts.

No, that fact remained forever true. His brother Luke favored the wilder ways, living for excitement and galloping on the edge of danger. Adam fancied tranquility, content with the life dealt to him and taking each day at a slow, ardent gait.

Knowing that about him, knowing he could keep her body quivering for hours if he possessed half a mind, she began unfastening the buttons of her dress. “I don’t mind so much seeing as I like your way.” Her hands met with his on her chest, and she stopped, the neckline of her dress falling open. The valley of her breasts peeked from the material.

“Mmm, and yet you continue to torment me.” The pleasure in his eyes told her he didn’t mind the distress one bit.

“Why, I’m not teasing, Mr. Stonewell.” Lara put on her best coy expression. “I merely seek to help you in the arduous chore of undressing me, is all.”

That got a laugh out of him, but when he pushed his hands beneath the material of her dress to cover the smooth bare flesh of her breasts, his laughter turned to a moan that echoed hers. The roughness

of his callused palms to her sensitized flesh only added to the eroticism of his touch.

“Do you now?” He caught her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, rolling them in a lightly pressured squeeze. “Might I ask why you’ve suddenly stopped?”

“I, oh, Adam.” Lara let her head roll back, her eyes closing as twin darts of arousal arrowed from her breasts to her pussy. He expected her to continue when he did this to her? Her hands found his shoulders, and she latched on, using him to hold her upright as her knees weakened and her legs started to tremble.

“Can’t find an answer, Miss Franklin?” Enjoyment resonated in his voice as he tossed his hat to the ground, quickly removed his gun belt, and leaned in. His mouth joined his hands on her chest. His tongue reached her flesh first. An appreciative moan accompanied his slow and measured licks as though he tasted a succulent fruit in the valley between her breasts. He painted a moist path up the side of her right breast, circling the pebbled surface of her beaded nipple, and finally drawing it into his mouth.

Lara arched her back, thrusting her chest forward, reveling in the delight of his mouth on her. He worked her nipple with the gentle ease in which he did everything, methodically driving her higher and higher with his unhurried manner.

“That’s okay,” he said as he swapped his attention to her other breast. “I believe I can finish the task on my own.” His hands put action to his words as he unfastened more of the buttons of her dress, pushing the material off her shoulders and peeling it down her body until it pooled around her waist.

To both her frustration and delight, his mouth followed the descent of her dress. His tongue painted yet another fiery moist path from her breasts down her abdomen to her belly. He stopped to trace and tickle her bellybutton before detouring to scrape his teeth along the flesh of her hip.

Lara whimpered. She drove her hands into his thick ebony hair, fisting her fingers in the silky strands. “Run into more troubles, cowboy?” She lifted her head to gaze down at him, loving the way he looked staring up at her from beneath long lashes.

“Nary a one, my lady. I thought I might take a moment to graze before I uncovered more heavenly pastures.” The corner of his mouth kicked into a boyish grin.

Knowing he would tease her for hours if she allowed him, she wiggled her hips and felt immense satisfaction when the movement caused the dress to slip another inch.

“Still intent on helping, aren’t you?”

“Determined to.”

“I ought to let you as long as you keep at it this way.” Adam sat back on his haunches. The smirk still tilted his lips. His gaze fixated on her hips. “You’ve got quite a shake going on there.”

Lara made a truly un-ladylike sound. “This is not how I wish to be shaking right about now, Adam Stonewell.”

He threw his head back and let out a loud hoot. The devil. Rather than freeing the confining buttons holding the dress in place, he dove beneath the hem, tenting himself beneath her skirt. Before she could think to argue, his tongue found the damp folds of her cleft. One arm wound around her buttocks, the fingers of the other spreading her pussy lips as he snaked a lick over her swollen clit.

Lara shuddered down to her toes. Her fingers clenched and unclenched. With his head and shoulders—heck, his whole body beneath her skirt—she could find nothing to grab onto for purchase. If not for his arm around her she would surely slither to the ground. She arched her lower body, pressing her pussy against his mouth, seeking more, wanting deeper.

“Please.” The strangled whisper got it for her. His hand reached between her legs, urging her to widen her stance, all the while holding her upright as his head dipped farther down. He licked her in a languid sweep from just behind her throbbing opening, all the way to

her clitoris, and her pelvis rocked convulsively. “Adam, I can’t stand this, can’t stand period! I need...need...”

But what she needed got lost in the waves of sensations that ricocheted through her sopping channel as his tongue penetrated her vagina. He licked her deep, likely suffocating himself in the folds of her pussy as his tongue danced inside her opening, wiggling and swiping at her flaming walls until the release exploded out of her. Still, he didn’t stop. He drank from her, lapping at the juices that flowed like a river from her center until the last of the convulsions subsided and she could stand no more. Lara folded boneless to the ground, only absently hearing his soft chuckle as he got tangled in her skirts on her way down.

“It seems you might have been right, Miss Franklin.” Adam’s lips glistened with her moisture and a prideful grin as he moved over her.

Breathless, her body numbed by the onslaught of the orgasm, but already starting to respond to the feel of his wide hips spreading her legs, Lara could only lift a brow. “Oh? And what might I have been right about?”

“That chore appears to have whooped my ass. You’re still clothed.” He glanced at her dress, now bunched between them at her waist. “At least in part.”

Lara tried to laugh, but only managed a snicker. “And you, Mr. Stonewell, are still fully clothed.”

“Am I?” He held himself above her, the muscles in his arms more pronounced as he rested his weight on his hands on either side of her head.

Her eyes widened in surprise as the swollen head of his penis pushed between her pussy lips. At some point between the marvelous release he gave her and their fall in a tangled heap on the ground, he managed to free his cock from his britches. “Smooth, romantic, and tender,” she said softly, her hands finding the grip they searched for only moments before, now in the corded muscles of his shoulders. “What more could a woman ask for in a cowboy?”

The answer to the question flittered through her mind, but she just as quickly jostled it aside. Marriage. That's what a woman could ask for, a lifetime commitment from the man she loved.

"Amazing, lovely, and feisty," Adam countered as he eased his cock all the way inside her aching channel. "What more could a cowboy ask for in a lady?"

The way his cock filled her, stretched her, felt nothing short of utter bliss. Her body sang from the penetration. Her inner muscles clamped around his shaft in an effort to hold his cock captive as he deliberately pulled back. Her hold eased only slightly as he sank inside her core once more.

A bead of sweat trickled down his temple. She reached up to wipe it away. "I am your lady, Adam Stonewell," she felt compelled to say, though she harbored no doubt he already knew.

He didn't say anything in return but instead captured her mouth in another of those searing kisses that sped her straight up the side of the orgasmic mountain despite the ride's tender slowness. Her hands moved to the small of his back, holding him closer, marveling in the way the muscles flexed in his back and buttocks as he pushed inside her. When he erupted, she came with him, her body quaking from a force no less debilitating than the last, as he bathed her channel in his hot cum.

Breathless and spent, Lara didn't move a muscle as he rolled off her to lie at her side, his arm strapped possessively over her waist. Her eyes fluttered closed as she expelled another of her truly contented sighs, but her happiness wavered when a set of eyes so like Adam's but blue in color, filled her darkened vision.

\* \* \* \*

Adam splayed his hand on Lara's belly, the ache to feel that flat part of her rounded with his child as bone deep and intense as ever. Despite his desire to stay like this until the end of time, he knew they



should be going before a ranch hand came upon them in their most precarious state. Still, he couldn't find the strength to do more than rise to one elbow, the better to gaze down at her. He hadn't missed the shadow that darkened her extraordinary eyes just before she closed them. The remnants of it settled now in the slight frown that marred her luscious lips.

"I love you, Lara."

Her eyes opened at his whispered declaration, her expression softening. "Oh, Adam, I know. As you should know that I love you."

He did, of course, though she rarely said the words aloud. He figured it hard for her to admit the depth of her feelings when he knew he didn't possess her heart alone.

"Were you thinking about him just now?" He needed to ask, to know.

"Yes." Tears trembled on the edge of her voice.

She didn't attempt to lie, to hide her thoughts of Luke. It pleased Adam that she would give him truth no matter how tainted by pain. A strand of her golden hair flirted with the corner of her troubled hazel eye. He brushed it down with the back of his thumb. "Don't fret over it."

Lara bolted upright. She grappled for the bodice of her gown, covering her breasts as she glared at him incredulously. "Don't fret over what exactly, Adam? Don't fret over Luke? Don't fret over you? Don't fret over the fact that I can't get your brother out of my mind even when I've so recently made love with you?"

Damn if the woman didn't become even more beautiful when she got angry, Adam mused as he watched her. Color rose to redden her cheeks as her hazel eyes flashed beneath a veil of long lashes. Her blond hair tumbled in waves around her face and down her back to graze at the cleft of her delectable ass. Her body exuded pure wicked temptation, and her personality fit that of the devil's siren.

He allowed a grin to unfold on his lips, knowing it would only serve to stroke her temper's flame. "All of that."

“But...but...” She sputtered and then all the fight seemed to leave her in an instant. Her shoulders slumped, and she turned more fully to face him. “Adam, I’m sor—”

He held a finger to her lips and finished her sentence for her. “You’re not going to apologize for anything you think or feel.”

Still, she tried anyway. “But I’m—”

“A wonderful, beautiful, sexy spitfire that I love with all my heart,” he said, cutting her off again. He sat up and pulled her closer. He helped her put her dress back on her shoulders and fastened the front closed before guiding her to sit in his lap. “It’s all right, sweetheart.” He caught the side of her head and eased it down to rest on his shoulder. “I know Luke is never far from your mind. He’s never far from my own.”

“It’s so unfair to you.” She rolled her head on his shoulder to look up at him. “You’re not my second choice,” she told him, her tone vehement in its conviction. “I love you, too. You know that, right?”

Adam nodded. “I do.” He never doubted it for an instant. Her love for him burned just as strong as it did for Luke, just as his and his brother’s love for her burned equal and ferocious. He and Luke intended to share her. No other answer made sense. She belonged to them both, right until the night Luke banished himself from the territory.

Hell, who did Adam think he could kid with that? She still belonged to them both even if Luke remained nowhere to be found.

“Do you think he’ll come back, Adam? Do you think if he gets wind of what happened to your pa, Luke will come back to help with the ranch?”

The hope that quavered in her voice sliced at Adam’s heart. He tightened his arms around her waist, offering the only comfort he knew he could give. The Lord knew his words wouldn’t help any. “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

Lara shook her head and went on as if she hadn't heard him. "He won't come back for that. He would know he doesn't have to be here for the ranch. He knows you will take care of this land."

Adam sighed. He couldn't stake an argument to that. "Best we can hope for is that he comes back to see how Pa's making it after the accident. Luke cares about Pa. I can't imagine he'd stay away after what's happened to him."

"Why not? Luke already proved his belief in justice holds higher than love." Lara got to her feet. Though she kept her back to him, Adam could tell by the way she stood that she'd crossed her arms tightly around herself, wrapping her hands around her elbows for self-induced comfort. "Or maybe he didn't. Maybe he never..."

Adam rose as her words trailed off. The implication in her words, her tone, hit his gut like a heavy stone. He stepped to her back, folding his arms beneath hers at her waist. "He loved you." He put as much assurance in the statement as he could muster, needing her to believe the truth for no other reason than to spare her more pain. God, he could hate his brother for what he did to their woman.

Lara looked at him over her shoulder. The glimmer of tears she blinked away tore at his very soul. She kissed him, a light brush of her lips to his, and nodded. "I know." Her voice cracked, and she swallowed visibly. "We should be getting back. There's still that line of fence to the west you haven't checked."

## Chapter Two

Lara listened to her father's objections even as she reminded herself how grateful she felt that nothing tragic befell him like what happened to Adam's pa. As her father ran out of steam, she squared her shoulders and prepared her own arguments in favor of what she wanted. Rather than face him, she dragged the cloth over the already pristine surface of the bar and spoke loud enough for him to hear her. "I'll be fine, Pa. I've proved many times over that I can handle the customers we get on a Monday night." If anyone came in at all, which would likely be the case. Their biggest customers came from the neighboring ranches shortly after quitting time and generally only on Friday or Saturday nights. They served the occasional straggler or passer through the remaining nights of the week.

"I still say working behind the bar isn't a fitting job for a lady, Lara," John Franklin grumbled. "I shouldn't allow it, shouldn't have ever let it start in the first place."

"But you did, and you're not stopping it now." Lara turned toward her father, the loving smile on her lips coming as easy as the swell of pride in her heart. Edging upon fifty with a head of graying hair and a formidable face despite being etched by lines and wrinkles, darned if her father didn't appear to be getting more handsome the older he got. "You need me behind this bar. You can't work this place by yourself all the time. Anyways, I like working back here, Pa. You know that."

"Only 'cause I messed up raising you," John argued. "No self-respecting lady ever got brought up to work behind a bar."

Lara angled her head and planted her balled fists on her hips. "This self-respecting lady did, and I won't have you blaming yourself

for the way you raised me. I like my life, and I enjoy serving drinks behind this bar, so go back there and hole up with your friends for a few hours. I'll be fine out here."

John's brows drew together, and his lips pursed. "Sure didn't raise you to talk proper to your Pa neither, did I?"

Lara giggled and tossed down the bar cloth. She walked to her father and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek. "You raised me to say exactly what's on my mind, and that's precisely what I just did. Now go." She grabbed his shoulders, turned him around, and gave him a lightly forceful push forward. "If I need anything, I know where to find you, and Adam is right there, too." She tipped her chin at Adam sitting at the piano in the far corner. "I'm not alone. I'll be just fine."

"Yes." He covered her hand on his shoulder with his own and gave it a quick squeeze. "I expect you will."

Lara watched him until he disappeared into the back room where several of his poker friends already waited. After a moment, she shook her head and let a soft chuckle escape. She loved her father and understood full well his desire to see her happy because she harbored the same hope for him. He'd lost so much, suffered so much, and none of it by his own doing.

"He worries about you." Adam's words cut into her thoughts. Melodic chords in an upbeat rhythm followed his statement and then the piano grew silent once more. "It's a man's place to worry about a woman, whether daughter or wife."

Lara nodded and returned to her spot behind the bar. He stayed here night after night, she knew, for exactly that reason. He used the excuse of playing the piano, and he enjoyed it. The enthusiasm in which he stroked the ivory keys left no doubt about that. Still, he spent his nights in the saloon to keep watch over her, to protect her.

"You're right, of course." She sighed. "It's only natural, I suppose. More than, given that I'm all he's got." Her mother had died of typhoid fever shortly after Lara's birth. Though she nudged him into a social engagement or three over the years, her father never

remarried. He was a business man rather than a rancher, born to the unlikely combination of a banker and a whore. He opened the saloon, seeing the lack of a watering hole in this part of the territory and the opportunity to cash in on a livelihood for his family.

Though she remembered nothing of her mother, Lara heard tale that Lucille Franklin loved the idea of owning a saloon and often sang along with the pianist on any given night the mood struck her. She held on to her reputation as a lady, too, Lara mused, and was the favored one of the town of Wildwood after Jeb's birth.

Lara's gaze shifted to the door of the saloon and fell slowly to the dusty wooden floor. She could still see his body sprawled there, still see the blood, though two years had passed since that horrible evening. She still felt the pang of horror, too, the deep-set sadness at the loss of her brother. As the oldest by close to three years, Jeb stepped in to help raise Lara after their mother's passing. He'd worked the saloon, too, and taught her what she knew of serving behind the bar, right up until the night he'd been shot down walking through the door.

She shivered as the memories of that fearful night chilled her blood. Pushing them away, she turned around and shot a wide smile at Adam. "Play something, will you, Adam? Play something upbeat and exciting."

Adam waggled his brows. His return smile widened so that it reached his sparkling emerald eyes. "As my lady requests." He touched the brim of his cowboy hat, tipping his head at her slightly, and then his fingers began the exotic dance over the piano keys that she loved to hear.

Lara watched him for a long while, her elbows propped on the bar, her attention fixated on the glorious male specimen at the piano. Adam Stonewell proved a man of many talents. No doubt about them apples. Poetry, music, and magic all wrapped into one. She drank in the sight of him. His handsome face set in an expression of intense concentration. The muscles of his upper body rippled as he moved to

the song's beat. His fingers worked the ivory keys, stroking them with an eroticism that tightened her nipples and wet her folds. She knew how those talented fingers would feel on her flesh, moving in much the same way they did on the piano.

Adam glanced up, his gaze slamming into hers, and his eyes flashed with a knowledge that told her he knew precisely the thoughts going through her mind. He licked his lips and dropped his gaze suggestively down her upper body in a slow glide that affected her as viscerally as a physical caress. She sucked in a breath, shivering as his gaze climbed her body once more. *The sly dog*. He knew precisely what that kind of look from him did to her. He wanted to play dirty? Fine. Two could play that game.

She gave him a sultry look beneath the veil of her lashes as she turned her back to him. She stepped to the side until she knew her back would be in full view around the edge of the bar and then wiggled her hips to the beat. He threw his head back and laughed, the sound so joyous it carried over the song.

Lara laughed, too. She preferred slow nights such as this, when only she and Adam occupied the saloon. It didn't put money in her father's pockets, but it put a peaceful, playful fun in her heart.

Hips swinging, she busied herself wiping the mugs and cups behind the bar. A part of her mind registered the stumble of the music as Adam's fingers fumbled the chords. Her entire world stopped a split-second later at the unyielding wall of muscle that pressed to her back.

Everything inside and out of Lara froze, her breath catching, her movements ceasing as the impossibility swirled with the hope in her belly and heart. There should've been fear for a set of wide, strong, unforgiving hands clasped her hips, holding her steady. The breath she managed to draw in should've given her the strength to scream. Instead, she used it to draw in the woodsy scent of a man she likely should've given up on long ago, but never quite found herself able to do.

“I always loved the way you moved.” The warmth of his breath fanned her earlobe, his voice as dangerously erotic and devilish as she remembered.

Unable to stop herself, Lara covered the hands on her hips with hers and gave her hips another suggestive sway. He stood so close that her lower back rubbed his groin, the evidence of his stiffening cock apparent against her spine.

“Jesus, Miss Franklin, you still know how to drive me loco.” Luke Stonewell growled and nipped her earlobe with his teeth before stepping away from her with the speed of a man who suddenly got burned.

\* \* \* \*

Luke figured if he’d been marked by a dozen cattle brands his flesh wouldn’t burn as badly as it did after those few short seconds of holding Lara Franklin’s lithe body against him after two long years. He knew better than to come here, knew he should’ve stayed as far from the golden-haired angel of his dreams as possible. Yet the saloon called to him like a demon in the night, beckoning him to come a calling the minute he hit Wildwood.

Damn if walking through that door hadn’t been the hardest thing he’d ever done in his miserable excuse for a life.

“Luke?” She said his name questioningly as if afraid she might be wrong.

She didn’t turn. For a fleeting instant, he hoped she wouldn’t. He thought about running, about hightailing it out of the saloon the same way he came in. Maybe if he left without another word she would think this a hallucination. He knew better, of course. Even if he could escape her sight, Adam sat at the piano in the corner of the open room. His brother saw him enter, watched as he made a beeline straight for Lara, and continued to play his song to the last note. Luke figured his brother didn’t wish to draw suspicion from anyone who



might be in the back or walking by outside. The silence now fell over the saloon like a thick blanket, heavy with speculation and anticipation. Luke knew Adam wouldn't say anything. His brother would bide his time, wait his turn till Luke finished with Lara.

He thought he'd finished with her when he rode out of town. He'd been wrong. He tested his fate by walking through that door tonight. When his gut clenched at Lara's next softly spoken words, he knew nothing beyond the surrender of a doomed man.

"Tell me it's really you, Luke."

The plea in her tone made his throat ache. He swallowed before he could answer. "Yes, Lara, it's me."

She whirled around fast enough to stir the heated air between them. Her amazing features brightened with unmistakable elation and love. He saw in her eyes that every ounce of feeling he knew she once harbored for him remained. He realized only then that he'd feared it would be gone. The beaming smile that spread her lips and the glimmer of tears that sparkled like diamonds in her eyes put to rest any lingering concerns of that.

"It is you. Oh, Luke, it is you."

Luke acted on reflex as she catapulted herself into his arms. He caught her, a hand on the back of her head, the other beneath her rump, and simply held her for a long time. She smelled of lavender and daisies, just as he remembered. The same scents that haunted his dreams and tormented his days. He closed his eyes, reveling in the moment, knowing he'd be forced to let her go again soon enough.

"I always knew you'd come back."

He opened his eyes to find her mouth so close her breath fanned his lips. "Look at you." He couldn't stop looking at her, at the fine lines on her long forehead, the perfect arch of her sunny brows, the shining hazel of her eyes, the narrow bridge of her nose, the succulent bow of her wickedly tempting lips. "You're even more beautiful than before."

A single tear trickled down her lovely cheek. He watched its descent, hating himself for making her cry even if the tears represented happiness. No doubt these weren't the first tears she'd shed over him, and likely the others hadn't been ones of joy.

Luke opened his mouth to speak, though he didn't know what he might say. Before he could figure it out, Lara closed the distance between their lips, boldly capturing his mouth in a kiss of pure hunger and heady desire. She shoved her hands into his hair, knocking his cowboy hat to the floor, and devoured him like a woman starved.

She didn't hold anything back. Despite what he knew of her, how he'd been drawn from the first by her spitfire tenacity and lust for life, her reaction left him too dumbfounded to stop her. He tasted every emotion he witnessed on her face in the kiss, the happiness, the relief, the love. He damned himself for not staying away. Two years didn't bring justice to the things he did to this woman of his heart. They didn't make up for the crime he committed. He'd banished himself from the town, the whole territory, and meant it for life. Anyone else would've never been permitted to return.

Yet, here he stood, with Lara Franklin's long legs locked around his waist, her shapely rear resting on his arm, her delicious tongue in his mouth, and her salty-sweet tears transferring to his face. No, two years served no justice at all. He should've been hanged for what he'd done, not allowed to all but pick up where he left off.

"Luke."

Dimly, Luke registered Adam's voice penetrating the cacophony of turmoil clogging his brain. It took another full heartbeat before Lara let him end the kiss. Even then, he found it necessary to angle his head to see around her to where Adam now stood at her back.

*This is how it's supposed to be.*

The thought hit Luke with so much force and pain he damned near dropped her. She wouldn't have fallen far in any case, sandwiched this way between his body and Adam's. His gaze locked with Adam's, and he saw that his brother's thoughts mirrored his. He'd left

before they made it right with Lara, before they claimed her as theirs. He knew he should leave again the same way, but it seemed someone had nailed his boots to the floor and put a lithe and wanton woman in his arms. How in hell did a cowboy fight that?

“It’s good to have you back, brother.” Adam sounded sincere enough. His expression backed up his words. Still, Luke couldn’t help but wonder at the truth in the statement. Surely he had staked his claim to Lara by now. He had the woman, *their* woman, all to himself.

Which is how it was meant to be now, Luke reminded himself as he gradually lowered Lara to stand between them. He broke out in a cold sweat as her body slid down his. Her supple curves glided over his less pliant muscles in a way that made his cock scream in agony and left his head feeling drunker than it did after a bottle of whisky.

Adam appeared to catch on real quick, the corners of his lips twitching in a grin he made a miserable attempt to hide. “I’ll cover the bar. Why don’t you and Miss Franklin take this reunion upstairs?”

Luke blinked at his brother, but before he could respond, Lara turned between them. She cupped Adam’s cheek and brushed a kiss to his lips. “Thank you.”

Adam nodded, returned her kiss, and then eased away, a world of knowledge and love in his eyes. His gaze shifted from her to Luke, and he nodded again, this time almost imperceptibly. They never needed words to communicate. They didn’t need them now. That motion indicated Adam’s agreement and understanding.

How in hell did a cowboy fight that? Luke wondered again, but this time the answer came quick. The cowboy didn’t fight. He simply couldn’t. Not yet, at least.

Luke reached to tip his hat at his brother before remembering Lara knocked it off when she jumped him. He could’ve sworn he heard Adam chuckle as Lara grabbed Luke’s hand and tugged him toward the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Lara feared her heart might pound out of her chest. Her body shook from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes, inside and out. Nervousness, excitement, and an acute arousal burned like wildfire through her veins. She didn't dare speak, didn't dare think, as she led Luke up the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor. Her bedroom sat situated in the farthest corner of the hall across from a larger room her father integrated as a parlor. The building that housed the saloon once served as a brothel before its madam and her girls got run out of town by a band of outlaws intent on staking claim to them all. That happened shortly before John Franklin rode in with his lovely wife Lucille to set up stakes and turn the two-story building into a respectable business.

Luke followed her willingly. She half expected him to fight, to at least admonish her for her brash approach downstairs and even more audacious actions now. She couldn't help herself.

*Glory be to God, he came back.*

As much as she loved Adam, and she did love Adam with every ounce of her heart, he'd been right yesterday when he pegged her on loving Luke just as much.

Practically giddy, her vision still blurry with tears of joy, she yanked Luke through the doorway of her bedroom. Only then did she release his hand. She twirled around, her skirt ballooning, her lips smiling so she likely looked a loon. Luke closed the door behind them, but then looked back at it as if he wished he'd left it open.

Lara couldn't take her eyes off him. He looked bigger, taller, broader than she remembered, and more handsome too. Where Adam possessed the charm and refined, though virile, good looks, Luke had always been the more rugged brother, dangerously spectacular and just a little scary.

That light edge of fear shivered through her now as their gazes met. "I prayed you would come back."

*Every night for two torturously long years.*

A muscle in his jaw worked as he stared at her. His gaze dropped from hers, falling in a leisurely glide down her body. Even though the thin material of her dress, the intensity of want in the way he looked at her sent her teetering on the edges of madness. Her breath hitched as she all but felt his concentration on her breasts like a physical caress. No, she amended as her nipples leapt to rapid and throbbing attention, not a caress. Luke didn't do gentle, he didn't do slow. He would grope, consume, possess just as his focus on her body did now.

Her belly quivered as his attention shifted down. Creamy arousal gathered along the folds of her sex when his awareness settled on the spot between her thighs. Hunger blazed in his bright blue eyes, turning them dark and predatory. She couldn't stop the quiet mewl that escaped her throat.

He jolted at the sound, quickly lifting his gaze to meet with hers again. He shoved a hand through his tousled dark hair. The movement screamed of frustration. "You prayed for me to come back? I don't know what the hell for." He stalked past her to the window and parted the curtains with the tip of one long finger.

Lara stared at his back, marveling at the play of muscles apparent through his shirt with each ragged breath he took. He'd never been one to be quick to anger. The ferocity in him now took her aback. She supposed it shouldn't have for she knew its source.

*Two years exiled and he hasn't come to terms with a darn thing.*

"I'm much obliged to you for setting me up with a room," he said more quietly, though his tone remained tight. "I won't trouble you long."

Lara gaped at him. Setting him up in a room? Wouldn't trouble her for long? The irritating man knew darned well this room belonged to her. "Luke Stonewell, don't be stupid."

He shot her a look over his broad shoulder, one brow raised. Though a hint of amusement sparkled in his expression, none sounded in his voice. "Name calling isn't very ladylike, Miss Franklin."

Lara scowled. "Like I care about being a lady at this point. You know darned good and well why I brought you up here, and it certainly had nothing to do with giving you my bed to take a load off, at least not in the ways of sleep, at least not for an hour or so anyways." She stopped when her irritation caused her to ramble. "You've got a perfectly good ranch to stay at and a room that's the same as when you left. If all you want to do is sleep, you best be headed that way now. It'll be late and your ma and pa will be down for the night by the time you get there."

Luke shook his head. "Still saying exactly what's in that pretty little head of yours, aren't you?"

Lara planted her balled fists on her hips. "And you expected that to change?"

That got a low chuckle out of him. He turned fully from the window. "No, can't say as I did. Truth be told, I figured you and Adam would be hitched by now, holed up in his room at the ranch."

Lara couldn't hold his gaze. "He hasn't asked me," she admitted in a voice low enough to make her cringe. Embarrassment heated her cheeks, and her temper sparked higher. Damn the man for putting her in this place! She'd waited for what felt like her whole life to be Lara Stonewell. Okay, so she never knew for certain which brother she wanted most to marry. How could a woman be expected to choose between two of God's finest creations, Luke and Adam Stonewell?

As the oldest of the brothers, she came to the decision Luke would eventually stake his claim. Then that horrible night ripped him from her life and she'd been left with only Adam's arms to catch her. For two years, she waited for Adam to propose. The man oozed romance from every pore. He mapped out his entire life and followed it to the letter. She even knew herself to be one of those frigging letters. He took her virginity, professed his undying love, but never once even hinted at the prospect of marriage.

"And you called me stupid," Luke muttered. "What do you mean, he hasn't asked you? He's bedded you, hasn't he?"

Lara raised her gaze. The urge to chastise him for asking something so personal sprang to the tip of her tongue. She bit it back. He had every right to ask such a question, and he deserved an answer. “Nearly every single day,” she said and marveled at the jealousy that sparked in Luke’s eyes.

Could that be why Adam never asked her to marry him? Had he merely been waiting for Luke to return and take her? Was that why Luke came back?

She didn’t dare ask the mountain of questions forming in her mind and burning her tongue.

“That no good, stupid, coward sonuvabitch.” Luke sounded livid. He stalked to the door, his intent on marching straight out and down the stairs to confront his brother apparent in the heaviness of his steps.

Lara shot a hand out, catching his bicep in as tight a grip as she could muster around all that toned muscle. She couldn’t hold him back if he wanted out bad enough. Not with brute strength alone. But with words, maybe she could make him stay. “Don’t, Luke. Stay with me.” She couldn’t hide the plea in her tone and didn’t even try. “Make love to me.”

The obvious torment raging in his innards tightened his muscles beneath her hand. He stood rigid, stone still like a statue, one hand frozen on the door. When she sensed a break in his intended departure, she dared to release her hold on his bicep, only to graze her palm down the corded muscles of his elbow and forearm.

With great caution not to spook him, she moved in at his back. He stood nearly a full foot taller. She rose on her tiptoes to reach his shoulder blades. She rested her cheek there, encircling his narrow waist and pressing her front against him. “Stay with me, Luke.” She boldly dipped a hand down to cover his cock, already hard and straining against the material of his Levi’s. “I’ve waited so long to be with you.”

“Christ almighty, Lara.” He breathed through clenched teeth. His head fell forward to rest on the wall by the door.

Lara took it as a good sign when he didn't attempt to move away or stop her. She pulled his shirt from the confines of his pants and lifted it up. She couldn't get it high enough to pull it over his head, so she settled for holding it at his shoulders, leaning in to plant tiny kisses along his back. She delighted when her tongue along his spine made him shiver.

"Help me." She tugged at his shirt by way of explanation and then left it to him to see it removed, favoring to have both hands free to explore the ropes of muscle and tanned flesh of his back. An angry scar just beneath his right shoulder blade gave her pause. It appeared fairly new, the skin tender and a stark white contrast to the darker flesh around it. She'd seen a few gunshot wounds in her day. Recognizing this as something different gave her a modicum of relief. A knife or possibly even an arrow seemed more likely. Either still could've dealt the hand of death. She said a quick prayer of thanks that she hadn't lost someone else she loved.

Her perusal of his back led her to his waist where her hands met with the band of his pants. She knew better than to mess with a man's gun belt so she trailed her fingers along the edge of it, giving Luke a clear indication of what she wanted and hoping he wouldn't take too long to get the hint. When she got tired of waiting, she cleared her throat. "Are you going to get rid of it, or do you want me to?"



## Chapter Three

Luke possessed half a mind to use it on her. Not the gun, of course, but surely the belt, right across her lovely backside. The mental image of her smooth bare flesh spectacularly reddened by a good arousing spanking made his cock harder than a rock. He expelled a low curse as he caught her wrist and whirled on her.

“Don’t you know it ain’t fitting for a girl to make the first moves on a man?” His teeth hurt from clenching them so hard when he’d really rather sink them into the tantalizing mounds of her breasts.

A bolt of electric temper shot through her luminous eyes. “You made the first move a long time ago, Luke Stonewell. You just didn’t stick around to prove yourself man enough to follow up.”

The jab stabbed like a knife to the gut. Her eyes widened, the realization that she pushed too hard keen in her gaze. He released her wrist and knew he should push her away right then. Instead, he scooped her into his arms and trotted her to the bed, depositing her on the edge with no measure of care. If she wanted sensitivity, she could find that with Adam. With Luke, she’d get a whole lot more.

“I’ll do it.” He leveled a pointed gaze on her as he removed his gun belt. It hit the floor by his booted foot. The small thud it made sounded like a death nail in his coffin. “And, by the time I’m through, you’ll know exactly what kind of man you’ve challenged, sweetheart.”

Lara got to her knees on the bed, the position putting him eye-level with her breasts as he sat down next to her and wrenched off his boots. “Luke, I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” Her tone held

more apology than fear. His threat didn't faze her in the least. The fact that she might have hurt him did.

Luke snaked an arm around her trim waist and drew her close, the fight leaving him as quickly as it came. Her fingers slipped into his hair. That simple touch felt so good he couldn't stop his head from falling to rest on her chest. He breathed deep, making himself drunk on her sweetly feminine scent.

*You don't deserve this, don't deserve her.*

He knew that to be true, and knew with even more certainty, he should be hanged for even coming within ten feet of her, let alone close enough to hold, to smell, to take.

*Just once.*

He needed to have her just once before he rode off again. He could find no justification in the permission he gave himself right then to steal one precious moment beyond a man's desires and a bone deep love he felt for her damned near his entire life. Face still buried in her bosom, he reached for the collar of her gown. It fastened down the back, a string of buttons that began at her nape and ended at her waist.

Neither time nor patience presented themselves on his side. Luke gripped the thin material of her dress and yanked. Buttons popped, flying through the air to hit the wall with a faint sound of chilling finality. She gasped in surprise, and for the first time, he sensed a shiver of trepidation move through her.

Good. She should fear him just a little. When he lost his grip on control, the way he felt it slipping now, he scared himself a little. He didn't wish to hurt her, hoped he could hold on well enough to prevent that, but he wanted her to know him from Adam. He wanted her to remember this time long after he left. God knew he'd never forget.

Luke lifted his head. He didn't meet her gaze. He couldn't just yet. He focused on her body instead, on the smooth expanse of silky flesh at her throat, the delicate line of her collarbone, the first peeks of her breasts as he peeled the dress from her upper body. He unwrapped

her like a present, his actions quick and excited like a child on Christmas morning, unable to stand another moment of suspense as to what the package contained. And what a package he unraveled!

“Christ, you’re beautiful.” The declaration barely rolled from his lips before he closed said lips over her right nipple. Her back arched, thrusting her breast into his mouth. A small strangled cry of surprise fueled his hunger as he began to feast. He worked her nipple with his lips, rolling the hardened bud to a fine point and then closing his teeth around it in a not so gentle bite that drew another cry from her.

Luke eased back even as his hand found her left nipple. He rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing it in much the same way his teeth did to her right. “I won’t be gentle, Lara,” he warned. The devil inside him gave a devious laugh at the way she slithered like a cobra to a song from his assault on her nipples. “I won’t go slow.”

“I...don’t...want gentle.” Her words spewed on ragged breaths. “Don’t...want slow.” Her glassy gaze, darkened with an expression of pleasure despite the wicked flickers of pain he dealt, met his. At least, he thought he saw pleasure there. He needed to know before he went any further.

“Tell me if I hurt you.” He got to his feet, though his hands stayed on her breasts. He continued to knead, to roll and pinch, to memorize the shape and texture of her weighted flesh. She turned with his movement, her body following his touch.

“You’re hurting me.”

Luke stilled until he caught the smirk playing with the corner of her lips. If the devil possessed his insides, then she proved herself the vixen to match. He lifted a brow and squeezed both her nipples just a little harder in turn. Her eyes rolled back, her lids closing, her lips forming an O as another jagged breath rushed from her lungs.

“Allow me to rephrase. Tell me if I hurt you in any way you don’t like.”

Lara gulped and opened her eyes, the conviction and lust in their hazel depths so acute it made his head spin and his balls sting. “I like. I want more. Fuck me, Luke. Take me hard and fast.”

Luke’s nut sac pulsed in agony as if a whip slashed at the tender skin. “Christ, woman, where did you learn such language?” He didn’t give her time to answer, but caught her in one arm and flipped her onto her stomach across the bed. She let out a small yelp, but lay as he put her, turning only her head to lie on one cheek. Her golden hair fanned over the blanket, her body naked from the waist up, sprawled languidly but for the irregular rise and fall of her shoulders with each breath.

He made quick work of his pants, shucking them down and off before reaching for what remained of her dress. He lifted her lower body with one arm and yanked off the gown with the other. Then she lay naked from head to toe, her body so magnificent he froze for a long moment to simply look at her. Clothed, the woman gave a new meaning to beautiful. Naked, she put every man’s wet dream and devious fantasy to shame.

“I use whatever language is necessary in the moment. You should remember I never balk at saying what I want, Luke Stonewell. My daddy taught me to always speak my mind. Or have you forgotten that about me?”

“What your daddy should’ve done is take a belt to this marvelous ass of yours, Miss Franklin,” Luke countered, gliding his palm over one half-moon cheek. He smirked when her butt muscles flexed visibly from his touch. “That might’ve taught you to speak like a real lady.”

“Daddy would never do such a thing. Luke, you wouldn’t either, right?” Question resounded in her tone now, the word underlined with just a hint of that feeding fear.

Luke’s smirk grew right along with his cock. He pushed her legs apart and settled on his knees between them, his palm drawing lazy circles on first her right ass cheek and then her left. “Absolutely

perfect,” he muttered more to himself than her. An ass such as hers left a man no choice but to welcome the view and feel. Too bad for him, the throbbing in his cock wouldn’t allow him to appreciate it for long. “Don’t fret, sweetheart. I can’t take playing daddy’s role just now.”

One arm still locked around her waist, he lifted her to her knees, positioning himself to mount. Flexible and apparently eager, she pushed herself to her elbows. She shot him a wicked look over her shoulder that put him in mind of the very vixen he’d already deemed her to be.

“Whether I always speak like a lady or not doesn’t make me some wild animal you’re about to mate.”

“Doesn’t it?” Luke rubbed the tip of his cock over her swollen labia. She shuddered, her hips attempting to rock back, to pull the head of his dick between her slickened folds. He gritted his teeth in his struggle to keep her from getting her way. He gave her what she seemed to want in part, reaching between her thighs to plunge two fingers side by side into her opening.

He couldn’t be sure he ever heard himself make the sound that rumbled from his throat as he penetrated her soft channel. “Jesus, you’re wet. You’re going to try to tell me you aren’t a wild animal waiting for my cock, darlin’?” He pumped his fingers in her pussy, marveling at the slopping sounds her juices made, delighting himself in the sweet female aroma that wafted up from between their bodies. “Tight, too. You’re gonna milk my cock real fast with the tight muscles in this pussy, aren’t you, Lara?”

“Yes, oh, God, Luke.” She writhed on the bed, thrusting her hips back on his fingers. Her head lolled from side to side.

“I like having you this way, at my mercy, in the perfect position for taking. I’m going to take you now, Lara. Are you ready for me, sweetheart?”

“Please.” She whimpered when he pulled his fingers from her sopping wetness, only to make an inarticulate sound when he propelled his cock inside her channel to the hilt.

Luke froze, buried in her flaming heat more deeply than he thought it possible for a man to go, and threw his head back as inexplicable sensations raced through his soul. The thought of heaven came first. He’d found heaven, and the gate opened for him, closing around him and holding him captive despite the crimes of his past. A razor-sharp blade of concern followed closely behind that thought. It worried him that he might have truly hurt her by plunging inside her so briskly. Then she started to move, pulling her hips forward until his cock nearly slipped free before she bucked back onto him again, driving his cock deeper still in a single, fluid motion.

One final thought clouded his conscious before he became engulfed in a world of ecstasy. *Doom*. Yes, he’d doomed himself but good now. Turning back no longer presented an option.

Accepting his fate, at least for the moment, he gripped her hips and did as she requested. He fucked her. Knees digging into the mattress, his grip on her sides solid and strong, he pistoned his cock into her velvety, soaking depth until her inner muscles convulsed around his shaft, milking the cum right out of the slit in his cock.

Only when he collapsed, panting and soaked with perspiration beside her, did his sanity return. Regret slammed into him like a bullet from a double-barreled shotgun. He squeezed his eyes shut as the self-recrimination boiled in his veins. What had he done? Christ, he treated her like some two-bit whore rather than the woman who held his heart for most of his godforsaken life.

He felt her shift beside him on the bed. He reached for her, not risking a look on the chance that she might see all the compunction he felt after his vicious assault on her body. He couldn’t face the pain he knew he’d see in her expression. He nearly drowned in the relief that washed over him when she cuddled her agile body in his arm.

She tugged at his hand, beckoning him to lie on his side, draping his other arm over her waist so that he hugged her close. “Stay,” she said softly, with no inflection in her tone beyond that of a truly pleased and sated woman.

Obviously, he hadn’t hurt her with his vicious lovemaking. He supposed that would’ve been too easy, for pain to the body held no comparison to that of the heart. And, with that desolate thought, Luke drifted to sleep.

He woke hours later, his eyes flying open at a sharp, staccato sound. He reached for his gun on reflex before deeming it out of his reach. Damn, when did he last allow his gun to rest more than a few inches from his fingertips?

Lara stirred at his side, her hand on his abdomen gliding up to cover his heart. She made a soft sound of contentment before settling again into a peaceful slumber.

Luke closed his eyes, the answer to his question a warm presence of female perfection in his arm. The last time he allowed himself solace from even the thought of his gun happened before he’d torn his woman’s life apart with it.

The sound came again, registering this time as a knock at the door. Disgusted with himself for the past, the present, for each frigging breath he took, Luke shimmied out from under Lara, careful not to wake her, and got to his feet. Figuring it best not to answer the door unarmed and buck naked, he slid into his pants and snatched up his gun belt from the floor on his way to the door.

“We’ve got trouble.” Adam sounded grimmer than Luke had ever heard him as he flung open the door to find his brother standing there.

Luke shot a glance over his shoulder, his gaze landing on the still sleeping Lara. She had barely moved an inch from her sideways sprawl across the bed after their lovemaking. Could at least cover her, he thought, but rather than return to the bed to do just that, he dragged his attention from the glorious curves and tantalizing planes of her body. He walked into the hall, closing the door behind him.

"Is Lara sleeping?" Adam kept his voice low, but the edge of urgency remained in his tone.

Luke nodded. "You said trouble. What kind of trouble?"

"Just got word the Desert Riders are headed this way. It's expected they'll be here in about two days' time."

Luke expected the notorious gang of dangerous outlaws to reach town sooner than that, but he kept that much to himself. Adam stared at him, no doubt waiting for the type of reaction he would've gotten from Luke two years ago at such news. Instead, Luke gave his brother silence.

Adam narrowed his eyes. "This isn't news to you, is it?"

*Observant sonuvabitch.*

Luke averted his gaze. "You've got established law in this town now. Leave it to the sheriff to handle them."

"That's why you came back." Adam sounded convinced. Luke figured not a word to the contrary would make his brother believe otherwise, so he didn't bother. "You knew the bastards planned to hit here next. I thought you came back because of Pa, but that's not it. You didn't know the town elected a sheriff until you got here."

"And, if I'd known beforehand, I would've never come back." If he'd been smart, he would've rode out the second he realized the order of the town now rested in the hands of the legal law. Instead, he continued on, unable to put out the burn in his loins, his heart, his very soul to simply lay eyes on Lara again.

*Eyes, you dumb shit. You were supposed to catch a peek at her and go. Not sink your cock into her sweet heat and fuck her to oblivion like a cheap, no-good whore.*

She deserved better than the way he fucked her. He berated her for not speaking like a lady, but damned if he took her like one. There was little he could do to change it now. Even as he resigned himself to that fact, he realized Adam had made mention of something he hadn't caught.



“What about Pa?” Fear quickened his pulse, and his fingers flexed on the leather of his gun belt. He didn’t bother to strap it on, but held it in a tight grip at his side. He hadn’t bothered to fasten his pants either, he realized, but figured that didn’t matter in the least. His brother might be soft in a lot of ways and places, but his brain never proved one of them. The bastard all but sent Lara upstairs with Luke anyway. Surely he didn’t expect them to play frigging cards.

“The Stonewell gang is gathered downstairs.”

“What the hell for?”

“They know you’re back, and they’re looking to hook up.”

Luke raked a hand through his hair. “Word sure travels fast in this fucking town.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Then word should’ve traveled a long time ago that the Stonewell gang disbanded two years back.”

“No one disbanded,” Adam argued. “They’ve just been sitting back waiting for their leader to return. Jesse Dillinger got the jump on it all. He’s deputy sheriff these days and means to talk the sheriff into deputizing the rest of the gang, including you.”

“Like hell. He can talk all he wants. It isn’t going to happen.” Luke turned, paced down the length of the hall, and turned back. “No one is pinning a tin star to my chest.” He poked a finger at his bare chest where a short time ago Lara had touched him, licked him, and pressed her smooth flesh against him. “And there’s no such thing as the Stonewell gang anymore. In case you haven’t heard, the leader got himself banished from this town right after he shot down one of his own men in cold blood.”

“There’s not a soul in this town that sees anything that happened that night as—”

“Go home, Adam. Go to the ranch where you belong and let the law the people of this town put into place do its job.”

“The sheriff can’t fight his way out of a rucksack, Luke. I would’ve made a better lawman than that fool.”

“Then you should get started, brother, because there ain’t anyone else who’s going to take the job tonight. Better yet, do what I said and get out to the ranch before all hell breaks loose here. Take Lara with you and the judge, too. Get hitched while you’re out there like you should’ve done already. What the hell are you doing fucking her when you haven’t given the woman a name yet anyway?”

“That’s not how it’s supposed to be.” Adam’s voice got quieter, but his glare remained steady and intense. “You know that.”

Luke scoffed. “Yes, and I wasn’t supposed to murder her fucking brother. It’s how it’s going to be now, damn it, how you should’ve made it the minute I rode out of this town. Damn you for not seeing it done.”

Luke spun around, stalked back to the bedroom, and flung open the door. He slammed it behind him as his gaze locked with Lara’s. She sat up in the center of the bed, her expression clearly one of a woman who’d heard everything that just transpired out in the hall.

\* \* \* \*

Lara’s body heated as Luke’s gaze fell down her naked flesh. His attention lingered pointedly on her breasts, then slid lower to settle on her pussy. Something about the embers of fury blazing in his eyes made her want to reach for the blanket to cover herself, but she resisted the urge. Modesty hadn’t been her ally when she brought him to this room. Perhaps the lack of such a virtue would aide her in easing the pain that returned to harden his expression. Perhaps she might even get him to listen to reason.

“You didn’t murder Jeb.” The statement came out softer than she intended, but certain nevertheless.

Luke flinched. His gaze jerked up and met with hers before he quickly looked away. “What’s the matter with my pa?”

Lara studied his profile, taking in the stubble that shadowed his upper lip, cheeks and chin, the hard set to his jaw, the squared hold of

his shoulders. She knew Luke asked the same question of Adam out in the hall, but Adam never answered. The chore fell to her now, but as soon as she told him, he'd go tearing out of here. She needed answers of her own first.

"How was it supposed to be, Luke?" Her heart raced as she waited for him to respond. When he merely shook his head, she demanded, "Tell me what Adam meant by that."

"It doesn't matter."

Oh, but it did. It mattered so much. She hadn't heard everything the brothers said outside her door, but she'd heard enough. A band of outlaws headed toward their town. Luke had come back for that very reason. His belief in duty and justice was still so bone-deep he couldn't ignore the calling despite the ghosts that greeted him here. Then he discovered the law in these parts now rested on another man's shoulders. Luke meant to ride out as quickly as he rode in. The intent etched itself in his expression. He would leave again, likely as soon as he saw to his pa.

"How was it supposed to be, Luke?" Lara stood, wrapping herself in the blanket as she repeated the question and then waited once again for him to answer.

"Damn it, Lara." Luke whirled on her, his blue eyes shooting sparks. "I told you it doesn't matter. Whatever should've happened changed that night. It'll never be that way, so there is no use talking about it."

"Never be what way?" Lara met his temper with a feigned calmness, struggling not to cower away under the heat of his stare. "Whether you think there's use to talk about it or not, I want to. You owe me that much."

"I owe you what I gave you," Luke countered through clenched teeth. "A life without being forced every day to look at the bastard who shot down your brother."

Lara nodded. "A life without the privilege of looking every day at the man I love." When the tension-filled silence fell between them

once more, she reached the last of her patience. "Fine! You won't tell me, then I'll go to Adam."

She barely took two steps toward the door before Luke caught her upper arm and spun her around. The move set her off balance. Her free hand flew out, connecting with the hard muscle of his bare chest. The fire in his eyes apparently blazed through his whole body because it seeped into her palm at the contact. Her balance steadied, but her insides quivered anew.

"Are you planning to storm down there like that?" He dropped his gaze pointedly between their bodies, indicating her state of undress. One brow lifted along with one corner of his lips as he brought his attention back to her face. There should have been amusement in that quirk of brow and mouth. Instead, Lara saw a cocky derision that got her back up further.

She shot her chin higher in the air. "What if I am? What care is it of yours?"

"None, I suppose. I knew you gave your body to Adam, and you sure didn't waste any time letting me in on a piece. I expect I shouldn't be surprised you are willing to spread your legs for the rest of the Stonewell gang."

Lara slapped him. Her eyes widened as she gaped at him. Her mind whirled with the disbelief of what he said to her and her reflex reaction to the insult. A red welt, the perfect shape of her palm, colored his cheek. She expected to see a matching fury flaming in his eyes. Instead, she saw disgust. Not with her, but with himself. His tone, wrought with apology when he spoke again, proved that.

"The old gang is down in the saloon, Lara."

"Which is exactly where you should be." Her palm still stinging from the slap, she curled her fingers into fists before letting her hand fall to rest on his shoulder. "They're down there waiting for you."

"They'll be waiting a long time." He released his hold on her upper arm. He took a full step back, putting a cold distance between them. "I shouldn't even be in this town."

Lara breathed deeply for patience. “You didn’t murder Jeb.”

“Yes, well, the jury said I did.”

A humorless laugh rolled from Lara’s lips. “What jury? You were the only jury. You dealt your own sentence on the spot and wouldn’t hear anything against it.” She stopped and closed her eyes. She quickly opened them again when images of her brother sprawled on the saloon floor, bleeding out from a gunshot to the chest filled her vision. “You didn’t mean to shoot Jeb. Accidents happen, Luke.” She reached for him, needing to touch, needing to feel his warmth. She cupped the cheek she slapped, her thumb lightly caressing the smarting red mark. “You want to redeem my brother’s death and your actions, uphold the true justice you both believed in. That’s why you came back in the first place, isn’t it? Adam got that one right, didn’t he?”

Luke answered with a slow nod. His gaze locked with hers. The torment she saw in his incredible blue eyes tore at her heart.

“Then do what you came here to do,” she urged. “Get downstairs where you belong. Don’t leave it to Adam, Luke. He isn’t as strong as you, and he’s never been as tough.” She took a breath and played her trump card. “Your pa can’t take losing both his sons. He already feels he lost you. Seeing Adam dead will send your pa to his own grave. And the ranch,” she shook her head, “it won’t survive. Adam is the only one keeping the ranch going now.”

“Lara, I’m going to ask you one last time and, damn it, I want a fucking answer. What happened to Pa?”

“He lost a leg.” Lara bowed her head, unable to stand the pain and shock that moved through Luke’s expression.

“How?” Luke’s voice grew tight and dangerously quiet.

“Infection. He went out to drive the cattle to another part of the ranch. A coyote spooked his horse, and he took a fall. He landed on a rusted piece of tin. It stabbed into his thigh.” She lifted her head to find Luke staring down at her. His eyes glistened with tears. She could remember seeing tears in this man’s eyes only once, the night

he stood over his best friend's body. They ripped her apart now as much as they had then. Because she didn't miss the plea behind the tears, she continued. "He took care of it best he could and thought nothing more about it. Days later he fell sick. Doc Spivey tried to heal the wound, to rid it of the infection that spread through your pa, but it was too far gone. He had two choices."

"Amputate or dig Pa a grave," Luke finished for her in a tone barely above a whisper.

Lara nodded. "Adam tried to get word to you. He sent one of the ranch hands riding west. We, well, everyone figured you'd ridden that way."

"I knew they would. That's why I went north."

And never intended to return. The words hung unspoken in the air between them. He didn't have to put them to voice. Lara already knew he'd never meant to come back. He obviously did what he could, too, to make sure no one ever found him.

She wanted to ask him about the lands to the north. She'd heard stories of others who made the travel and all but drank up the images they painted of mountains and frigidly beautiful snow. Instead, she bottled her questions for another time, praying even as she plugged the lid that there would be another time.

"Tell me about the sheriff."

Lara's heart leapt to her throat, swelling with such hope she could barely manage to breathe around it. "His name is Wood Baird."

"An outsider." Luke turned, putting another few steps between them, and started to pace.

Lara watched him, afraid to hope, terrified not to. "Not anymore. He rode into town a few short months after you left. The Stonewell gang, the rest of the gang," she amended when he shot her an indecipherable look, "found the guy you meant to shoot that night."

"The one I mistook Jeb for," Luke whispered and kept on pacing. His long steps moved him across the short distance of the small room in four strides. He stared at his booted feet. Lara could've sworn she

saw the thought wheels turning in his head. “What did they do to him?”

*To him. Not with him.* Interesting choice of words, Lara mused. “Shot him down.” Though his shoulders flinched, she got the distinct impression he expected exactly what she told him. “No one challenged their action. No one even knows exactly who pulled the trigger. The gang’s been very close-lipped about that ever since.”

“No one challenged them, but they took in some stranger as sheriff.”

“You weren’t here anymore. Without you, the gang went their own ways, did their own things. Sheriff Baird rode in, heard what went down, planted the idea of an organized law in the minds of the townsfolk, and then took up the spot himself.”

“That nice and tidy, huh?” Luke grumbled.

“It should’ve been you. Taking up the office of sheriff, it would’ve been you if you hadn’t run.”

Luke’s pacing drew to an abrupt halt. He leveled a look at her that made her squirm beneath her skin. “I didn’t run,” he ground through gritted teeth. “I dealt myself the same justice I would’ve given any other who did what I did. I expelled myself from these parts.”

Lara met his intense anger with a penetrating calmness. She might be pushing her luck, but she saw no other way to handle this ornery man. “Perhaps, though accident-doers in the past generally got forgiven rather than banished. I expect it might have been easier though, leaving like that instead of facing the fact that you’re as human as everyone else around.”

Her breath caught in the next instant when Luke closed the short distance between them so quickly she hardly saw him move. He stopped, his face so close to hers that she smelled his breath, felt the heat of it as it fanned her nose.

“You’ve got a real smart mouth on you, Miss Franklin. It’s not fitting of a woman to pick fights with a man twice her size. I have half a mind to spank that disrespect right out of you.”

Lara's pussy flamed at the threat. The muscles in her butt cheeks gave an involuntary flex at the idea of his large, callused hand smacking her bared flesh. She locked her gaze with his and knew by the echoing embers in his eyes, the threat excited him just as much as it did her.

"Be my guest if you think you're man enough, Mr. Stonewell."

A low growl rumbled from his chest, an animalistic sound that told her she just might have pushed too far. "Challenging a cowboy's manhood will get that smart mouth in even deeper trouble." His arm roped around her waist, and he yanked her hard against him. His hand dropped to cup her ass, and he squeezed her butt cheek with no semblance of nicety.

Lara couldn't stop the tormented moan that left her throat. Her pussy throbbed. Her ass pulsed, wanting to feel the deliverance of his threat. If she dropped the blanket she still held covering her nakedness, his palm's pressure would be directly on her flesh.

"But that's what you're after, isn't it, Lara?" He dipped his head, roughly nipping her jaw. "You're after a good teaching on how to talk to a man. Well, darlin', I aim to give it to you just as soon as I find the time."

Before Lara could utter a response, he smashed his mouth to hers. His tongue dove between her lips in a kiss of vicious promise. When he abruptly released her seconds later, the promise and the dominant spark in his eyes made her head spin.

He moved away from her, fastening his denim pants then strapping on his gun belt. He scooped up his shirt from the floor and stomped to the door. "Stay here," he shot over his shoulder on his way out.

Lara flinched as the door slammed, but allowed herself a small smile. Luke Stonewell had it all wrong. Her smart mouth just accomplished the two things she wanted most. It got him downstairs with the rest of his gang, and it got her a devilish promise of what would surely be more amazing sex in her near future.



Pleased with herself, she dropped the blanket where she stood. Naked, she crawled onto the bed and ran her hands over her flesh, imagining Luke's touch and anticipating exactly how many ways he might use to teach her.

## Chapter Four

Adam hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and surveyed the small crowd gathered in the saloon. So much for a slow Monday night, he mused.

The news of the impending visit from the Desert Riders spread fast though their little town. The bulletin of Luke's return reached the ears of townsfolk faster still. His gaze landed on the table of three a few feet from where he stood. They represented what remained of the original Stonewell gang minus Jesse Dillinger who Adam expected to show in short order with news of his own.

A clatter at the bar momentarily drew Adam's attention away from the men looking to him for answers and, God help him, leadership. John Franklin came out of the backroom. His poker game came to an abrupt halt in favor of serving the slew of other cowboys that followed the Stonewell gang into the saloon. A quick count rendered ten of them armed and ready, their eyes primed for a glimpse of Luke. Adam knew each waited for a chance to draw on any man looking to raise hell in their town.

Four more men, counting the deputy sheriff, seemed hell bent on restoring a vigilante gang. Couple that with a leader bound to a sentence of justice only he believed and a band of outlaws intent on robbing and brutalizing their town, and Adam figured they had a hell of a mess on their hands.

Walt Stubeck cleared his throat. He thumped the brim of his Stetson to send it sitting back farther on his head and lifted a brow at Adam.

Adam gave the man a small nod.

Next to Walt, Hiram McCain sat with his hands on his waistband. His chair teetered on two legs. He let the chair fall to all fours with a smack that sounded enough like a shot to have half the saloon reaching for their gun before quiet fell over them.

Adam waited for that moment to speak. "We figure to have about two days time before the Desert Riders reach our town." He spoke loud enough for all in the saloon to hear him, but his gaze fixed on the three men of the Stonewell gang in front of him. "Might take them longer, but I wouldn't want to take the chance on them showing up and us unprepared."

Dirk Yates puffed on a tobacco stick, his gaze on Adam speculative. "Are you looking to take Luke's place with the gang?"

Adam stared back at the other man, unwilling to let the doubt and fear he felt show in his expression. He expected the question. He figured the men set to follow Luke's lead might not look so keenly on direction from the younger Stonewell brother. The bitter truth lay in the fact that he couldn't say he felt too keen on being point man. He would do it, though, if it meant seeing the gang organized and set to take care of the Desert Riders when the sons of bitches hit town.

A flash of Lara tied and screaming with a bruised cheek and blood streaming from her nose smacked him like a physical blow. If the Desert Riders got a hold of her, and all the town's women, that's exactly what they would do to her. The stories that followed the Desert Riders were legendary. They told tales of destruction to property, murder among men, and brutality toward women so horrid few men wished to face off with the outlaws. No, the Desert Riders weren't merely bank robbers but some of the meanest, soulless, foulest men in the West.

"I'll take Luke's place if that's what it takes," Adam finally answered, his tone as stern as he could make it. "If news is right, there are better than a dozen of them. The sheriff is the law in these parts. The townsfolk saw to that."

Walt chuckled dryly. “He ain’t got enough guts in his big toe to go against more than a dozen gun-wielding bastards like the Desert Riders.”

“Maybe,” Adam slowly nodded, “and maybe not. It’s not our place to pass judgment on our lawman, at least not tonight.”

“I’ll pass judgment.” Walt muttered soft enough only the other two men at the table and Adam heard him. “Sheriff is a yella-belly coward.”

Adam slanted Walt a look but kept his mouth shut. He didn’t necessarily agree, though he recollected seeing the sheriff back down in several situations fitting for a lawman to take a stand. Adam figured the man to possess some guts seeing as he convinced the townsfolk of it enough to appoint him as their first sheriff.

“Fact is, the sheriff and one deputy aren’t enough manpower to go against outlaws like the Desert Riders.” Adam shifted his gaze back to Walt and said the words that would likely seal his fate. “I can’t take Luke’s place with the gang, but if you want a Stonewell to lead you, then I guess you’ve got one.”

“This I’ve got to see.”

Adam didn’t have to recognize Luke’s voice to know when his brother hit the bottom of the stairs. The gaped mouths, straightened postures, and wide eyes of the men in the saloon before him proved a dead giveaway. He shot a look over his shoulder and felt a wash of relief that made him feel like the “yella-belly coward” Walt accused the sheriff of being. Luke stood fully clothed, his gun belt riding low on his hips and an expression fit to kill on his face.

Adam leveled his glare as Luke walked closer. He watched his brother take in the scene, and the scowl on his lips deepened.

“That is unless you’ve got a better idea.”

Luke’s attention snapped to Adam. Challenge sparked in the blue depths of his eyes. “I might have a few. Why are all these men here? Are you looking to set up a mob or something?”

“News travels.” Adam shrugged, but a familiar unspoken communication passed between the two of them. Only three of the men before them mattered. Four, if they brought Lara’s father into the count.

“So I hear,” Luke muttered. He snagged a chair from a nearby table and used it as a prop for one booted foot. He slapped a hand to his thigh, pursed his lips, and addressed the room of men. “Go home. Keep your women and children close until you hear it’s safe to let them out.”

“But what about the Desert Riders?” a cowboy near the door asked.

“We’re aiming to shoot those sons of bitches down before they harm a speck of dust in our town,” another cowboy declared and spat on the floor by his boot.

Nods of agreement and mutters of oaths and swears followed the outbursts.

“Yes, I expect you are, but gunning a man down in the middle of the street without just cause isn’t fitting with the law around here these days,” Luke countered calmly.

“What do you mean without just cause? They’re robbers, vandals, and murderers. What more cause do you need?” A yellow-toothed rancher at the bar shouted his objections.

“By reputation and rumor only,” Luke countered sternly. “You’ve never seen them do any of that stuff with your own eyes.”

“I’m not meaning to see it either,” the yellow-toothed rancher spat back. “What happened to you, boy? You go soft when you rode out of here two years back?”

“No, but I didn’t go stupid either,” Luke answered calmly. “The Stonewell gang never stood behind anyone going off half-cocked on any man, and we aren’t about to start now. Deputy Dillinger and Sheriff Baird are the law in charge in these parts now. You want to find yourself at the end of a rope for shooting down a man on sight?”

That's what will happen if you draw that gun on your hip and fire at these boys as soon as they hit town."

The first cowboy by the door spoke up again. "So we're supposed to sit by and wait for them to draw on us first, rape our women, or steal our money?"

"No." Luke shook his head. "You're supposed to go home like I told you. Make sure you don't let your women come into town. If you live here in town, keep your women indoors and out of harm's way. Leave the Desert Riders to the lawmen."

"And the Stonewell gang, right?" The anger in the yellow-toothed rancher's tone lessened as he stared down Luke from across the saloon.

Adam watched Luke. He saw when true realization of how many of the townsfolk still looked to him for protection set in his brother's expression. None of the townspeople ever blamed Luke for gunning down Jeb. They all knew then as they did now that it had been an accident. Even John Franklin and their Lara never thought to blame him. If Luke had stuck around long enough back then, he would've come to see that. Perhaps the time he spent upstairs with Lara coupled with the steady gazes of the men staring at him now would bring him to see it tonight.

Luke finally nodded. "And the Stonewell gang." Adam swore he heard a collective sigh of relief throughout the saloon. "Now, for the third time, go home, every last one of you." His gaze fell on the men of the Stonewell gang, and a hint of a smile tilted his lips. "You three stay put."

They gave a low chuckle, but said nothing until the saloon emptied of everyone else except Lara's pa who remained behind the bar.

"You were really going to lead this bunch of hotheads?" Luke turned a questioning gaze on Adam, tipping his head slightly at Walt, Hiram, and Dirk.

Adam let a grin unfold on his face. “The name of the gang is Stonewell, isn’t it? Unless you’re hiding someone, there are only two of us with that last name able to lead these boys.”

Luke’s grin came quick and teasing. Adam couldn’t help but think how great it felt to see his brother smile even knowing that smile came at his own teasing expense.

“Seems you’re half right, brother. There are only two of us carrying the Stonewell name, but only one of us is good enough with a gun to face off with the Desert Riders.”

Adam felt the jab, but it didn’t hurt anywhere like he supposed it should’ve. He angled his head. “I take it that would be you?”

Luke winked at him. “You take it right, my man. Your place in all this is back at the ranch with our folks. You should take Lara and her pa with you.”

John Franklin spoke up loud and clear from behind the bar. “I’m not going anywhere, Luke.”

“Mr. Franklin, I believe—”

“I didn’t leave the last time things got rough in this town,” John reminded them. “Maybe I should have, given what happened.” Given that Luke shot Jeb as the other man walked into the saloon. If only Jeb had given Luke some kind of warning that night. “But I’ve got a business to run here, son. You take my daughter.” He shifted his gaze to Adam. “See that she’s safe and don’t make the same mistake my boy made and I’ll be fine here.”

Luke shut his mouth, and Adam didn’t blame him. It wouldn’t do to argue with a man who lost his son in the doorway of his own livelihood, especially when Luke did the trigger pulling. Accident or no accident, John Franklin had a right to his own mind, and he seemed intent on using it now.

“Are you planning to join me?” Adam asked Luke, searching his brother’s expression for any sign of his intentions. “Ma and Pa likely already know you’re back.”

"I'll be there." Luke straightened and moved to put a hand on Adam's shoulder. "As soon as I'm able, I'll be there. You just make sure you take care of our woman."

It took everything Adam possessed not to react to Luke's choice of words. Their woman. If he played his cards right, if Lara managed to soothe Luke's wounds enough to make him forgive himself, they might just be able to set their world to rights once and for all.

"You've got it, brother." Adam patted Luke's hand on his shoulder and then headed up the stairs to fetch Lara.

\* \* \* \*

Lara heard the knife clatter as it hit the table in the center of the Stonewell kitchen. She rushed to Grace Stonewell's side, winding an arm around the older woman's thin shoulders. "Here, ma'am. Why don't you let me slice these apples while you take a load off on that stool there?"

"No, no." Grace Stonewell gave Lara's hand a pat and then reached for the knife. "I can do this. Luke always loved my fresh apple pie from the time he stood barely taller than this table. He swore no one else's pies could compete because I added something special to my recipe."

Lara leaned a hip against the table. She'd known Luke and Adam nearly her entire life and remembered much about them as young boys. Still, she enjoyed listening to their mother share stories of their childhood. "And do you add anything special?"

Grace Stonewell giggled girlishly. "Not a one. This recipe is the same one used by my mother and her mother before that. It'll be yours one day, too."

Lara's heart skipped a beat. She knew of only one way a recipe passed down among Stonewell women would come to her. She would have to marry Luke or Adam.



"I expect you'll make it with that special ingredient Luke swears by, too." Grace shot Lara a wink and pulled another apple from the nearby basket.

"You said there isn't one."

"It's love, dear. Luke says my apple pies taste better than anyone's because I make them with love."

Lara smiled and nodded her understanding. "If that's what it takes to make Luke's special pies, I have that ingredient, Mrs. Stonewell."

"Yes, dear, I know you do." Grace stopped to swipe the back of her hand over her forehead. Lara wondered if the woman might be overheating despite the chill of the kitchen. Then Grace continued, and Lara realized the gesture came more out of an intense relief than any need to wipe away sweat. "He's home, Lara. My boy has come home."

Rather than drawing the other woman into another embrace, Lara crossed her arms beneath her breasts and hugged herself. For a moment, she imagined Luke's strong arms in place of her own, holding her tightly against the hard frame of his body. A warmth spread through her, erasing any chill and offering her the second half of a comfort she longed to feel for far too long.

"We should throw a party," Grace decided. "A dance. I love to dance. It's been so long since we had anything to celebrate. As soon as this mess is over with in town, we should have a great big gala. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea. But, well," Lara hesitated, hating to bring up Mr. Stonewell's disability, but wondering all the same, "what about Mr. Stonewell? Won't he feel strange not being able to dance and all?"

"Honey, Mr. Stonewell can still dance even in that wheelchair of his." Grace shot her a conspiratorial grin and waggled her brows. "The loss of one leg only left him with the ability to focus on the remaining two."

Lara coughed a laugh. "Oh, my!"

Grace didn't appear the least bit embarrassed. "Come now, we're both girls here. Knowing my Luke, he's the one who will feel strange, seeing as he *loves* to dance."

Adam loved to dance. Luke hated anything of the sort. Lara started to remind Mrs. Stonewell of that as well, thinking she may have gotten her boys confused. Then the sarcasm in the woman's tone sank in. A mother didn't get confused or need reminding of her boy's preferences even when he spent two years away. "Wait until you see him. He's even more handsome than when he left."

"I knew he would be. It's how it works with the Stonewell men. They get handsomer the older they get. One has only to look at my husband to see that." Grace's eyes twinkled when she glanced at Lara.

"I hope I still love my husband as you do yours after we've been married for thirty years." Lara's sigh sounded wistful even to her own ears. "I hope we are still as happy after we've gone through as much as you and Mr. Stonewell."

"We are happy." Grace gave a firm nod. "We have faced much in our years of marriage, and it's likely we will face more before we meet our maker. That's the thing about life, girl. You got to take the good with the bad. You know that as well as I after all the heartbreak your family saw."

"I do." Oh, how she did. She didn't remember her mother's death, but she saw her brother's every time she closed her eyes if she allowed the vision to come. She saw Luke's back as he rode out of town, too, taking half her heart right along with him.

"Grab on to him, Lara. Get a hold on my boy and don't let him go this time."

"I'm not sure if I can," Lara whispered before she could stop herself. The more she thought about her life now, the more her belly twisted in knots.

"What's that nonsense? Of course you can."

"I don't know if I want to give up Adam." There. She said it. The God's truth to the woman who gave birth to both men Lara loved.

Grace, however, went on as if she didn't hear Lara's confession. "You and my boys will be as happy as Boyd and I for as long as the good Lord allows. Your love has already stood the test of time, has it not?"

Yes. She loved Luke as much today as she had the day he rode out of town. She loved Adam equally as much.

"I've long thought my boys are lucky you have such a big heart, plenty of love to give between them."

Lara felt her jaw drop, but no sound escaped.

Grace threw back her head and let out a hoot of laughter. "Why look so shocked, dear? I know you love both my sons. Do you think I've been blind these past two years or the dozen or so years before that?"

"Well, no, of course not. I just, well, gosh!" She sputtered to a stop and simply blinked at the older woman who continued to grin at her like a loon.

"And why on God's green earth would you even think of giving up Adam? It's going to take both of you to keep Luke here. Grace gave another firm nod. "It is how it's supposed to be."

Red sparks rimmed Lara's vision. "I'm about half-sick and tired of everyone saying that to me." She pushed away from the table and stalked to the window. She placed her hands on the washboard beneath it as she gazed out at the open expanse of Stonewell land. "How what is supposed to be?" She whirled around and found Grace staring at her, lips twitching in obvious amusement. It only fueled Lara's anger. "Everybody seems to know the answer but me. I learned to read and write and do a woman's chores. I can even do a man's chores if need be. No one ever taught me to read minds or find answers in the clouds. Do I have to seek out the teaching of the Indians and their smoke rings before that statement will make sense to me?"

"Sugar, I expect you already know." Grace's tone rang with the same amusement that shown in the smile she continued to bite back.

“Well, I don’t.” Lara winced at the pouty sound to her voice and barely stopped her bottom lip from poking out. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and bowed her head. Embarrassment brought a low burn to her cheeks. “I’m sorry I raised my voice to you, Mrs. Stonewell. I had no right.”

Grace heaved an audible breath, letting it out on a heavy sigh. “Call me Grace, dear. And tell me, when did you ever apologize to someone for speaking your mind?”

Lara heard the other woman move closer. She didn’t look up until Grace hooked a finger under her chin and tugged her face up. The gaze Lara’s eyes met soothed and steadied her. Lara looked at the woman who acted like more of a mother to her than any woman Lara had ever known and felt ashamed by her anger.

“I’ve never known you to apologize any more than I’ve known you to blush. You’re sure doing both now though.” Grace finally laughed, albeit softly. “You are meant to be together, sweet Lara. It is supposed to be three. You wonder why Adam has not asked for your hand in marriage, don’t you?”

Unable to speak for the tightness in her throat, Lara nodded.

“He couldn’t marry you without Luke on your other side. He loves you. *Both* of my boys love you. One cannot marry you without the other. They decided that long ago when the three of you fell in love.”

Lara’s head spun. Luke and Adam loved her. Yes, on some level she’d always known that. Luke and Adam planned to marry her. Both of them! “But, isn’t that against the law? A woman can’t promise herself to two men, can she?”

“Why ever not?” Grace wiped her hand on her apron and returned to the table where she went back to slicing the apples for the pie. “I’ve never heard of such a law against it. There have been rumors of such a thing, yes, of religions that practice polygamy, of the government stepping in to tell people they can’t marry more than one person. Those laws have not yet reached our town.”

“But I’m not any of those religions that allow such a practice, and neither is Luke or Adam.” Lara rubbed her forehead, feeling an ache begin behind her eyes as her mind struggled to grasp the idea of being hitched to both men she loved.

“Your religion doesn’t matter, girl. Neither does what is seen in the eyes of the law. What God sees is all that matters and that’s love. Both my boys love you to their very souls. They always have.”

“You’re wrong, Grace,” Lara said softly, shaking her head. “What the law sees does matter. It matters very much to Luke.”

Grace sighed. “I expect you’re right about that.” She fell silent for a long moment as she arranged the apple slices in the pan for cooking. Only after she set the pan on the rack inside the readied oven did she speak again. “The three of you will figure out something. Until you do, I suggest you go wash up. The pond should be mighty nice out there today.”

## Chapter Five

The blasted woman couldn't be left alone for five minutes.

Adam made a beeline for the bathing pond, his booted feet stomping over fallen leaves and branches. Reminding himself that he hadn't left Lara alone didn't ebb his rapidly growing irritation. He last saw her in the kitchen with his ma talking over the makings of a delicious-smelling apple pie. He returned not five minutes later to fetch her, only to discover his ma sent her here. Alone.

A sliver of alarm darted through his anger, and Adam picked up his pace. Anyone could come up on Lara out here. Didn't his mother realize that? The trouble might be headed for town, but until the Desert Riders were taken down, no place in these parts could be deemed safe. Not even the private acres of Stonewell land. It mattered little that the distance between the bathing pond and the main house barely measured fifty feet. A scream might not travel that far through the thicket of trees lining the pond. Those trees provided privacy for anyone choosing to go for an afternoon dip.

Or anyone looking to force himself on an unsuspecting woman, Adam thought crossly.

He ducked his head, shielding his face with the brim of his hat and using his forearm to push back a low hanging branch. At the edge of the clearing, he came to an abrupt halt. Panic constricted around his heart for half a beat when he found the pond empty. His pulse roared in his ears, drowning out all sound, as he scanned the surrounding tree line.

Adam opened his mouth, ready to shout to the heavens for her.

Lara chose that moment to break the surface of the pond. Water rained off her bare flesh, some drops staying behind to sparkle like tiny diamonds in the sunlight on her shoulders and breasts. She pushed her hair away from her face and tipped her head back. Only then did her eyes open. Her lips parted on a smile, and he followed her gaze up and saw the blue jay perched high on the edge of a tree limb.

They'd spent many a lazy afternoon cuddled together in the grass listening to a bird's song. Adam leaned a shoulder against the tree, pushed up the brim of his hat, and let the bird's sound soothe the sharpness of his temper. He never managed to stay angry with her for long. Her beauty and zest for life made it impossible to do more than love her, to want to keep her in arm's reach, and see her safe. The Lord knew he attempted to do little else for most of her life.

In the pond, Lara threw her arms out wide and spun in a circle. Her quietly delighted laugh floated to him on the air. The crack of a stick behind him followed next. He reached for his gun, his finger poised on the trigger as he did a spin of his own. Luke stepped through the trees, a finger held to his lips in a gesture to keep the silence.

Adam forced himself to relax, releasing his hold on his gun. He shifted his attention back to the pond. Lara stood with her back to him now, the water around her rippling as she skimmed her hands over the surface.

"Guess I should thank you for not being as fast on the trigger as I've always been, brother." Luke moved to the opposite side of the tree from Adam, his words spoken low enough that only Adam could hear.

"You should." Adam didn't take his gaze off Lara. Still, he let his lips fold in a slow smile, deciding it better to tease Luke than dredge up the old memory now. "But you won't."

"No, I won't." Luke expelled an audible sigh. "That's one amazing sight."

Adam didn't have to look at Luke to know which sight his brother meant. Lara's beauty made her spectacular at any time, but naked, she surpassed amazing. As he continued to watch, she waded to the edge of the pond, her back still to him and Luke, and retrieved a bar of soap. Luke groaned low, the sound a perfect match to the one Adam felt building in his throat, as Lara started to wash herself. Her hands moved over her hair and flesh in slow glides that tantalized his cock and escalated the hunger in his gut to a new high.

Adam shifted to relieve a bit of the pressure building in his cock and balls, but he couldn't take his eyes off Lara. Especially not when she tossed the soap to the bank and let herself fall backward. She made a delighted girlish giggle just before she went under.

"I forgot how much fun that girl gets out of the simple pleasures in life," Luke muttered softly. "I'm glad to see that hasn't changed."

"There isn't much that can break her spirit," Adam commented. "She goes through life like she's riding a hose. She takes a tumble and gets right back on for another try. It gets to be contagious after a spell."

Luke sighed. "I can see how it might."

"You go to the house yet?"

"I went there first thing. I'm surprised you didn't hear Ma's squealing like a banshee all the way out here. The woman went crazy when she saw me. Pa looks..." Luke hesitated so long that Adam finally looked at him and lifted a brow. "I guess nothing could prepare a man for how he looks."

"He looks better now than he did a few months back. It's been a hard road for him, for Ma, too."

"And for you." Luke averted his gaze, seeming to stare out over the trees across the clearing. "I doubt any of this has been easy on you, taking up the responsibilities of the ranch, of the house, of everything alone."

"I always knew it would come to that one day. Mind you, I didn't expect it to happen quite so soon or the way it did."



“Pa lit into my ass.” Amusement laced Luke’s tone. “Old coot still has a way of taking a fellow down a notch or ten.”

Adam grinned. “He does that. Did he get you good?”

“He took a sizeable chunk. You could’ve warned me.”

Adam shrugged, but his grin didn’t fade. “I figured you had it coming.”

“I guess I did. I probably deserve more than that.”

“Give the old man time. He’s just getting started.”

Adam glanced back in the pond where Lara floated on her back, her arms and legs outstretched and blond hair fanned around her head, giving her the look of an angel.

“What’s going on back in town?” Adam asked after several long moments of silence.

“Nothing much yet. The whole gang is in wait mode. The sheriff and Dillinger are holing up at the jail house. Lara’s pa offered to put up any of the gang that wants to stay in town.”

“The sheriff is going to let the gang assist him, then?” Adam would never let his brother know the relief that washed through him at that news. He liked to think he had faith in the town sheriff, but the truth didn’t land too far from what he’d told his brother earlier. Sheriff Baird couldn’t defend his way out of a rucksack.

“He isn’t too happy about it, I’ll tell you that.” Luke shot Adam a smirk that spoke volumes about how he felt toward the sheriff’s happiness. “It isn’t set in stone either.”

“He hasn’t ordered you or the rest of the gang out of town,” Adam pointed out. “That’s got to count for something.”

“No, he hasn’t done that. Yet.”

“You’ll be staying, then?”

Luke fell quiet for so long Adam didn’t think he would answer. His gaze locked on Lara, now treading water, keeping only her head and the top of her shoulders above the surface. At last he nodded slowly. “Looks like.”

Adam released a breath he hadn't been aware of holding even as he felt his world settle to rights. He tipped his chin at Lara though Luke didn't see because he still looked at her. "She's worried."

"I figured she would be."

"I don't think it's all to do with the Desert Riders. She seems bothered, confused. If you ask me, I think it has to do with us."

"She heard us in the hall outside her room, heard you talking of how it's supposed to be between us."

"And?" Adam prompted when Luke let the silence drag on too long. He never found the words to explain everything to her himself. He never figured out how or where to start after Luke left. He held out hope that his brother would come back, and they would explain together, claim her together.

"And I didn't tell her anything." Luke looked at Adam, his eyes full of an uncertainty Adam rarely saw in his brother. "I didn't know what to say."

"What about now?"

Luke chuckled, but the sound held more frustration than humor. "Hell, Adam, you're the one who has always been good with words."

Adam nodded. "And you're the one who has always been good with his hands."

Luke's lips twitched in a genuine smile. "So, what, you tell and I show?"

"We could go about it that way." Adam paused, his gaze on his brother not wavering. "We do this, and there's no going back, Luke."

Luke looked back at Lara. When he spoke, his words fell on the air like a blanket of certainty and acceptance of fate. "I lost any chance of that the minute I rode back into town. I just didn't know it until I stepped foot in that damned saloon."

\* \* \* \*

Lara felt Adam enter the pond. Awareness tingled in her belly, quickening her pulse and heating her channel. He'd watched her for a long time from the trees. She sensed his presence first when she waded to the edge of the pond to fetch the bar of soap. Adam rarely managed to sneak up on her, for the connection they shared affected her in a visceral way only his brother could match.

She waited until he started closing the distance between them, until she heard the soft slapping of the water against his flesh, before she turned. Trepidation tightened her throat even as love wound around her heart.

*And why on God's green earth would you even think of giving up Adam?*

Grace Stonewell's question reverberated through Lara's thoughts. She wouldn't give him up, couldn't. Even if forced to choose between the brothers she loved, no way could she let go of this gentle, poetic man who held her heart.

"Mind if I join you?" Adam's voice sounded odd, gruff with arousal and something more she couldn't quite define.

Lara pushed the cacophony of confusion in her mind aside and lifted a brow. "It's a bit late if I do, seeing as you're already in the pond." Gloriously naked and almost within reach, she silently added . Her gaze fell from his face to his broad shoulders, the wiry dark hair that speckled his chest, and the dark beads of his nipples. Her own nipples hardened almost to the point of pain at the sight. She took one step toward him, then another. When he pulled her into his arms, all her uncertainties drowned in the sanctuary of his embrace.

"Adam." She didn't mean to speak his name aloud. She didn't realize she had until he lowered his face to hers. He stopped so close she felt his breath fan her lips.

"Yes, Miss Franklin?" His gaze danced over her face. The tips of their noses brushed, and the corner of his lips tilted in a hint of a smile.

Lara didn't answer. She stood there with her arms encircled around his neck, her body pressed firmly against his, and drank in his warmth and solidity. She felt safe in his arms, as if nothing or anyone could harm her. Likely because she knew he would never allow any injury to befall her. He would protect her with his life, the same as she knew Luke would.

*It's going to take both of you to keep Luke here. It's how it's meant to be.*

Lara stared into Adam's eyes and wondered, wished, and hoped. She forced herself to stop. She spent too much time these last two years doing exactly that. She couldn't do it anymore. She would demand an explanation. She needed to know. He owed her that much.

"Why have you never asked for my hand in marriage?"

Adam blinked at her. Several heartbeats passed before he slowly lifted his head, but his gaze never left hers. "Is that what has your pretty little head troubled today?"

"Who says I'm troubled?" Lara lifted her chin, meeting his concern with a spark of challenge. It galled her how he seemed to easily see right through her even when she did her best to hide her emotions. She didn't want him to know the turmoil twisting in her gut over him and Luke, over what would be, over how it was *supposed* to be. "I simply want to know why you never asked me to marry you."

"Why now?"

His question threw her. Lara wrinkled her forehead. "Why now, what?"

"Why are you wondering this now? You never said anything about it before. It's not like you to hold back, Lara. You come closer to speaking your mind than you do to keeping quiet more often than not."

He spoke the truth, of course. She didn't keep quiet even when staying silent proved to be in her best interest. "Maybe I feared what you would say." The admission left a bitter taste in her mouth. Still, his honesty deserved the same in return.

Adam barked a laugh. “You? Afraid?” He kissed her.

Blast the man for knowing exactly how to shut her up. She might have let him get away with it if he stopped laughing. He didn’t. She felt his continued amusement in the way his lips quivered as his tongue snaked into her mouth. He actually tasted of laughter, and it sparked her temper enough to make her push him away.

“I’m glad you find me so funny, Mr. Stonewell.” She swatted at him, narrowly missing his shoulder when he dodged left. “You could’ve told me a long time ago. You might have saved me all the trouble of worrying that I’m not what you want in a lady, that I don’t satisfy you enough to be your wife.”

Adam’s laughter died. He gaped at her. “Lara, how could you think you don’t satisfy me? Christ in heaven, woman, how could you think I don’t want you?”

“I don’t know.” Seething, Lara brushed a stray hair out of her face and then brought her hand down in frustration. Her palm smacked the water between them, splashing them both. “Oh, it doesn’t matter how I could think it. What matters is that I did. You could’ve prevented that, Adam Stonewell. You needed only to tell me about yours and Luke’s plans, and I would’ve understood. I would’ve felt...” She trailed off as she realized she didn’t know quite how to finish her sentence. She would’ve felt wanted, loved, confused? Yes, all of that, just as she did now.

“You know then.” Adam’s soft tone sounded strange in the aftermath of her louder outburst.

“Your ma told me.”

*And shocked me to my bloomers, or would have if I’d been wearing them.*

Lara didn’t say that much aloud. Still, she couldn’t believe what Grace Stonewell had revealed about her sons. They meant to marry Lara, to share her. They expected her to marry them, to satisfy them both forever. “What would you have done, Adam, if Luke never came back? Did you think to wait forever?”

Adam shook his head. "We both held out for him, Lara. You know that as well as I. You didn't put him out of your mind or your heart any more than I put him out of mine."

She didn't see him reach for her under the water, but she felt his arm around her waist a second before he pulled her into a tight embrace.

"That's why you never pushed the subject of marriage before today. You didn't want to give up on him any more than I, did you?"

"No, of course I didn't. I love him." The weight of Adam's tenderness and the truth between them lessened Lara's need to fight. "I just wanted to hear it from you. I wanted to know—"

She broke off abruptly when another set of hands framed her hips beneath the water. Luke's hands. She didn't hear him enter the pond behind her, didn't sense him there. Still, she knew that touch, recognized the heat that seeped through her flesh. Even after only one night with him, she couldn't mistake his presence for another anymore than she could Adam's.

He nuzzled his face in the bend of her neck, the sensation of his breath causing goose pimples to rise on her skin. "It doesn't matter what Adam would've done because I came back."

Lara laced her fingers at Adam's nape even as she let her head fall limply back on Luke's shoulder. She closed her eyes, consumed by the erotic sensations radiating from the bodies in front and behind her. Her mind struggled to grasp sanity when the solid walls of muscle holding her fast threatened to drive her mad.

Luke's hands kneaded her hips. His teeth scraped her neck, her jaw, and then nipped her earlobe. "We can turn it right, here, now. Adam and I can make it as it should have been all along."

Lara's heart skipped. Her pulse raced. Arousal tangled with a foreboding she couldn't quite explain into a heady mix that turned her breath ragged. "You're planning to stay then?"

“I’m not seeing as I have much choice.” Luke’s tongue delved into her ear and then retreated to trace her lobe with the very tip in a pass so light it made her knees weak.

He intended to stay. Elation made her light-headed.

“I’ve been with you now.” A hand cruised from her hip to her thigh and paused.

Even in the cold water, her labia flamed in anticipation of his touch. She teetered on the verge of begging for it when he finally pushed his hand between her legs.

“I’ve been inside your sweet pussy.” One finger eased between her fiery folds, the callused pad grazing over her swollen clit.

The rapture that sparked didn’t stop there for he reached farther to plunge his finger into her sodden opening. Adam’s arms tightened around her waist when her legs started to shake.

“I’ve felt your tight pussy milking my cock until I thought I would lose my mind. I must’ve lost my mind, Lara. That’s what you do to me. There’s no way I can leave you again.”

His naughty words and erotic touches made her feel as though she lost her mind, too. Lara fought against the urge to surrender to his every wish without thought or question. She battled to hang on to even an ounce of her scruples. She needed them for she couldn’t sort the fear from the promising pleasure without deliberation or answer. “You plan to share me.” She opened her eyes, needing to see him, to see Adam. “That’s what your ma said. You both plan to marry me.”

Adam, always attuned to her emotions, asked, “Do you love me, Lara?” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear with a dripping hand. She leaned into the familiar touch. As always, it brought her a desperately needed comfort.

“Of course I love you, Adam.”

“Do you still love *me*?”

Fear tangled with hope in Luke’s voice. Lara thought at first she imagined it. Then she saw an echoing surprise swirling in the green depths of Adam’s eyes. She reached back over her shoulder for Luke,

snaking her fingers along the flesh of his neck to cup his nape. “I never stopped loving you for a second.” She couldn’t mistake the relief that washed over his hardened features, softening his expression.

“Then you will marry us both.” He said it as if it were already settled. To him, to them, she supposed it was.

She couldn’t fathom it. Marry them. Both of them! It simply didn’t seem possible that a lady could claim two loves of her life forever. “And you will share me?” She cast a glance at Adam and then back at Luke.

Adam’s fingers skimmed the side of her neck, over her collarbone and down her arm, leaving a path of sizzling heat in their wake. He shifted, and her attention dropped to his cock stretching long and hard against her belly. Her pussy convulsed at the memory of having that cock spreading her channel. Her inner muscles squeezed on Luke’s finger, which still probed her opening.

Her concentration jumped to Luke, to his cock resting equally hard against her lower spine. His finger did delicious things inside her throbbing pussy. He stroked and wiggled in a way that put her on the brink of the madness. His other hand held her hip in a firm grip, trapping her between his body and Adam’s.

“We’ll share you,” the brothers said in unison.

Because their words made little sense no matter how many times they professed their intentions, Lara focused her concentration inwardly. She knew her heart, knew her mind, and knew both belonged to these men. If anything proved constant in her life, that did. Her mind might feel like a mud hole right about now as mixed as her thoughts had become, but her heart felt clear. She loved them. She needed them. Adam with his tenderness and poetic passion offered her a serenity she found nowhere else. Luke with his steadfast beliefs and domineering hands offered her an adventure she’d never before experienced.

*What do I offer them?*



The thought stuck in the forefront of her mind. Sex, yes. She knew she could give them that. A man deserved more from his lady. Darn him, *them*. She wanted to slap them for doing this to her, for confusing her so. Her temper sparked even as tears burned her eyes. She started to yell at them, but what came out instead voiced every ounce of doubt she felt festering in her gut.

“What if I can’t make you happy? What if I can’t keep both of you,” Lara dropped her gaze, closing her eyes as she forced the last word from her trembling lips, “satisfied?”

\* \* \* \*

Did the woman ever run out of surprises?

Luke shot Adam a glance over Lara’s head, stupidly relieved to find his brother looking as dumbfounded as he felt. Lara truly worried she wouldn’t be able to make them happy, that she wouldn’t be able to keep them satisfied. Christ almighty, had the woman gone crazy?

He knew of only one way to answer her questions and set her mind at ease. Seeing agreement in Adam’s eyes, Luke pulled his finger free of the heavenly warmth of Lara’s pussy. She made a whimpered sound of protest, and he nearly drove his finger right back in her again. Instead, he hooked an arm around her waist and lifted her.

She yelped, kicking her feet but not connecting with anything solid for he held her a good five inches off the pond bottom. The water became shallower as he carried her to the bank. He got distracted by all her creamy flesh slowly coming into view.

“You think with this body, with that spirit, you will ever run into trouble satisfying me?” He didn’t try to hide the wonder or amusement in his tone, knowing it would only bring out more of the wickedness he loved in her.

“Maybe I’m wrong. When you manhandle me that way, why would I worry about making you happy?” She slapped at his forearm, the blows stinging slightly but not rendering him any true pain.

“Well, there you are.” He grinned as he sat her on her feet on the soft grass at the edge of the pond.

“Huh?” She whirled on him, her brows knitted in confusion. “What kind of game are you playing, Luke Stonewell?”

“No game at all, sweetheart. I just don’t know what to do with you when you get all mushy and afraid to speak your mind like you did back in that pond.” He caught her wrists, cuffed her hands behind her back with one hand, and yanked her close. “When you get like this, all sassy and letting that temper of yours fly, I know exactly what to do with you then.”

Her chin jerked into the air. “Oh, you do, do you?”

Luke chuckled. He couldn’t help it. God, he loved her defiance, her gumption, her spark. “How did I ever think I could live without you?” He didn’t mean to say it aloud. He knew he did though when he noticed the shock gallop through her expression. Damn it, what made him think he could ever live *with* her knowing what he did to her, what he took from her?

She lifted a brow. “Well, you never were much for thinking.”

“I did quite a bit of thinking these last two years, and it’s all been about you.” He trailed the fingers of his free hand down her spine, delighting in the way her body shivered against his all the way down.

“Now who’s getting mushy?” Challenge sparked in her eyes despite the breathiness of her voice.

Luke splayed his hand on her ass, pulling her closer still, and ground his stiff cock into her belly. “Trust me, Miss Franklin. There is nothing mushy about me.”

Her eyes turned glassy even as her lips tilted in the grin of a vixen. “Then I suggest, Mr. Stonewell, you leave the poetic words to your brother and get back to the matters at hand.”

Luke cocked his head. “Oh, and what matters would those be?”

“I believe you were about to show me that you know what to do with me. Frankly, I can’t imagine how you came to possess such knowledge.”

A bark of laughter at her back drew Luke’s gaze up. Adam stood behind her, sheer amusement painted on his face. “Neither can I, but I’d be obliged if you saw your way to sharing that bit of wisdom.”

Lara’s body tensed in Luke’s arms at Adam’s use of the word share. Luke realized, despite her recent spunk, uncertainty continued to rage a war inside her. So much remained unsaid between them, but he suspected she needed more than words now. Lucky for him, because he couldn’t give her words. Not ones of the sweet, tender varieties in any case.

“It’s pretty simple really, little brother.” Luke pushed his body against Lara, forcing her to step backward until she bumped into Adam. He took both her wrists in his hands and guided her arms up and around Adam’s neck. He released her slowly, using an intent gaze rather than words to order her to stay.

“Sometimes our little spitfire needs a firm hand.” He let his hands glide down her arms, marveling in the way her breaths grew quicker as his fingers danced along the inner flesh of her elbow. “She needs a little direction on the proper ways to speak to a man.” His attentions reached the curve of her armpit. He bit back a grin when she squirmed as his fingertips tickled the sensitive flesh.

“Luke?” She gasped his name, the sound equal parts plea and question.

Luke smiled. He kissed the tip of her nose at the same time, covering her breasts with his palms. “Didn’t I tell you I mean to teach you a thing or two about talking to a man?”

Her chest thrust forward, filling his hands with warm, pliant flesh. “Please.”

“Please? Well, now, honey, that’s a good start.” He dragged the pads of his thumbs over her taut nipples, eliciting a moan that sounded remarkably close to another plea from her luscious lips.

“Asking for what you want instead of demanding it might be a nice change for you.” He slipped his hands beneath her breasts, lifting one as he dipped his head for a taste. He drew a nipple between his teeth, gave it a pressured but gentle bite, and felt his dick come close to explosion when her body jerked against him.

“Just a guess, but I think she wants more of that.”

Luke shot a glance at his brother, noting the other man’s glazed eyes and gruff tone. Between them, Lara wiggled, slithering like a snake in search of Luke’s touch. He realized then that Adam’s hands were splayed on Lara’s pelvis, his fingers buried in the blond curls concealing her clit.

“Is he right, Lara?” He caught her right nipple between his teeth and treated it to the same tenderly forceful bite he did the left. The sound of her sucking a breath through clenched teeth delighted him. “You have to answer me, sweetheart.”

“Yes! I mean, oh, Luke. Oh, God!”

He chuckled. “I’m no God, but I’ll take you as close to heaven as I can.”

“Teasing me isn’t the path to heaven.” Her head fell back, lolling from side to side on Adam’s shoulder, her lips pursed in an O of pleasure.

Luke met his brother’s gaze and lifted a brow in question. Adam looked sheepish. Luke glanced down to see Adam’s hand working Lara’s pelvis. He gathered Adam had found her clit through her soft curls.

“Ah, but it is.” He shook his head at Adam, an almost imperceptible movement, but Adam’s hand stilled. Lara’s head came up so fast she nearly hit Luke in the chin.

“You’re being unfair, Luke Stonewell.” She turned her head and pinned Adam with a narrow-eyed glare. “And you’re letting him.”

Adam licked his lips as if preparing to deny or argue, but shrugged instead. “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckon’d.”

Luke threw back his head and laughed. “My little brother, always ready with the quote to dazzle the lady.”

“Do I look dazzled?” Lara growled through gritted teeth. Her eyes narrowed to little more than slits as she continued to glare at Adam. “I doubt your hero Shakespeare intended that line to be fit in any such situation as this.”

“One never knows the meaning of a true playwright’s heart.”

Luke stifled another chuckle as he slowly sank to his knees. He leaned in to trail the tip of his tongue on a path down her front as he descended. That shut her up, he thought in amusement as whatever she started to say to Adam dissolved in another of her dick-torturing moans.

“Have I found the passage to your heaven yet, Miss Franklin?” One of Adam’s hands returned to her hip, the other staying on her pelvis to spread her labia for Luke’s tongue. The first taste of her sticky sweet heat made him growl like a wounded beast. Wounded because deep down he knew he didn’t deserve to be feasting on a treat as delicious and delicate as this. Still, he couldn’t deny himself this opportunity any more than he managed to deny himself anything since his return to Wildwood.

“Answer him, Lara.”

Adam surprised Luke with the harshness of his command. Damned if his little brother didn’t have a bit of spine in him after all. Luke eased back from Lara’s pussy, tormenting himself with the need to continue his explorations as he awaited her answer.

“Not quite,” she said breathlessly, “but you might be on the right track.”

Glory be to God, Luke loved this woman. Even in the throes of mounting passion, she didn’t lose her spirit. Teasing her, toying with her, and teaching her would be more fulfilling than he ever imagined.

“Let me know if I get warmer, okay?” He leaned in again, this time tracing the V where her pelvis and hip met with the tip of his tongue as he slowly pushed to his feet.

“Wh—what are you doing?” She jerked and squirmed, but Adam held her fast. Her arms, no longer locked around Adam’s neck, came down, and her hands found purchase on Luke’s shoulders. She pushed, but rather than kneeling again, he continued to stand. “That path leads to the Arctic, cowboy. You were closer down there.”

She wasn’t kidding. The gaze that met his as he straightened could freeze the Sahara. Luke caught her face in his hands and brushed a kiss to her lips. “It’s not for you to worry about satisfying us, pretty girl.” Her eyes grew wide for an instant before she averted her gaze, looking past him at a point he couldn’t see.

“It’s our job to satisfy you.” Adam nuzzled his face in her hair so Luke couldn’t see his brother’s expression, but he heard the vow in Adam’s tone.

“I’m not feeling very satisfied at the moment.”

Luke stifled more laughter at Lara’s snippy words.

“What would you have us do about that?” Adam asked, surprising Luke with the question even though he’d been about to ask the very same thing. Wasn’t Adam the one who thought Lara needed taming? He said so often enough growing up. Her blunt speak and brash actions made Adam blush like a virgin. Apparently his brother had done a bit of changing in the two years since Luke left Wildwood.

“Fuck me, darn it.” The words rumbled from her chest on an animalistic growl Luke didn’t know a woman could make.

He tsked. “There you go again with that language. Didn’t I promise to teach you better?” As he spoke, he reached between hers and Adam’s bodies and found her ass in the tight grip of his palms. Her eyes flew open, and memory and knowledge lit up in their depths.

“You wouldn’t.” Her challenge held a hint of excited fear.

Luke lifted a brow. “Wouldn’t I?” He shifted his gaze to Adam’s. “I promised our Lara I would take a belt to her soft little rump as soon as I found the time.”

Adam surprised him yet again when he simply nodded. “Is now the time?”

Lara wriggled, perhaps to get free of their hold. She succeeded only in driving his cock wild by gyrating her belly against his shaft. “Adam, don’t let him spank me. You just said the job fell on you to satisfy me. Treating me like an unruly child isn’t a way to satisfy a lady.”

“When you don’t act like a lady, why should we treat you like one?” Luke countered. He stared into her eyes, not missing the low burn of anticipatory thrill deep within them. She might struggle and argue out of habit, but she wanted what he promised her. He felt no doubt about that.

“Luke, please.” Her voice shook, but the words held an underlining request he didn’t expect to hear.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re asking to be spanked?”

She gulped and then jerked her chin into the air. “I would never ask for such a thing.”

*Oh, yes you will.*

Luke drove a hand into the hair at her nape and fisted it. She asked what kind of game he played. The time had come to show her.

“Get on your knees.” He used his hold on her head to push her down, leaving her little choice but to obey. Adam moved a step back, his gaze locked on Luke’s face, obviously waiting to see what Luke intended to do. “Since you won’t ask for what you want, you’ll put that sassy mouth to use in other ways.” He grabbed his shaft in his other fist and poised the head at her lips. “Open for my cock, Lara. You’re going to suck it for me while I decide how to make you behave like a lady.”

## Chapter Six

Adam watched Lara's lips part to take the head of Luke's cock into her mouth, and for the first time in his life, he wanted more than anything to be his brother. He couldn't say why the desire hit him with the force of a physical blow. He long ago lost count of how many times Lara sucked his cock. Luke couldn't know it, but he hit on Lara's greatest satisfaction with that command. Still, as Luke's dick disappeared in Lara's mouth, Adam's cock ached with jealousy.

He rarely allowed himself to be so forceful with her. He preferred to treat her with compassion and tenderness rather than with such reckless abandon. She enjoyed it, though. That much became obvious when she began to moan. The noises her mouth made around Luke's cock, sucking, slurping. *Sweet Jesus*, she sounded as if she enjoyed the grandest meal of her life.

"Son of a bitch." Luke groaned as Lara's head dipped farther, obviously taking his cock deeper down her throat. He locked gazes with Adam out of heavy-lidded eyes. "You didn't warn me how good she is at this."

Adam felt his lips twitch. "You didn't ask."

"She's making my damned knees weak."

"She'll do that. Watch, you'll be falling next if you aren't careful." Adam knew that from experience. He'd scarred his knee on a rock once after collapsing while Lara's lips were wrapped around his dick.

"Thanks for telling me." Luke sucked an audible breath through his teeth as his eyes closed.



Adam looked away, gritting his teeth over words that sprang to his tongue, oaths he knew he shouldn't be thinking, let alone putting to voice. He never thought to feel this way, to be unable to watch his brother and Lara together. He'd known it would be this way from the start, accepted it as truth long ago, and even ached for it after Luke left Wildwood.

*Careful what you wish for.* His pa said it often enough. *Be grateful for what you've got, son, and mind what you think you want.*

Christ almighty, he always appreciated what he possessed. He felt even more blessed since Luke's return. So why did he feel like a noose tightened around his heart every time he looked down to see Lara feasting on Luke's cock?

Lara angled her head. The new position caused her hair to fall over her face, shielding her pleased expression from his view. Adam averted his gaze only to collide with Luke's intent, heavy-lidded stare.

"Easier to talk about it, to plan it, than it is to see it happen, isn't it, little brother?" Luke's voice sounded tight with barely restrained control and a hint of apology. His hand caressed the top of Lara's head as she set a smooth rhythm sucking his cock.

*Perceptive son of a bitch.*

Adam scowled. He didn't answer. What could he say? Perhaps talking about it before Lara came of age had been easier than acting on it now. That didn't change the facts. Lara craved things Adam couldn't give her, things like the dominate commands and reckless touches Luke provided. On the other hand, she looked to Adam for the tenderness and passion Luke didn't often give. Even if none of that were true, they loved her, and she loved them. That alone mattered if nothing else did.

"Lara, ah, God, pretty girl, time to stop." Luke pulled at Lara's head, chuckling when she attempted to chase after his cock as he eased away.

She sat back on her heels and glared up at Luke. Adam couldn't see her expression from his place behind her. He didn't have to. He knew her well enough to know she would be pouting right about now. Sure enough, when she spoke, it rang in her voice.

"I wasn't finished."

"Don't I know it?" Luke barked a breathless laugh. "But I believe Adam is getting a bit jealous."

Lara slowly turned to look up at Adam. Surprise twisted her beautiful features. "Adam?" She made his name a question, her eyes narrowing in obvious confusion.

Adam sank to his knees and pulled her into his arms, unable to keep his hands off her a second longer. "I'm sorry." He brushed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm being stupid. I know it."

"I thought you wanted this." She stiffened in his arms, pulling back to look at him. "You said this is how it is supposed to be."

"I know." Adam closed his eyes and took a deep breath. How to explain the natural male reaction of jealousy to a woman? If he saw her with anyone other than Luke he knew he would go nuts. "I didn't lie. I can handle this. I do want this, Lara." He pushed a stray hair behind her ear, letting his gaze dance over her angelic face. "I just need a minute."

"I think that's fair, seeing as he got two years alone with you." Luke kneeled beside them. He ran a hand down the back of Lara's head, petting her in a gesture that exhibited his love. "It's an adjustment. If we'd taken you together from the start as we meant to, things would be different. It didn't work out that way. You belonged to him and only him for a long time now."

"No." Lara reached for Luke, cupping the side of his face with one hand as she cupped the side of Adam's face with the other. "I've always belonged to both of you."

"That you have." Adam turned his face in to her touch, grazing a kiss to her palm.

"Lie back, Adam. Let me climb on top of you."

Adam glanced at Luke. "Aren't you forgetting—?"

"I'm not forgetting anything." Lara pushed at his shoulders until he lay back on the grass as she bid. "I'm testing. I believe I am the one who feared not being able to satisfy you both. Allow me to see that I can."

Adam caught her hips as she straddled his waist. He loved having her on top, reveled in the sight of her hair falling around her face as she gazed down at him through passion-glazed eyes. "Though last, not least in love," he whispered, and his heart swelled at the smile that unfolded on her lips.

"Oh, brother, here he goes again," Luke grumbled, making them all laugh.

\* \* \* \*

"I like that he does that so stop teasing him, Luke Stonewell." Lara's attempt to scold got lost somewhere in a moan as the tip of Adam's cock tickled her pussy lips. Her body felt on fire from her throbbing breasts to her sopping pussy and every point in between. "I like, oh, *oh*."

"What is it you like, Lara?" The head of Adam's cock parted her labia, and she lost all train of thought. "You're so wet, woman, smooth and warm like the petals of a rose in the summer sun."

"That," Lara managed on a ragged breath. Her eyes closed of their own volition as she relaxed her legs on either side of Adam's hips, letting her body sink another half inch onto his fully erect cock. His hold on her waist prevented her from taking his dick inside her weeping channel to the hilt the way she so desperately wanted. "Your lovely words, your gentle hand, all of it." Her head fell back as he lowered her a little more, giving his full length to her in gradual increments that threatened to drive her to the brink of madness. When he stilled her again with the tightening of his grip on her flesh, she opened her eyes to find Luke standing over her.

“Luke.” She mouthed his name, but didn’t think she actually said it aloud. Pleasure spiked in her womb, mingling with the love that swelled in her heart and rendering her unable to finish her thought. Another came on its heels instead, one she knew would bring a smile to Luke’s intent lips. “I’ll still never ask to be spanked.”

Sure enough, Luke smiled. It started slow, the corner of his sexy lips inching up until an arrogant grin that screamed of confidence and promise lit his handsome face. “Oh, you will, pretty girl.”

His tone rang with the promise she saw in his smile. Her butt cheeks flamed as if already hit by the strap of his belt. A belt, she noted absently, that she didn’t see now. She should’ve felt relieved by that. Instead, a sliver of disappointment moved through her.

“Just not today.” Luke closed the distance between them, reaching down to fist his hand in her hair. “I believe you have a job to finish, Miss Franklin.”

Excitement danced though Lara as he turned her head, held her still, and nudged her lips with his cock. She saw him glance at Adam, then he thrust his cock between her lips. The movement forced her mouth to open at the same time Adam slowly pulled her body down, sheathing his remaining length in her aching channel. She closed her eyes as pleasure the likes of which she’d never before felt ricocheted through her at having two cocks in her respective openings. Hands gripped her hair, her breasts, and her hips. She lost track of whose hand might be where in the throes of the first orgasm that slammed into her from out of nowhere.

“Ah, that’s it. Suck it, Lara.” Luke fed his cock to her, setting a brisk rhythm she didn’t harbor a prayer of controlling as her body convulsed with the force of the pleasure tearing from her very soul.

Staying upright while her body bucked from inside out proved to be a challenge. She reached around Luke, her hand finding a sure grip on his ass. The muscles beneath her palm flexed with each piercing thrust of his cock into her mouth. She splayed her other hand on the

flat ridges of Adam's abdomen, marveling in the ripple of the muscles there that quaked in his obvious struggle to hold off his own release.

Mindless, on a race to oblivion, Lara sucked Luke's cock with reckless abandon as Adam defied speed, leisurely drawing out her orgasm. Adam's hold on her hip pushed her up and eased her back down in gradual strokes that buried his dick balls deep inside the clinging depths of her pussy. Luke's low growl dimly registered in her consciousness before his hot semen bathed her mouth and throat. She swallowed, drinking the salty, sweet liquid drop for drop as her fingers dug into the flesh of Adam's abdomen. Only when Luke pulled away, his cock slipping from her hungry lips, did she open her eyes. Her gaze fell on Adam lying beneath her, his face awash with fascination, intense concentration, and a deep set love that wound around her heart.

Lara licked her lips, tasting the remnants of Luke's cum. "Still jealous?" She cocked a brow and let herself fall over Adam, catching her weight with her hands on either side of his head.

He chuckled, the sound like music to her ears. "Only because he got to come."

"No one's stopping you." She used her newfound position to gain a bit of control, pushing against his hold until she managed to lift her body off his dick. She wriggled her hips, drawing another low laugh from him. Then she let her body fall once more, impaling her drenching pussy with his thick length.

Adam threw his head back, his eyes closing as an animalistic growl rumbled from his chest. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" His eyes opened to narrow slits. "You know I can't hold out when you do things like that."

Lara nodded and repeated the movement despite the tightening grip of his hands on her hips. "I know." She also knew he wouldn't allow himself release until she came again. Not that it would take much more than another deep thrust and she would be right there with him.

She'd started to say as much when she felt a hand glide over her ass. A moan festered in her throat at the combination of the gentle touch to her rear and the wide, stiff cock spreading her womb. The moan turned to a quickly indrawn gasp when a finger slipped between her ass cheeks and grazed over her forbidden entrance.

Trepidation snaked through Lara even as a sliver of icy heat connected from her anus to her pussy. Her eyes widened, and she grew still. All thought of riding Adam's dick that last few thrusts to oblivion vanished in the frightening, pleasure-filled idea of having that fissure of her body explored.

A keen knowledge moved over Adam's face even as a small smile kicked up the corner of his lips. His grip on her eased. It seemed he knew such a hold on her became unnecessary now with Luke's teasing perusal of her secret passage. Adam tickled the backs of his fingers up and down her side, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"He means to take you there." Adam's words came as softly as his touch. "Likely while I take you here." His hand traveled down, disappearing in her pubic hair to find her swollen clit. His pelvis lifted off the ground to propel his dick deeper still inside her clutching channel.

"Would you like that?" Luke asked. "Would you like to feel my cock inside you here, Lara?" The tip of his finger eased past the tight band of muscles rimming her anus.

"O—oh." Lara's arms started to shake as her body attempted to decipher pain from pleasure.

"Would you like your body filled to bursting with my cock and Adam's?" Luke's other hand caressed her butt cheek, his finger wiggling slightly in her nether hole. She felt it stretching, the muscles relaxing ever so slightly to his probing touch. "Maybe I'll blister this pretty ass of yours first, give you that proper spanking I promised you, before we show you such pleasure."

"Yes." Lara hissed the word as a second orgasm crested. The intense sensation of Luke's digit in her ass, the mere implication of

his impressively thick cock serving as a replacement proved to be enough to send her quaking over the edge yet again.

Both men seemed to sense her bliss because Adam pistoned his dick inside her convulsing channel at the same time that Luke worked his finger deeper inside her anus. The combination wrenched a mewling cry from Lara. She never heard herself make such a sound, never felt anything close to the riot of ecstasy that ruled her. She collapsed on top of Adam, jerking, her inner muscles milking Adam's dick until she felt his hot seed spill into her. Lightheaded with pleasure, Lara passed out.

\* \* \* \*

"He won't do anything you don't want. You know that, don't you?" Adam held out a hand for Lara as she waded back out of the pond. She had been drenched with her own juices and his after their lovemaking and needed another washing before putting on her dress.

"Of course I know that." Heat crept into Lara's cheeks as she put her hand in Adam's. She looked away, unable to meet his gaze. The probability ranked high that exactly how badly she wanted everything Luke promised her and more might be etched in her eyes. She started walking back to where they left Luke beneath the tree at the edge of the clearing.

Adam laughed, reaching to hook a finger beneath her chin. "Then do you know how much I truly enjoy seeing you blush? It is a treat you rarely gave me before Luke's return."

"Is that what made you jealous?" Lara stopped and turned to him. "That Luke can make me blush while you rarely do?"

"It might be part of it. It might be more that I feared you would decide you wanted only him."

Lara gaped at him. Her gaze danced over his face, realizing from his expression that he meant exactly what he said. "Adam," she began, but couldn't think of a thing else to say.

“He got it right, Lara. I had you to myself since he rode out of town. It’s been just the two of us for a long time. How am I to know you don’t wish for that same amount of time to be with Luke?”

“You know because I’m telling you.” Lara rose to her tiptoes and brushed her lips to Adam’s. “I do want that time with Luke. I want the rest of my life with him the same as I want it with you.” She threw back her head and expelled a loud gasp. “What you can’t know is how lucky I am, how amazing I feel knowing I won’t be forced to choose. I’ve loved you my whole life, both of you. I thought I lost him, Adam.”

“We both did.”

Lara nodded. “But we didn’t. He’s back, and he’s staying. It might take both of us to keep him here. That’s what your ma said. You’ve got to help me see that he stays.”

“He’ll stay.” Conviction turned Adam’s tone to stone. He averted his gaze, focusing on a point over her shoulder. On Luke she figured, given that she stood with her back to Luke and the tree beneath which he sat. “He’s different now, Lara. He’s not the same man that got on his horse that night outside the saloon.”

Lara kept her hand locked in Adam’s as she turned slightly to catch view of Luke. Her heart stumbled. The burning that previously settled in her cheeks made a flaming path straight to her pussy. No, he was certainly not the man who’d left her. The Luke who returned to her possessed a hardened resolve that radiated from every pore. Even now, lying on his side with one leg bent at the knee, the other stretched on the grass and his cock soft and dangling against his thigh, he looked like a man who no one in his right mind would approach.

“We’re not the same people he left behind either,” she reminded Adam. How could any of them be the same after that horrid night?

“We don’t know what he went through, where he’s been.”

“Does it matter?” She shot a look at Adam, caught the intensity in his eyes, and sighed. “Of course it matters.”

“Not in the ways of changing anything, but it haunts him.”



“It haunts all three of us.”

“It will turn him harder. It will make him more crazed if it continues to fester, Lara.”

She heeded the warning in Adam’s tone as she watched Luke pluck a blade of grass and stick it in his mouth. His brow winged up, his jaw muscle working as he chewed. “He will never be as gentle as you. It’s not his way. He looks for justice, for...” She stopped abruptly, fear chilling her veins.

“Redemption?” Adam finished for her.

Lara whirled to face Adam. “He can’t be. Surely you don’t think he will put himself in harm’s way, let himself be gunned down because of what he did to Jeb.”

“No, that would be suicide. Luke is no more a coward than he is a murderer.”

Lara sighed in relief. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I don’t know what I’m thinking.” He wouldn’t have returned for her to see him shot down. He’d returned to protect her, to protect his family and the people of his town.

A cool breeze ruffled the trees, and Adam hooked an arm around her waist, pulling her close. “Come on. You’re going to catch a chill standing out in the open, naked this way.”

Lara beamed a smile at him. “Not if you and your brother do your duty and keep me warm. You did say the job fell to you to keep me pleased, right?”

Adam muttered an oath, but he grinned as she led him toward Luke. Lara folded herself to the ground in front of Luke. Desire sparked in his eyes as he watched her. It ignited the ever-smoldering fire within her. One corner of his lips tilted in a smile. He tossed the blade of grass aside and reached for her, yanking her against the hard wall of his chest.

“All clean?” He nipped her chin and then traced the outline of her lips with his tongue.

“We are.” Lara drove her hands into his hair, loving the feel of the silken strands. “Aren’t you going to wash up?”

“Don’t need to. You cleaned me nice and good with this fantastic mouth of yours.”

Her cheeks flamed, and she swore she heard Adam chuckle as he settled on the ground at her back. Blindly, she reached back for him, finding his arm and guiding it around her waist just below Luke’s arm. Her other hand came to rest on Luke’s chest, and she pushed herself away from him enough to meet his gaze.

“What’s going to happen in town? What are you planning to do when the Desert Riders reach Wildwood?”

Luke’s expression went from playful to serious in a flash. “I don’t intend on them making it to town.”

“How do you plan to stop them?” Adam asked, folding his body over Lara’s back to lean over her shoulder.

“Set up a blockade about a mile outside of town.” Luke pushed himself up, but his hold on Lara didn’t move from her waist. “I’m going back before dark. I’ll stay in town tonight with the gang. I haven’t run this by them yet, but I figure we can form a line at Miller’s Pond.”

“You don’t expect they’ll come in quietly, sneak in from another direction?” Adam sounded skeptical.

Luke shook his head. “Bastards are too arrogant for that. They will ride straight in.”

“And you will be there to see they don’t make it all the way,” Lara concluded, already picturing his intentions in her mind’s eye.

Luke nodded. “That’s right, pretty girl. Miller’s Pond is as open as it gets between here and the next town over. If the gang sets up stakes there, we’ll be able to spot the whole of them long before they can do any damage.”

“Except to you,” Lara pointed out, the fear returning with enough intensity to raise goose pimples on her flesh.

“There are plenty of places to take up watch if you know the area. I want everyone situated so I know where they are. I want my gang where I can spot them. There will be less chance of a surprise that way.” His voice dropped almost to a whisper.

Lara swallowed. She could all but feel his pain radiating from his chest and seeping into her palm. She understood what he didn’t say, why he needed his men to stay in his sight. He didn’t want one of them sneaking up at his back the way Jeb did.

“We never talked about what happened,” she told Luke unnecessarily. Adam’s arm squeezed her waist, offering her both encouragement and comfort. She desperately needed both right now. “Will you talk about it now?”

Luke stared at her, his eyes wrought with so many emotions she didn’t dare attempt to sort them out. After a long, tense moment, he expelled a loud sigh and nodded. “I suppose we probably should.”

\* \* \* \*

Luke covered Lara’s hand on his chest and gave it a squeeze before taking it away. He shifted, turning to rest his back against the tree. The move put a few inches of distance between himself and Lara and even more between himself and Adam. He needed that space despite the growing cold that now consumed the air around him. Amazing how the weight of a memory, the guilt of an action, could turn the world to ice even on a warm, sunny day.

It had been warm that night, too. He remembered it so very clearly, stalking into the saloon to find the bastard believed to have robbed, raped, and murdered EllieMay Sue Rossly. He even felt the sweat beading on his brows the same as it did that night.

“What that son of a bitch O’Keefe did to the Rosslys is unspeakable.” Luke swiped the back of his hand over his brows, only marginally surprised when his hand came back wet with true sweat. “When I realized where he went, when I found him standing at the bar

in your pa's saloon knocking back a belt of whisky as if nothing happened, *God*, Lara, you can't possibly know what went through my mind."

Lara inched closer, but she didn't touch him. "I can if you tell me." Her tone and eyes implored him to continue. The love he felt radiating from her nearness gave him strength.

He looked at her. He saw his woman as she sat now a few inches away. He saw her, too, as he did that night and every night since. The way she'd walked toward the outlaw at the bar, oblivious of the atrocities the man had committed or his likely intent to do the same to her still sent chills racing down his spine. "O'Keefe meant to rob the saloon." Luke felt certain of it clean through his bones that night. His instincts had never steered him wrong before. He never believed they did then either.

"You reckoned he figured to bide his time, hold up in the saloon while the town started a man hunt for the Rossly family's assailants," Adam guessed.

Luke nodded. "I expect he thought he might get away, could get another robbery off, get his—" *cock satisfied by raping Lara, too.*

He abruptly cut off his words, but when he dared a glance at Lara, he saw he hadn't stopped talking soon enough. "While everyone in town focused their search elsewhere," he said instead.

"What made you look for him at the saloon?" Lara asked. "The rest of the gang and the townsfolk they enlisted to help concentrated on the lands closer to the Rossly's spread. Why did you come back to town?"

*To make sure you were safe.*

"Instinct." Both answers were true enough, though he spoke only the second. Even now, years later, he remembered the turmoil he battled that night. His duty as the leader of the only semblance of law in Wildwood at that time demanded his loyalty. His needs as a man to see his woman protected shouted above all else. His mayhem ended in

an instant when he realized his instinct led him to Lara because at least one of the O'Keefe's comrades wasn't far behind.

"I always said you had that by the wagon load," Adam muttered.

Luke saw in his brother's eyes that Adam knew what Luke left unsaid as well.

"He drew on you," Lara said of the outlaw. "I saw his hand go for his gun just as I cleared the corner of the bar. I remember." She stopped, closing her eyes as if she saw it all happening again in her mind's eye. Luke knew she likely did for he saw it all every time he'd blinked for the last two years. "You said something. I don't remember what, but it got his attention, and he knew you meant to take him in."

What Luke said in that moment remained a blur to him, too. It got lost somewhere in the pounding of his pulse, drowned in a soul-deep fear he'd never felt before that night. "I saw him go for his gun, too."

"You didn't give him a chance to draw," Lara said. "You already held your gun in your hand, and you shot him."

"I'm sorry you saw that." Luke wanted to reach for her, but held himself back. Not yet. He couldn't allow himself the total comfort of her contact just yet. So much more remained to be said. They only now reached the part of the night he wished more than his next breath that he could've prevented her from seeing.

"I'm not." Lara shook her head vehemently. "He got what he deserved."

"Jeb walked in. The moment I fired, he stepped into the saloon behind me." A part of Luke knew the timing to be exact. Amid the sound of the shot, he somehow heard Jeb's booted feet on the wood at his back. "I didn't tell Jeb I meant to head for the saloon. I left him with the others back at the Rossly's place."

"You put him in charge of the search." Adam's tone made his words more statement than question. He hadn't wanted to lead the gang, preferring to let Jeb act as second in his place. "He'd never gone against your orders before. You didn't know he would pick that night to be the first."

"I didn't think, *fuck*, I should have realized he would go for you and your pa too, no matter what order I gave him." Luke held Lara's gaze for only a second before he looked away. He couldn't handle the memories while he stared into her hazel eyes. "It was plain stupid of me not to realize he would want to see you safe, same as I did."

"The moment didn't give you time to think, Luke. That's just it." Lara scooted closer again until her leg brushed his, but still she didn't touch him. "It happened so fast you could do nothing more than react."

"It wasn't supposed to be Jeb behind me." Luke squeezed his eyes shut over the burn of pain still so raw even after all this time. "I heard him. Somehow a part of my mind registered his presence behind me, and I spun. By the time I realized it was Jeb and not one of the other outlaws, I'd already pulled the trigger." He actually remembered seeing the bullet fly through the air to embed itself into Jeb's heart. He never thought it possible to see such a thing, but he didn't doubt his memory of that moment. The projectile spun in the air on a direct course for Jeb's chest, and Luke had known a paralyzing certainty he never dreamed. He'd known he shot down a friend. The shock of the impact in Jeb's expression would haunt Luke's soul for the rest of his life.

Luke opened his eyes and gave his head a shake to rid himself of the visions. "What I did to Jeb, to you, is unforgivable. I couldn't stay after that, Lara. I couldn't face you, let alone ask you to exonerate me for murdering your brother. I shouldn't do it now."

He should leave. He started to say that, too, but caught the almost imperceptible shake of Adam's head out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't leave again even if he wanted to. Not unless she wanted him to. "But I'm going to anyway. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Lara? Can you look at me every day for the rest of our lives and know one of the men you married is the man who shot down your brother?"

## Chapter Seven

Tears streamed down Lara's cheeks. Her heart, broken so long ago by the events Luke described, by his abandonment, shattered once more by the anguish in his tone. Forgive him. Forgive him! She wished she could laugh at the absurdity of his request. He asked her forgiveness for something he couldn't prevent. How did one exonerate a man for being himself, for acting on the bone-deep reflex to protect and see justice done?

She shook her head. "I can't."

His gaze fell, but not before she saw the devastation in his eyes.

"No." She finally touched him. She caught his face in both hands and made him look at her. "You don't understand."

"I do." He covered her hands with his and tried to pry her hands from his cheeks. Lara stiffened her hold, determined not to let him push her away. "I don't blame you, pretty girl. What I did to you, to your family, there is no forgiveness for that."

"Stop it!" She didn't mean to shout, but the force of her words at least gave him pause. "Damn it, Luke, I can't forgive you for something I never held you responsible for in the first place. What happened was an accident. You said so yourself. You reacted just as any man would have. The only thing I blame you for is leaving me."

"You mean that." His words rang with such surprise that she suppressed the sudden urge to slap him.

Stupid man. What would it take to convince him? She knew of only one way to get through the barrier he threw up between them. Keeping her hold on his face strong and true, she shifted herself until she could straddle his lap.

“This is the last time I’m going to hear any confessions of guilt out of you, Luke Stonewell. Do you hear me? I won’t stand for it.” She felt like she talked to a child and knew she likely sounded as such too. But, if it took treating this hard, determined man like a two-year-old to get through to him then, by golly, that’s what she meant to do.

The cursory idea of a child sent her mind careening on an unrelated path. Her belly danced. Her womb constricted at the desire to be filled with a child, his child.

Their child, she amended as she shot an imploring look at Adam. He moved to her side though still a bit behind, and sat now with his legs drawn up, his forearms resting on his knees as he watched them. She saw the evidence of his tears on his cheeks. Still, he gave her space. He gave Luke space when Luke revealed all that ate him up inside. Luke didn’t need that space now. He needed closeness, reassurance, love.

She reached for Adam, at the same time sliding her other hand behind Luke’s neck. She pulled Luke closer and kissed him. His primal response, heated and instantaneous, confirmed she made the right move. He devoured her mouth, possessing her in a way that compelled juices to leak from her center. Her pussy ached to be licked with the same exuberance.

His hands raked over her flesh. The calluses on his palms and fingers abraded her sensitive skin. His thumbs glided over her taut nipples. He gave a low growl as she arched into him, asking without words for more of that touch.

Luke broke the kiss only to skim his mouth down her throat, her collarbone, her chest. Adam moved closer at her back. His body pressed against her, his chest there to support her head when she let it fall back. His hands moved beneath her arms and around to cup her breasts. He held them firm, lifting them and squeezing slightly as Luke dipped his head and closed his lips around one taut peak.

Luke alternated nibbling at her hardened nipple and then licking it to soothe first one breast and then the other until her pussy flamed and



she writhed against him and Adam. With his hands free, thanks to Adam's hold on her breasts, Luke delved a hand between her legs on a direct course to her sopping and ready folds. He reached between her body and Adam's with his other hand and palmed her ass.

Lara's breath caught. She knew what he meant to do. She feared it even as her body hummed for it. The touch didn't feel as foreign as it did the first time. Luke moaned against her breast. His warm breath fanned her highly sensitized nipple as his finger grazed the swollen bud of her clit. On her ass, his hand skimmed her cheeks, then spread them. One finger slipped between.

Despite the fresh memory of such a touch, Lara's body went rigid just the same. She opened eyes she didn't realize she'd closed to find Luke gazing at her. The corner of his lips tilted in that sexily superior half-grin that made her insides flutter. Seeing his playful mood return, no matter how haughty, brought her spirits soaring. She decided to meet him action for word.

"I want that." The confession offered her nearly as much excitement as his touch. She shivered in his arms. "What you said about taking me there while Adam's cock is inside my pussy, I want that, Luke."

The sound he made at her affirmation couldn't be defined. Pain, need, desire, torture mixed together to form a noise she never heard before from a man. From any human. "You'll get it, woman. You'll feel my cock inside that tight ass just as you'll feel my belt on that soft skin for the words you speak."

This time Lara heard the unintelligible sound come from her own throat. "Luke." He meant to spank her. He continued to talk of such a thing. The intent in his gaze left no doubt in her mind he would do it. The sizzle in her body, the burn in her ass that made her inner muscles tense in anticipation left no doubt in her mind that she would enjoy every swat.

Adam leaned down, chuckling in her ear as he nipped her lobe. "You're blushing again."

Lara couldn't stop herself from smiling at that any more than she could stop her body heating from head to toe at Luke's words. She craved all he spoke of with a fierce hunger she never thought to experience, and the knowledge embarrassed her even as it thrilled her.

"She is, isn't she?" Amusement laced Luke's question.

"Your words seem to have that effect on her," Adam commented.

"Adam never touched you here, never fucked you here, did he?" As he spoke, his finger delved inside her anus. The familiar, pleasurable burn rendered her unable to do more than shake her head. "I didn't expect he would. I'm glad. Thank you, brother, for leaving that hole virgin for me."

"My pleasure." Adam's hands caressed her breasts, his thumbs grazing over the nipples Luke left aching for more attention.

"The pleasure will be our lady's when I decide to claim this part of her. I won't do it today, my love."

Lara whimpered at his refusal before she could stop herself.

Luke smiled and nipped her jaw. "Right now, I want to be inside your tight, wet pussy. I want to feel your inner muscles squeeze around my cock. I want to be so far inside you that our bodies feel glued together." He bent again, taking first one nipple and then the other in his mouth for more of the torturous pleasure her breasts craved.

"Okay." Luke bit her right nipple with a little more force than before, and she shivered clean to her toes. Shards of pleasure-like crystal rained through her body and collected exactly where she wanted him most, in her sopping, throbbing channel.

"There's something more I have to tell you first."

Lara's heart skipped.

*No, please, no.*

He meant to tell her he planned to leave. She knew it. She couldn't handle it, knew she would die if forced to watch him ride away a second time.

Luke licked a path up her chest and neck to her mouth and kissed her lips more softly than he'd ever kissed her before. He pulled back enough to meet her gaze, his eyes intense, serious, and captivating. "I love you, Lara."

She tried to swallow, but couldn't around the lump in her throat. His confession didn't come as news to her. She knew he loved her. But hearing him say it, seeing the echo of it in his eyes, feeling it in his touch brought another rush of tears to her eyes. "I know," she whispered. "And I love you."

He grinned, the curve of his lips so proud she could've sworn she saw his head swelling. "I know."

Adam's hand glided up her front. He tapped her chin with one finger, and she turned her head to look at him. "Since we seem to be saying things we already know..." He shot a smile at Luke. He opened his mouth to continue, but stopped when Luke groaned.

"Don't start with the poetic horse manure again."

Adam acquiesced with an almost imperceptible movement of his head. "I love you, too." He kissed her.

They turned her in their arms, not needing words between them to communicate their intentions. They never did, she recalled and figured it to be a good thing seeing as Adam's tongue remained inside her mouth. They guided her to kneel between them, her front now pressed to Adam's unyielding body, her hands braced on his shoulders. Luke's hands splayed on the back of her shoulders and glided down in a firm but tender fall south.

Luke leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I'm going to take you from behind like I did our first time. I believe you called it mounting an animal."

The laughter in his voice made her smile as she broke the kiss with Adam. "And I believe you fucked me with the exuberance of said animal, too."

"As I will again. Spread your legs for me, Lara."

She did, sliding her knees on the grass, wincing only slightly at the abrasive sting to her kneecaps. Luke's lips closed over her flesh, and he licked a spot at the juncture where her neck met her shoulder, then bit the same spot. She shivered down to her soul.

Her gaze locked with Adam's. He watched her intently, holding her lovingly with his arms around her waist.

"Keep your hands on my shoulders and arch your back," he instructed her. "Let Luke guide your body where he wants it."

Luke's hands moved to her hip and the small of her back. The position coupled with Adam's fixed gaze on hers seemed dirty and erotic. She felt electrified, needy, and ready.

"Please." The word escaped her lips before she could stop it. They'd barely touched her and already she'd started to beg. She didn't care. She would beg if it took that to get what she wanted. Right now she wanted Luke's cock inside her aching pussy.

"Thought you wouldn't ask for such things, Miss Franklin," Luke chided her, his cock pressing to the sodden folds of her pussy.

"I'm not asking. I'm demanding. And what I said I wouldn't request is something entirely different than what I want now."

"We'll argue that point later." Luke positioned his cock at her fiery opening and plunged.

Lara screamed. She couldn't help it. The single, vicious, deep thrust tore the sound from her in a riot of pleasure, pain, and sheer bliss. He fucked her. She could think of no other word to describe the ferocious and primal way he slammed his cock into her sodden channel. She burned for him, and he met her flames with a dynamite of his own, taking her fast and hard to an orgasmic peak she couldn't have backed away from if she wanted to.

It was rough and rapid and totally superb. Her body rocked forward with each piston of his cock into her. Her breasts slapped Adam's chest, the sensitive, hardened peaks sizzling at the abrasion of his coarse chest hair.

“Lara.” The sound of her name seemingly wrenched from Luke’s balls proved enough to send her over the edge. Whether he called out to her in warning, permission, or passion, she didn’t know. Either way, she couldn’t hold back if she tried.

“Go with me.” She ground the words through tightly clenched teeth, the last coming out as only half a sound while her body convulsed. She quaked as the orgasm blasted through her. Her nails dug into Adam’s shoulders. She wondered how she didn’t draw blood as she struggled to hold her position while her body gave in to the spasms. Dimly, she heard Luke’s release, felt the hot spurt of his seed as he came deep inside her.

“Shit!” The oath, so uncharacteristic coming from Adam, broke through the roaring in her ears first. Lara lifted her head from where it fell to rest on his chest just below his throat and met his gaze.

“Tell me about it.” Her words were labored, her breath ragged, but she managed a smile that spread from ear to ear.

“I don’t suppose you can handle that a second time.” His hands glided caressingly up and down her arms.

Lara lifted a brow. “With you? But we’ve never fu— made love like that.”

“I think I might be just on the edge enough to give it a try if you don’t mind.” His hands skimmed her front, lingering on her breasts, and then trailing down. “That is if Luke didn’t hurt you too badly just now.”

“Hurt me? You’re kidding, right?”

“Seeing as I’m not.” He caught her waist, twisted her around, planted her gently on her back and covered her body with his all in a move smoother than churned butter.

Lara gave a soft chuckle as she stared up at him in surprise. “That’s something new.”

“I have a few moves I’ve yet to show you. I’ll have to be on top to give you the full impact.” The head of his penis created a lightly insistent pressure to the outside of her opening. His wide hips spread

her legs, and his lower body pressed to her stomach, a spectacular weight pinning her to the ground.

“Oh, my,” she said raggedly. She cried out with every rapturous, sensational part of her being as he drove every delicious, wondrously hard, and long inch of his dick inside her awaiting pussy.

\* \* \* \*

“Didn’t you say nobody expected the Desert Riders to show for two days’ time?” Lara planted her fisted hands on her hips and turned to Adam before spinning back around to glare at Luke.

She looked so damned sexy with a hint of temper coloring her cheeks that Luke very nearly grinned before he caught himself. He might have been single his whole life, but he watched men with their women, and he learned real fast. Until he figured out what got her back up this time, it would be best to keep such observations to himself.

“If that’s the case, why are you spending the night in town?”

Luke scooped his shirt off the ground near his booted feet and pulled it on. “That ‘nobody’ doesn’t include me.” When her eyes narrowed, he sighed and decided to try smoothing her ruffled feathers despite being oblivious to their cause. “I explained to you what I mean to do, Lara. I can’t organize the gang and coordinate everything with the sheriff from way out here. I have to be in town.” He said it more to reiterate the fact to himself than to convince her. He wanted to stay. If only he could turn a blind eye, let the sheriff do his duty, and then Luke could stay right there with Lara where he belonged.

“You didn’t tell me about that.”

Luke glanced down at the tin star pinned to his shirt and suppressed a sigh. Shit, no. He hadn’t told her, but something told him he was about to now, or else. “No, I suppose I forgot to mention it.”

Lara cocked her head. "Forgot to mention it or conveniently omitted it?"

"Did the sheriff deputize the whole gang or just you?" The calmness of Adam's question landed like a log in the center of Lara's interrogation, making Luke blink. He shifted his attention to his brother.

"The gang," Luke snagged his hat off the branch he'd hooked it on and settled it on his head. "Dillinger saw to that."

Adam nodded. "He needed to. It's best if all of you are legal before this goes down. There's no telling what you'll have to do to stop the Desert Riders. Good to see the sheriff is keeping his head."

Luke bit back the first retort that sprang to his tongue. From what he saw before he left town to come to the ranch, Sheriff Baird would rather eat rotten prunes than swear in a bunch of vigilantes like the Stonewell Gang. He did it, though.

"You don't think it will take them two days to reach town." Lara's softly spoken comment drew Luke's attention back to her. She stood, her hand still planted on her trim hips, her blonde hair falling in wavy locks around her face, her eyes awash with too many emotions to name.

Luke stepped to her, hooking an arm around her and drawing her close. Her lithe body fit to his less pliant one with such perfection. It fed so much blood to his cock that it threatened to burst from the confines of his britches. He swallowed a groan. The woman screamed of plain hellfire, and he couldn't get enough of her.

"I think they will reach town long before two day's time," he answered her honestly. Baird argued with him to the last, but Luke refused to budge. Instinct told Luke that Baird didn't believe they had two day's time either. Still, if the sheriff got his way, the Stonewell Gang would stay out of town until the moment the first Desert Rider's horse stepped its hoof on Wildwood ground. The sheriff's attitude didn't set right with Luke, which is precisely why Luke didn't intend to give the sheriff his way. "They'll be here sooner."

Lara nodded. "And when they do, you'll be there."

"I mean to be." Luke rested his forehead to Lara's, his gaze locked with her. "I have to be. You know that, don't you?"

"I do. I wouldn't expect anything less out of you." She pulled back and looked away, hesitating. "I um, well, I'm s-sorry I got so angry about you going to town tonight."

Luke did a good job of stifling the laugh of surprise that bubbled in his throat. Then he screwed up and glanced at Adam. The shock Lara's apology had etched on his brother's face undid him. Luke lost it, nearly doubling over as the laughter escaped.

Lara went rigid in his arms. He figured if eyes could shoot arrows he would be full of holes right about now. Her hands flattened on his chest, and he braced himself for the slap even as he held her tighter when she attempted to push him away.

"Am I nothing more than a source of constant amusement to you, Luke Stonewell?"

"You're many things to me, pretty girl," Luke managed through fits of laughter. "A source of constant entertainment for sure. Comically." He got himself under control and brushed his lips to her forehead. "Dramatically." He moved his lips down the bridge of her nose to kiss the tip. "Sexually." He found her mouth next and traced its shape with the tip of his tongue until she gave a small gasp, her lips parting to offer him entrance.

She tasted of heaven and song, of everything he ever wanted in life and dared to leave behind. But not this time, he vowed as his tongue tangled with hers in a dance as old as mankind. He might ride away again before sunset, but only for a little while.

"You did that on purpose," Lara accused him breathlessly when she broke the kiss.

Luke winked at her. "Everything I do is for a purpose, though to what you might be referring to at this moment I'm a bit unclear." He watched her struggle not to smile, the corners of her tasty lips twitching in her efforts to retain her scolding expression.



"I'll have you know the innocent act doesn't work for you." Her fingers tangled in the back of his hair. It felt so good he let his eyes drift closed for a moment, enjoying the tenderness of the sensations. "You kiss me like that and all my irritation with you disappears."

"The day that stops working I'll be concerned." Luke kissed her again, this one nothing more than a chaste brush of his lips to hers, and then gave her a swift pat on her bottom. "Head on up to the house. See if Ma needs your help with anything. Adam and I will be right behind you."

She hesitated for only a moment before she nodded. She walked to Adam and laid a kiss on him that looked to blow the man's mind clean out of his head before she headed for the path leading back to the main house. Luke didn't bother to speak until she disappeared through the trees. Then he gave a low whistle that drew Adam's attention and a quiet chuckle to go with it.

"How did we get so lucky, my bother?" Luke asked only half in jest. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and took the three steps necessary to bring him to Adam's side.

"As I recollect, we've asked one another that very question since she learned to walk." Adam dusted his cowboy hat on his britches and set it on his head.

"I've got to say, I appreciate how well she learned to walk, too."

"You and me both." Adam chuckled, but the sound faded quickly. "She's worried."

Luke slanted his brother a glance. "I know." He'd seen it in her eyes, one of the many emotions that swam in the mesmerizing depths of hazel. "Truth is, I've been having trouble figuring if she's worried I won't come back this time or hoping I don't."

Adam shook his head. "For a cowboy hell bent on justice and quick with a gun, you've always been dense in the head."

"Maybe." Luke rocked back on his heels. "Or maybe it's you I should be wondering that about."

“Now you’re just plain stupid. I got jealous seeing you together for the first time. I didn’t go mad. If I had, I would’ve drawn on you.”

“Drawing your gun on me would prove you insane.”

“I’m not going to argue about who is better with a gun.”

“Because you know I’ll win.”

Adam brought the conversation full circle. “She needs you. You’re stronger, harder, more commanding. Hell, I didn’t know she wanted that kind of stuff.” He stopped and ran a hand down his face. “Oh, who am I kidding? I knew she got turned on by stuff that make most women run away and hide. Her favorite place to have sex is out in the open fields where anyone can come upon us.”

Luke barked a laugh. “No kidding. Anyone ever catch you?” The picture that sprang to mind of Adam scrambling to hide Lara’s assets with his stark naked body while one of the ranch hands just happened by kept the grin plastered to Luke’s face.

Adam pushed a hard breath through pursed lips. “Not so far. Been a couple of close ones, though. I’m thinking I’ll let you handle that end from now on.”

“I’d be much obliged.” Luke tipped his hat at his brother, still grinning. “It’s the same it’s always been, you know. She likes all that hokey pokey playwright shit you quote, gets all starry-eyed when you start talking all sappy and sweet.”

This time Adam grinned. “I told you one day it would help me romance the lady.”

“That you did,” Luke agreed. “We’re good together, the three of us.”

“Keep it that way.”

Luke bowed his head at Adam’s abrupt change from smiling to serious. “I aim to do just that. You keep her safe until you hear word from town.”

“I’ll keep her safe until you come back to take up your end of the job,” Adam countered. He started walking, and Luke followed.

“Don’t send anyone with news. You come back yourself. She’s not going to accept any word unless it comes from your lips.”

Luke didn’t say anything as they made their way down the path. The sun barely peeked over the trees, casting a pinkish-orange glow over the land as they pushed through the wood and stepped into the clearing. He spotted Lara first, leaning against the post where he tethered his horse, her hands on either side of her slender hips, her legs outstretched. She had changed into a pale blue dress and tied her hair in a ribbon at the back of her head. He swallowed the sudden urge to head straight for her, to lick his way over the creamy expanse of skin she left exposed along the side of her neck. His ma stood at her side. His pa sat in a wheelchair by his wife. His Lara might find thrill in the chance of being caught in a primal act of passion, but he didn’t figure tossing her to the ground at his parents’ feet and fucking her blind would be too proper.

Grace Stonewell covered her mouth with a delicate hand as he approached. He realized when he remained more than three feet from her what warranted her reaction. She noticed the deputy badge on his shirt.

“I guess there’s no hope in changing your mind, then?” Her eyes swam in hope all the same as she met him halfway and wrapped him in her motherly embrace.

Luke buried his face in the top of her head and breathed in her lavender scent. He’d missed her. That didn’t come as a shock to him. It did surprise him how the absence of her love left him feeling empty. Without her, without Lara in his life, he had been little more than a soulless walking dead man. “You know better, Ma.”

“Yes, but a mother has to try.” She pulled back enough to stare up at him, her gaze intent and as firm as he ever saw it. “You’ll take heed of yourself and the gang. You’ll be careful. You’ll come back.”

“I will,” he promised and swallowed down a lump forming in his throat. “I’ll do all of those things.”

“You better because Lara and I are throwing a party when you return.”

Luke groaned, mostly because he knew she expected him to. It made her smile, a bright beam of sunshine that lit up her pretty face. “Now, Ma, what are you going and doing that for?”

“We want to dance,” Lara chimed in, drawing his attention to her. She stood between Adam and his pa, one hand on his father’s shoulder and the other arm hugging Adam close.

“She makes quite a picture, doesn’t she?” Grace whispered.

“She always has.” Luke looked down at his ma. “You two go ahead and plan your party, but make sure you invite the guests to the wedding that will be before it.”

“Wedding?” Grace whirled out of his embrace, one hand flying up to cover her mouth, while the other fell to rest on her chest just below her throat. “Oh, oh, my boys are going to be married.”

Lara cleared her throat. When Luke looked to her again, he found her once more glaring at him, her foot out as if she meant to tap her toes impatiently on the ground. She might have been doing exactly that, but he couldn’t tell for her dress covered her feet. “Exactly who do you mean to marry, Mr. Stonewell? Surely you do not have me in mind for I have not heard a proper proposal pass your lips.”

Luke bit back a grin and cocked a brow. “Do you really wish to engage in a conversation about proper words passing the owner’s lips, Miss Franklin?”

She blushed. Luke figured if he had been gifted with vision to see through clothing he would’ve likely seen her flush all over.

Beside her, Adam covered his laugh with a feigned cough. “I’ll take care of my asking while you’re gone. You can see to your own when you get back.”

“Good enough.” Luke tipped his head back. The sky had already turned a purplish blue in the distance. “It’s time for me to head out.” He pulled his ma in for another tight hug. “I love you.”

“That’s one thing I’ve never doubted, son.” She patted his back and stepped out of his way.

Five steps brought him in front of his pa. As he looked down at the man who once stood taller and stronger than himself, his throat grew tight. “Pa...” He shook his head when no other words came. How did he apologize to the man who taught him everything? Everything except how to ride away, he amended silently. He taught himself that one.

“You do what you have to do, son. You do what you feel is right, just as you’ve always done.” His pa gazed up at him with nary a tear or sour spot in his eyes. “A man can’t ask for more out of a son than that.”

Luke nodded and leaned down to hug his pa. Straightening, he moved to Adam. “I won’t send word,” he told his brother, remembering what Adam said to him. “I’ll come back myself.” As he spoke, he reached for Lara. He snaked an arm around her and yanked her against him, smiling when she gave a startled gasp. “Then we’ll finish making it right with our woman.” He locked his gaze with hers as he leaned in to capture her mouth with his. “And we’ll see who’s more proper in the asking.”

## Chapter Eight

The taste of the last kiss he shared with Lara lingered on Luke's lips as he rode for town. They planned to hold a dance upon his return. Damn it all to hell, he hated to dance, and both his ma and Lara knew it. Leave it to women to get their jollies out of a man's discomfort, he thought sourly. His cock stirred in his pants at the thought of a far different kind of dancing he planned for his Lara when he got back to the ranch.

The sun had disappeared by the time he reached town, leaving Wildwood in full dark. Lanterns hung on posts outside the eatery on the corner of the main road, and a few buildings down, another hung outside the Franklin Saloon. More lights drifted out of the saloon through the door, and the two windows on either side. As he guided his horse at a slow gallop past the saloon, he spotted Lara's pa behind the bar and two lone cowboys on stools at either end, their hands fisted around glasses of whisky.

Luke's mouth watered as the craving for a good jigger kicked in. He hadn't touched even a sip of whisky in over a year seeing as he almost drowned himself in it when he first rode out of Wildwood. Perhaps he would have a glass to celebrate his return to rights after this whole mess got cleared up.

He rode on past the saloon without another glance, knowing he would find his men at the sheriff's office tonight. The gang would be holed up there until the threat of the Desert Riders passed despite John Franklin's insistence they stay at the saloon. None of them wanted to involve Lara's pa any more than necessary.

Up ahead, Dillinger stepped onto the front porch of the sheriff's office. The deputy sparked a cigarette, puffing slowly as he watched Luke's approach. "Still can't get used to that sight again, my man." He spat on the ground as he took the two steps down to the street to greet Luke.

Luke dismounted, securing his horse's reins to the post, and shook hands with his old pal. He tipped his chin at the door to the sheriff's office. "The rest of the gang inside?"

Dillinger nodded. "Waiting for you."

"And the sheriff?"

"Pacing the floorboards like a man waiting for his child to be born." Dillinger shook his head. "I've worked with the man for nearly two years, almost since you left. I've never seen him this antsy. Something don't seem right, Luke."

Luke agreed, though he didn't put it to voice. An uneasy feeling had settled in his gut almost immediately upon meeting the man the townsfolk appointed their first sheriff. "We're all antsy, Dill. That's a bad bunch of outlaws headed our way, dangerous bastards without a lick of care. A man would be crazy not to be a bit jumpy knowing they were about to face off with men like that."

Dillinger spat again, took a puff on his cigarette, and then tossed it to the ground, putting it out with his heel. "I suppose you're right. Come on in. The gang is anxious to finish laying out the plans."

Luke followed Dillinger inside. The conversation in the midst went silent the instant he stepped through the door. He spotted Walt and Hiram first, leaning shoulders on either side of an open doorway leading to the only prisoner cell in the small building. A cursory glance through that doorway confirmed the cell to be empty of wrongdoers. Dirk took up space in a corner chair, his booted feet crossed nonchalantly on a log stool. The desk sat on the left, the chair behind it unoccupied, and a scatter of telegrams, newsprint, and papers cluttered the top. If Luke ventured a guess, he'd say someone had been hell bent on uncovering information in recent hours.

"I thought we might get a better handle on how soon they'll be here if we traced their recent activity in the papers," Sheriff Baird said by way of explanation. He turned from the lone window to the right of the door and trekked to the desk. Given the cleanliness of that particular path in regards to the rest of the dirt-covered floor, Luke deduced the sheriff paced that way more than once tonight.

Luke stuck his tongue in his cheek as he studied the sheriff. Calm, cool, and collected didn't spring to mind in any liberal form. Nervous, ruffled at the collar, and at loose ends fit the tall, burly man better by Luke's observation. He wondered if the sheriff ever faced anything like what he would soon come up against. Pinning a tin badge to a man's vest didn't make him stronger, harder, or more able to stand up to a threat like the Desert Riders. Perhaps Luke could lay blame for the unease in his gut on that, because he'd yet to figure any other cause.

"And?" Luke prompted when the sheriff didn't go on.

"If we're to go with your plan we should ride out at first light."

"Have you got one better?" Luke tried to be cordial. He tried to remember the people of this town, of *his* town, saw this man fit to be appointed their first sheriff. Maybe he and the sheriff would find they didn't quite see eye to eye on the best way to handle the upcoming events. The fact still remained that the man swore Luke in as one of his deputies. Luke might lead the Stonewell gang, but as long as they wore the tin stars on their chests, the final answer in justice lay with Baird.

The sheriff scratched his chin and shook his head. "Nah, can't say as I have. I'm thinking you might be right."

"That they aren't as far away as you thought?" Luke hid his surprise. The sheriff's admission only succeeded in raising Luke's unease about the man.

"They'll be here sooner." Sheriff Baird sounded certain.

Luke studied the man through narrowed eyes, not trusting the change in his attitude. "Then we'll head them off at Miller's Pond."



“Leaving at first light is still assuming they’re a good half day or more from town,” Walt pointed out. “Yet you’re both talking like they’re almost on top of us.”

Luke considered Walt for a long moment before he answered the man. “They’ll find a place to hole up for the night. It’ll be too dangerous, even for them, to ride straight through in the dark. No telling what they’re likely to come across. Besides, they’ve got to know there are at least a half dozen Rangers on their tails. That’s all over the papers. Some of them are pretty damned good at tracking.”

“Not as good as the Desert Riders are at getting away.”

Luke shot a look at the sheriff, certain he imagined the reverence he picked up in the man’s tone.

“What they’re not expecting is to make it to a town that’s waiting for them,” Dill put in from where he took up post at the now closed door.

“I want to be at Miller’s Pond waiting for them. Not here in town.” Luke turned to the deputy, a man he always thought of as his second in the gang outside of Jeb. “But, if we do as the sheriff says and ride out at first light, we’ll get there in plenty of time to take up positions and see they don’t get past us.”

“Then it’s settled.” Sheriff Baird lowered himself into the chair behind the desk. Even sitting didn’t seem to calm the man’s tension for he immediately began shuffling through the telegrams and newspapers with hands that shook, albeit slightly.

No, nothing was settled yet. Luke watched the man, his distrust growing deeper by the second. One moment, the man fought tooth and nail to keep the gang from getting involved, the next he swore them in as deputies. One moment, the man insisted at the top of his lungs the Desert Riders were nowhere near their town, the next he agreed with Luke that the outlaws were closer than they thought. The sheriff flat out didn’t make a damned bit of sense.

Instinct reminded Luke that he didn’t know a thing about the sheriff’s personality or skill. He didn’t know how the man went about

upholding justice in Wildwood. After a while, Luke averting his gaze and let it land on each of his men in turn. Then, he trusted with his life. He knew they had his back and wouldn't hesitate to do what needed to be done when the time came. Did they put their faith in the sheriff? Luke hadn't asked and didn't plan on doing so now. Still, believing they likely did didn't ease his soured stomach one little bit.

\* \* \* \*

Lara lay in the crook of Adam's arm, shifting so she could look up at him from beneath her long lashes. Something prayed on her mind. He saw that much in the wrinkles of her forehead, and could swear he heard the wheels grinding as her thoughts struggled over the choice to keep quiet or put voice to whatever concerned her.

She would tell him, when she got it worked out exactly how. He decided to give her time, content to simply lay there with her curled against him. He stared unseeingly at his bedroom ceiling, his attention focused on the woman in his arms. The warmth of her naked flesh gave him a comfort nothing in the world could match. Her hand on his chest lay still but for the fingers that twirled strands of his hair around their tip. One breast pressed his side, the nipple taut either from a chill he didn't feel or a growing arousal within her despite their most recent exchange of love. His cock flexed, a tingling sensation dancing through his shaft, and he hoped for the latter.

Adam felt Lara's jaw move as she opened her sweet mouth and closed it again without a word. Next, he felt the warm rush of air fan his neck as she puffed out a breath. She swallowed, shifted, turned her head, and all the while he fought to keep a straight face through her hemming and hawing. Finally she spoke.

"Well, are you going to do it?"

"Do what?" Adam played dumb. So that's what had her tap dancing on needle points. He bit back a grin. He would just let her dance a little longer.

“What do you mean, do what? You know exactly what, Adam Joseph Stonewell.” She pushed herself up, scooped her hair out of her face and glared down at him. “Ugg, you and your brother, you’re so...so...ugg.”

Adam barely held back the bubbling laugh, but couldn’t stop the grin. “Luke’s got one thing right. You are sexy as hell when you’re angry.”

She cocked her head. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Adam pretended to think about her question. “Hmm, now, let’s see. The ranch hands reported the fences seemed fine, the animals all got fed, the horses are locked in the barn, I ate dinner, and I even helped Ma clean the plates since you were otherwise engaged...” He trailed off as he glanced at her. “Nope, can’t think of a thing I might have missed. What were you up to while I set to the womanly chores this evening anyway?”

“Trying on a dress of your ma’s, and believe me, a few womanly chores won’t hurt a cowboy now and then.”

“Never said they would. Did it fit?”

“Did what fit?”

“Ma’s dress?”

“Perfectly.”

“What’s wrong with your own dresses?” Temper flashed in her hazel eyes, but it disappeared in a blink. His urge to laugh didn’t dissolve so easily or quickly though.

“My dresses are fine, thank you. Sometimes a woman likes to have a new one, though, especially when it’s one for a special occasion.”

“Now, see, that’s something I’ve never quite gotten.” Adam rolled onto his side, propping his torso on one elbow. “Give a man a pair of boots, a pair or two of britches, and a couple of shirts and, as long as they stay together, he’ll never need anything more. A woman, however, needs five dresses and all these ribbons and lace and, what?” He changed tacks when her eyes started to narrow.

“You are sounding more like Luke to me right now than you ever have.”

Adam let a grin tilt the corner of his lips. “I know. I couldn’t think of a better misdirection at the moment.”

“And why would you look to misdirect me?”

Adam hooked her waist, flipped her onto her back, and stretched himself over her body, stifling her yelp of surprise with a kiss in a series of fluid motions that pleased even him. “So you would stop yapping long enough that I could ask you to marry me.” He held himself on his elbows and framed her face in his hands, his mouth but a breath away from hers. “I love you, Lara Franklin. I’ve loved you my whole life. I’ll work every minute of every day to make you happy, to give you passion, and to earn your love.”

Tears glimmered in her eyes, and one slid down her temple. “Oh, Adam.” Her voice cracked. She caught his head in her hands and pulled him down that last fraction of an inch until their mouths touched.

“Will you marry me, Lara?” Adam asked against her lips.

“Yes. Definitely, yes.” The kiss Lara planted on him tasted of more passion and love than he’d ever felt from her. She wrapped her arms around him, catching his hips in her hands and guiding him between her legs as she spread them wide. “Please, now, Adam. Put a finish to your proposal by being inside me. I’m burning for you, Adam. I need you inside me.”

Christ, when she spoke to him like that, how could he do anything more? He positioned his body against hers, his cock ready and throbbing to be sheathed in the wet heat of her channel. When he pushed balls deep inside her, they both groaned in one drawn out sound of pleasure. He stopped, allowing himself a moment to bask in the feel of his woman, his soon-to-be wife locked around him.

“Shh.” She turned her head to the side to whisper in his ear. “Your ma and pa are just down the hall. We wouldn’t want them to hear us.”

“Not to worry, sweetheart. They're fast asleep and far enough down the hall they won't hear a thing.” Adam pulled back, easing his cock several inches from the gripping muscles of her channel and then guiding it back in. She threw her head back, making an inarticulate sound as she thrust her hips up to meet his, attempting to pull his cock deeper within her body. “Besides, you seem to be the one making the noise.”

“Forget I mentioned it,” she said raggedly as her body relaxed only to tense again when he repeated the slow out-in invasion of his cock to her gripping pussy. “Just make love to me.”

Adam didn't need her to say more. She could save her begging for Luke. Right now, if Adam waited another moment to touch her, to stroke the pinnacle of her inner heat, he'd be reduced to begging like a banshee. Her vaginal muscles clenched on his cock, and he knew she wouldn't last any longer than he. They rarely took long before both fell into the mindless sea of body convulsing surrender when they joined as one.

He made love to her with the slow, tender finesse he always showed and preferred above all else. The mewling cries she muffled against his chest coupled with the rise and fall of her hips as she met each thrust confirmed that he kept his promise to deliver her passion.

“Now, Adam.” She gasped and clenched onto his hips as tightly as her pussy clamped onto his cock. Her body started to shudder, liquid heat bathing him as her release took control.

He came, his seed spurting from the slit in his cock with such force he forgot all semblance of quiet and growled his release. Breathless and spent, he rolled her with him until they lay on their sides, his cock still buried deep within her spasming channel.

“The dress I tried on of your ma's is the one she wore when she married your pa.”

Adam opened his eyes to find Lara gazing at him, her own eyes half closed as sleep neared. He brushed a strand of her hair from her temple. “I figured as much. What about your ma's? Didn't she wear a

special dress when she married your pa?" He felt her stiffen for an instant in his arms at the mention of her mother, but then she relaxed.

"She did, but it got ruined. I don't know how exactly, but it happened not long after Jeb's birth. I have other dresses of hers, but none as suitable for a wedding as your ma's."

"I'm glad Ma's fits you, and I'm touched, as I'm sure she is, that you want to wear it when you marry me and Luke."

"I plan to do more than wear it for our wedding." She giggled when Adam lifted a suggestive brow. "I intend to keep it safe to pass down to our daughter when she's of age to marry."

Adam gazed at her, speechless for several heartbeats. "I can't think of a better plan than that, Mrs. Stonewell."

"Hmm," she moaned languidly. "I like the sound of that even if it isn't yet my name."

"It will be soon enough."

"No, not soon enough. Yesterday wouldn't be soon enough. Still, say it again, Adam."

"I love you, Mrs. Stonewell."

"I think those might just be the loveliest words you've ever said to me, Mr. Stonewell." She grinned and kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

Luke mounted his horse and waited as the rest of the Stonewell gang followed his lead before he shot a look at the sheriff. With an almost imperceptible nod, the sheriff jerked the reins of his horse and set off at a brisk gallop. Luke waited, watching the man's back and feeling that niggling in his gut growing stronger by the minute. The sheriff didn't wait, didn't glance back to see if the rest of them followed, but simply set on his way.

"Luke?" Dillinger's indecision rang in his tone.

Luke looked to the man that stood as both his second in the gang and the first appointed deputy of the town. He knew his friend

struggled with the duty to follow his sheriff or stay with his gang. Feeling like an ass for putting his friend into such a situation, Luke took a deep breath and gave the order to follow. "Let's ride."

He caught up to the sheriff quickly enough, slowing his horse to an even speed beside the other man. Two by two, the rest of the Stonewell gang trailed at their backs.

"I wondered if you'd catch up." Baird eyed Luke as they fell into a steady speed.

"It's your law in this town, and these are your men." Luke kept his eyes trained on the land in front of him. The sun broke through the night only a half hour before, the sky still streaked with gorgeous colors that didn't seem fitting for the fight he knew to be coming shortly after midday.

"Nah, they're yours," the sheriff argued. "Always have been."

Luke hadn't been talking about the Stonewell gang, but the Desert Riders. The bitter tone of the sheriff's disagreement made him hesitant to explain. He found it odd that the sheriff would see things that way, even if the view held a certain amount of truth. More, it seemed strange the other man would latch on to what Luke considered a petty irrelevance at the moment when they were banded together to face off with a group of outlaws like the Desert Riders in a few hour's time.

"They're a loyal bunch, your gang. They stayed behind you even when you gunned down one of your own."

The sheriff's comment hit low to the belt. Luke barely caught himself before reacting with even a flinch.

*You didn't murder Jeb.*

Twice since his return, Lara had said those exact words to him. He heard them a third time now, as softly but firmly spoken in his head as when she said them to his face.

"Jeb Franklin's death was an accident." He'd never put voice to such claim before, never even thought of that night with such a dismissal of blame. But, as he heard the statement leave his lips, he

realized it to be true. He *had* accidentally shot Jeb. The fact that he might be one of the best gunfighters in the West held no bearing when a man reacted to a perceived threat. He'd faced off with one menace that night when he felt another at his back.

"An accident, you say? Yet, from all accounts you banished yourself from town. That seems a pretty stiff sentence for a man who didn't mean to kill someone."

"What are you chewing at, Sheriff?"

"I came to this town shortly after you left. I heard about you, heard about what went down that night in John Franklin's saloon, but no one could seem to tell me the whole story. Another man died that night besides Jeb Franklin, Stonewell, a fellow by the name of O'Keefe. Haven't heard much tell about him, though, just that he got what he deserved."

"Not quite," Luke muttered. "The bastard died too quick for my liking. I should have shot him lower in the chest, maybe nicked his heart or a lung and let him bleed out slowly rather than taking him out with one bullet."

The sheriff stared straight ahead, but Luke noticed a muscle in the man's jaw twitching.

Luke had done all the talking about that night that he wanted to when he poured out his heart to Lara and Adam back at the ranch. Even so, he couldn't stop himself from prodding at the sheriff. "I take it you don't agree."

"The law demands a fair trial for any wrongdoer. The vigilante justice you and your gang dished out that night would've gotten you hanged in the eyes of the law."

"The bastard I gunned down raped and murdered EllieMay Sue Rossly, shot down Cliff Rossly when he tried to save his wife, stole everything of value on the Rossly land, and then sauntered into the Franklin Saloon like nothing ever happened. That the kind of man you want walking the dirt in your town, Sheriff?"



“Way I heard it, you got the wrong man. There were others with him and one of them did that to the Rosslys. My guess is you figured that too or you wouldn’t have been so quick to watch your back after you killed the first one.”

Luke breathed deep, grinding his teeth against the urge to tell the sheriff exactly where he could shove everything he heard about that night. He’d run across men like Baird before, lawmen who couldn’t think beyond the regulations they’d sworn to uphold and protect. He agreed with organized law, too, though he couldn’t say he wouldn’t push for the same sentence for a bastard like O’Keefe if a similar atrocity happened under his reign as sheriff.

“Truth is, Sheriff, I figure it the same way now as I did that night. O’Keefe might not have been directly responsible for what was done to the Rosslys, but he belonged to the gang. He did nothing to stop them and, in my book, that makes him just as guilty.”

\* \* \* \*

Adam woke with a start, his heart hammering for a reason he couldn’t yet put a finger on. He laid utterly still, eyes closed and breathing shallowly, ears trained for any sound. He didn’t hear anything. Slowly, he opened his eyes. Where he expected to find only a sliver of moonlight to slice the darkness, a beam from the brightening sun greeted him instead. He’d drifted off after the second time he and Lara made love and morning now glowed on the horizon.

Lara stirred in his arm. Her head rested on his shoulder. Her lithe body curved to his side. She made a quiet moan in her sleep, and her hand glided down his front. All the blood in his body followed the descent of her hand until her fingers curled around his now-stiff cock.

Adam waited, sure she must be awake to be touching him in such a manner. When her breathing evened out once more in her apparent dream state, his certainty turned to amusement. He smiled, remembering how surprised she’d been when his ma directed her to

sleep in Adam's room. Lara expected to be put up in the guest bedroom. His ma, however, proved yet again not to be as reserved as most females. The fact that Adam and Lara already shared the ways of the flesh, the fact that both Adam and Luke intended to make Lara their wife and share her in every way a man claimed a woman, wasn't lost on Grace Stonewell. As his ma put it when she propelled Lara down the hall to Adam's bedroom, "Why mess up a good bed when you belong in my son's anyway?"

Why indeed? Adam wondered and bent to brush his lips to the top of Lara's head. He danced his fingers over her arm and shoulder, loving the softness of her flesh. The swell of one breast peeked from where it pressed against his side. He stroked it, delighting in the way she stirred once more, this time rolling slightly onto her back to expose the fullness of her breast. Her nipple beaded to a hardened point at his touch. An angelic moan filled the sexually charging air. When her fingers tightened around his shaft, he knew his time of rousing her slowly from sleep through sensual perusal had come to an end.

"You weren't supposed to wake yet." He sucked in a quick breath on the last as she began stroking his cock. She lifted her head from his chest, her eyes fluttering open, their hazel depths already darkened with desire.

"It's after sunrise, isn't it?" She cast a glance over her shoulder at the tiny window where the beam of sunlight grew brighter and larger with each passing minute. She looked back at him, and he didn't miss the shadow that moved through her expression. Drawing her bottom lip between her teeth, she stared at him unspeaking.

Adam stared back, catching everything she didn't say in the worry lines that creased her eyes and mouth. He cupped her cheek. "He'll be back this time."

She nodded. "As long as he's able, I have no doubt."

“He’s the best gunfighter in these parts, Lara. That’s never changed.” Even as Adam struggled to reassure her, he realized he needed the words to bolster his own confidence.

“Do you think they made it yet? To Miller’s Pond, I mean?”

Adam shook his head. “They wouldn’t have ridden at night. They likely waited till daybreak to head out.”

Lara nodded again. “You’re probably right. Luke isn’t stupid enough to lead the gang on that way in the dark. Tell me, Mr. Stonewell, why am I not supposed to be awake yet?”

Adam blinked at her brisk change of subject. Then his eyes started to roll back in his head when the hand that stilled at their conversation began stroking his cock once more. He knew why she did it. She needed something to take her mind off what might be happening at Miller’s Pond, to ease her worry until Luke returned.

“I had plans for you.” He grazed her taut nipple with the callused pad of his thumb, drawing yet another sexy moan from her pursed lips.

“I see. You would rather seduce a woman unawares?” She shifted, sliding her body up the side of his until she lay face to face next to him. “I suppose I could pretend to be sleeping while you take advantage of me.”

“You could,” he agreed, catching her hand and prying it from his cock. He immediately felt the absence of her touch, and his balls screamed in agony. “Or you could allow me to see you have a proper breakfast in bed now that you’re awake.” He pushed her hands to the bed and rolled on top of her. Her thighs spread, and he slipped between them with ease.

She gazed up at him, happiness and amusement twirling in her eyes. “Is this how you plan for me to wake every morning once we are wed?”

“Definitely.” Adam rested his weight on one arm and reached between their bodies, delving a finger into her soft pubic curls and

finding her hot, wet, and ready. “God almighty, Lara, you feel amazing.”

“Adam,” she gasped his name, her hips lifting to meet his touch. “Please.”

She didn’t need to ask twice. Adam withdrew his finger and settled his hips more securely between her legs. His cock nudged at her sodden folds, and he braced himself to enter her intoxicating heat.

Then he heard a ruckus kick up outside.

“Adam?” A foreboding replaced the plea in Lara’s tone when she said his name this time. Adam felt the sense echo through him as he stilled, straining to listen. He didn’t have to try hard for a voice shouted outside the ranch house at the top of its lungs. “Shit.” He rolled off Lara and yanked up his britches as soon as his feet hit the cool wood floor.

“Who is that?” Lara pushed to her elbows and then sat up straight, her eyes growing huge. “Adam, it sounds like a frightened boy out there.”

“I know.” Adam pulled on his pants, snatched his gun belt from where it hung on a nail by the door and shot Lara a hard look over one shoulder. “Stay here.”

She sucked in an audible breath, perhaps to argue or maybe in surprise because he couldn’t remember ever speaking so forcefully to her. He didn’t waste time figuring out which. He rushed out the door, nearly barreling into his pa on his way down the hallway.

“It sounds like Bo Dillinger.” Boyd Stonewell blocked the narrow space. The width of his wheelchair barely left enough room for him to steer himself out of the passage, let alone allow room for anyone to pass. “Isn’t his older brother still part of the gang?”

“Best as I know, Pa.” Adam gripped the back of the wheelchair and pushed Boyd the remaining distance to the main room. “Stay inside. I’ll see what’s going on.”

“Adam—”

At the sound of his mother's voice behind him, Adam cut her off with a brisk "Stay here," in the same tone he used with Lara. By the time he reached the door and flung it open, the boy had already dismounted, tethered his horse, and stomped onto the porch.

Adam recognized the boy. "Bo, what's all this ruckus about?"

"Sorry, Mr. Stonewell, but you've got to come quick." Even as he spoke, the boy spun on his heel and headed back down the porch steps.

"Now, hang on. Come where? Talk to me, boy." Adam followed the kid down the steps, catching him by the arm and halting him in his spot.

"To Miller's Pond. That's where the gang is headed. I went by the sheriff's office to catch Dill. I wanted to ride with them. He always promised when I got old enough he'd let me join the gang. Well, I'm fifteen tomorrow. I think it's high time he realized I'm old enough."

"You might be right about that." Adam quickly agreed if only to get the kid talking back on point. "Were they already gone when you got to the sheriff's office?"

Bo nodded furiously. "They were. I must've just missed them because the lantern on the desk was still hot. I checked it myself, burned my finger, too. That's when I saw it."

"Saw what, boy?" Boyd Stonewell wheeled himself out and made it down the ramp Adam had built next to the steps.

"The newspaper article."

"What article?" Adam asked.

"The one on the sheriff's desk about the Desert Riders."

"Well, that's who they mean to stop by heading them off at Miller's Pond," Boyd commented.

"Yes, sir. I know, sir. But this one was written just after Luke gunned down that man in the Franklin Saloon."

"O'Keefe," Adam supplied. "Ralf O'Keefe."

Bo Dillinger nodded again. "That's right. The paper talked about him having two brothers, one of them a Gerald O'Keefe and the other Climens Baird O'Keefe."

Adam's blood turned to ice in his veins. Without even realizing it, his hand shot out, and he grabbed Bo's arm in a tight grip. "Are you sure about that, boy? You're saying the sheriff is one of O'Keefe's brothers?"

"Yes, sir. It got me to thinking, nobody knows the true identity of the Desert Riders, right? What if one of them is the other brother, the one named Gerald O'Keefe?"

"If you're right, boy, then my son and the rest of the Stonewell gang might be headed into an ambush." Boyd's voice shook with worry and fear. "We've got to get word to them."

Adam broke into a run for the horse barn, ignoring the sound of feet pounding the dirt behind him until he retrieved and mounted his horse.

"I'm going with you," Bo Dillinger declared. The boy stood in a gunfighter's stance with his feet shoulder-width apart, hand at the ready on the butt of his gun, his expression hard. "You said yourself I was old enough."

Adam didn't waste time arguing. As it stood, he might end up needing the help. He didn't have an idea what he might come up against once he reached Miller's Pond. He only knew Luke could be in a real heap of trouble if what they suspected about the sheriff and the Desert Riders turned out true. He tipped his head to the boy's horse still tethered by the house. "Then get your horse and let's ride."

## Chapter Nine

Luke sensed eyes on him a heartbeat before they stepped out from the trees. He quickly counted eight of them, all with shotguns trained on him and the Stonewell gang. He tightened his grip on his horse's reins and guided the stallion to a stop mere feet from the barrel of the closest outlaw.

"Gutsy bastard." The outlaw spat on the ground at the horse's feet, his shotgun lifting the distance needed to aim directly at Luke's chest. "Heard that about you."

Luke slowly put his hands in the air, not wanting to give the outlaw a reason to shoot just yet, and peered down the barrel of the shotgun. The thought flittered through his mind that he couldn't recollect a time when he saw such a fine piece of metal from this angle except when he cleaned his own shotgun. "Oh? I can't say as I heard the same about you."

A couple of the other men stirred, shifting their weight and their guns, preparing to fire. Luke ignored them. He knew instinctively when the lead started to fly the man at his front would be the one he would have to deal with. His men would take care of the rest.

"Fucking prick." The outlaw swore and spat again. A cocky grin split his weathered face, revealing teeth speckled with chewing tobacco. "You won't be so full of yourself by the time I get through with you and this bunch of cowards you ride with." He cocked his shotgun, the sound like a bomb in the morning silence. More sounds followed, clicks of more guns being readied to fire by both his men and the outlaws.

Luke turned a palm toward the men behind him. "Keep calm, boys."

"Keep calm." The outlaw laughed. "Now that's a hell of an order. A might good one, too. Get off that horse so I can look at you gunslinger to dead man."

"Wearing a hat and a pair of boots doesn't make a man a cowboy," Luke informed the outlaw as he dismounted slowly, his mind reeling with what to do next. Perhaps he shouldn't have left the protection of his horse, but he figured he stood a better chance of facing off with this bastard on his feet.

He eyed the man, catching the resemblance between his assailant and the sheriff just a little too late. Damn, he must be out of practice. How the hell did he miss it? The fact that he never actually saw any of the Desert Riders up close notwithstanding, he'd felt something sour about the whole deal in his gut almost from the start. Moreover, his instincts had told him something just didn't add up about the sheriff. Well, it all added up now, and the deck sure did appear to be stacked against him and the gang.

"What's the relation?" He stared at the outlaw, thinking him older, nastier than the sheriff. Luke gathered him to be the leader of the Desert Riders, too, given his current position as apparent spokesman and commander.

Sheriff Baird's voice boomed behind Luke. "Gerald, here, is my brother. The youngest. I'm in the middle. That made Ralf the oldest."

Gerald O'Keefe sneered. "You see, that man you killed two years back was our brother. Good man, too, and you shot him down like a dog."

"I only gave him what he deserved." Luke caught the glint of a barrel hidden in the bushes out of the corner of his eye. He didn't dare venture a guess if it belonged to one of O'Keefe's men or his own. He only hoped for the latter. "Your brother and the rest of your men will get the same for all the crimes you've committed."



Gerald gave another laugh, and the rest of his outlaws followed suit. He closed the distance between himself and Luke, or rather between the barrel of his shotgun and Luke's chest. "You're talking about those things you killed my brother for? You gunned down the wrong man for what was done to that woman and her husband. She screamed mighty nice as I enjoyed that sweet pussy and fucked her brains out."

Luke tasted bile, but he swallowed it, feeling a renewed anger for all the Rosslys endured in the last minutes of their lives. His hand itched to draw his gun, but he resisted, knowing if he did so he'd only be sentencing himself to death. A few short months ago, he might have welcomed death with an open mind and heart. Back then he still blamed himself for what he did, still believed that expulsion or death served as the only justice for his act. He saw it differently now, thanks to Lara.

"Whore tried to kick me in the balls after the pleasure I showed her," Gerald went on. "I might not have killed her if she hadn't tried that."

"Ralf would've done it for you though, wouldn't he?"

Gerald angled his head, his eyes narrowing. "You looking for justification for killing the wrong man now, Stonewell?"

*Nope, just keeping you talking, you dumb sonuvabitch.*

"I didn't need my brother to do nothing for me. I handle things the way I see fit. I might be younger than him and Climens, but I'm the smarter one."

"You also talk too much, Gerald," the sheriff bellowed. "Let's do what you planned to do and get this over with. I've got a town back there to run."

Gerald's cracked lips spread into a grin not fit for the devil. "A town I intend to have a great deal of fun in. Didn't you say this one here left a pretty lady behind pining after him?"

"You stay the hell away from Lara." Luke couldn't stop the seething words. With that one statement, he let them know exactly how to get under his skin.

*Mistake. Huge fucking mistake.*

But he couldn't take it back now.

"I mean to have a go at her myself." Climens Baird's breath came hot at Luke's neck as the man leaned in at his back, the barrel of his pistol stabbing Luke in the spine. "Just as soon as I put a bullet through your brother same as you did mine. I could've taken him out a long time ago, you know. An eye for an eye as the good book says."

"Why didn't you? Why wait two years to get your revenge?"

"The town took me in real nice and smooth. Stupid folks never suspected a thing. Getting you back here took a bit more work. Setting up this little meeting at just the right time, well, it took some planning with my brother and his boys here. The great Luke Stonewell, best gunfighter in these parts. I've gotta say you're pretty easy to fool though. An eye for an eye," the sheriff repeated and scoffed. "Adam Stonewell's eyes don't replace Ralf's. Adam is a pussy, a yella-belly coward. He isn't man enough to be a fair revenge for you killing Ralf."

Two shots rang out almost simultaneously. Luke felt the blood splatter on his face as Gerald O'Keefe's head exploded like a melon. He felt the gun at his back falter, too. He spun a heartbeat before it trained on him again as Climens quickly recovered from the shot that caught him in the side of the thigh. Luke didn't think. He drew his gun and fired a clean shot to the chest, but not before the sheriff got off a shot of his own. Luke felt the instant sting as the bullet buried itself in his left arm. Reflexively, he fired again, sinking another bullet into the sheriff, this time right between the eyes.

Around him, more gunfire blazed as the Stonewell gang faced off with the Desert Riders in a fight too quick for the eye. Luke saw Hiram take a bullet, the force of the blow sending him stumbling back and folding to the ground. Walt leveled Hiram's assailant in a flash,

taking the outlaw out with a single shot that sent the outlaw crumpling in the dirt. When the dust cleared and quiet settled around Miller's Pond, six men stood victorious and one sat up cursing a blue streak, while nine bodies lay sprawled on the ground dead.

"Who's a pussy now?"

Luke slowly turned his head and caught sight of Adam moving toward him, his gun now lowered at his side. It surprised Luke how confident and steady his brother appeared. He met Adam's gaze and lifted a brow as realization of what happened set in.

"I take it you don't care for being called a yella-belly coward," Luke said, biting back a grin.

Adam's gaze raked over him, obviously taking in the fact that Luke had taken a bullet to the arm but still stood on his own two feet. "I never did care for name calling. It always seemed so childish."

Luke couldn't help it. He threw back his head and laughed.

\* \* \* \*

*Two weeks later*

Lara felt a trickle of wetness drip from her pussy, and she shivered with anticipation.

"You know what you have to do, wife." Luke's tone held the commanding lilt that drove her mad, his hand a warm but threatening presence on her bare ass cheek.

Wife. She couldn't get enough of hearing it. The endearment reverberated through her mind as she closed her eyes, letting the images of the past few hours flash through her memory. In her mind's eye, she watched her men walk toward her from where she stood with the preacher before nearly the whole town. Both looked better than any man should in their new britches and coats Grace had sewed for them. It amused her to see Adam with a rosebud pinned to his breast in the same place Luke wore his tin star. The town had appointed

Luke sheriff, keeping the rest of the Stonewell gang on as his deputies. Adam had spent the time since the showdown at Miller's Pond working on building a home for the three of them at the back of the Stonewell spread. The important part, the bedroom, had been completed just hours before their wedding.

The poet and the sheriff, and they officially belonged to her. Lara shivered again and opened her eyes, her gaze locking with Adam's slightly amused and very aroused one. "I told you I would never ask for such a thing, husband. What makes you think I would change my mind now?"

Behind her, Luke pushed a finger into her anus, causing her to draw in a quick breath of pleased surprised. "Because if you want more of this, and what I have planned after it, you'll do as I bid."

The finger retreated as fast as it plundered, leaving her hole feeling empty and wanting. She wriggled in search of that touch, the movement grazing her sensitized pussy lips over the head of Adam's cock. Adam lay beneath her, his hands gripping securely on her hips, holding her poised above his cock. If she moved just right, she could feel the beads of pre-cum seeping from the slit of his dick as it rubbed at her labia and soaked her flesh.

She stared down at Adam imploringly, but he merely held her still, the corner of his lips quivering in a smile he obviously struggled to hold back. What had happened to her softly spoken poet who preferred the tender over the rough, the slow over the rushed, passion over demand? Apparently, he harbored no qualms at waiting patiently to have things his way while his brother controlled with a firm hand. Oh, yes, belonging to both these amazing men certainly meant she got the best of both worlds.

"Please." The plea escaped her lips before she even knew she meant to say it. Damned if Adam's lips didn't curve ever so slightly in the first signs of a true grin. Mother Mary help her, but he might be becoming just as devious as Luke.

“I think if you give him what he wants he’ll return the pleasure,” Adam told her, his tone one of a heated arousal she couldn’t mistake.

“You deserve it, Lara. You know that.” Luke’s palm caressed her ass in slow, abrasive circles that sent slivers of wicked tantalization shooting through her. “Did you think we wouldn’t find out that you disobeyed Adam?”

“I only wanted to see who came to the house,” she said, defending her actions. That morning seemed so very long ago now. “Your ma stood with me. We were both so frightened.”

Adam’s expression softened at that and, though he didn’t release his hold on her hips, his thumbs caressed her flesh there in a tenderness she knew came from his heart. “I knew you would be, my love. That’s exactly why I told you not to leave my bedroom.”

“It could’ve been anyone outside the house that morning,” Luke chimed in, his tone scolding. “You must learn to do as we tell you, Lara. And you must know that when you deliberately disobey one of us, you will be punished.”

Her skin flamed clean to her toenails. She knew he wanted her to ask to be spanked. She couldn’t do it. A part of her recognized everything he said to be half truth and half a play of erotic dominance. A wicked part of her wanted the punishment he spoke of. She craved it from the very first mention of such an act. But to ask for it? Perhaps she could do so in another way, a far less embarrassing manner.

“Did my defiance of a direct order not constitute a request for punishment?”

Adam’s brows rose at her question. “I do believe the lady has a point, brother.”

“Hmm, she just might.” Luke traced the outline of her forbidden hole with the tip of his finger, causing her breaths to become shallow and rapid. “Am I to take it then, wife, that any time you directly disobey an order from us that you are asking to be punished as we see fit?”

What exactly would she be agreeing to if she answered yes to his question? Lara didn't have time to contemplate her answer because at that moment he slipped his finger deeper and faster into her anus than ever before. Her breath caught as the sting came instantaneously but ebbed to a riotous pleasure just as quickly. She released her breath on a ragged cry, the word, "Yes," sounding with it.

"Then I do believe I have the request I sought." The first smack of his hardened palm to her tender ass drew more of those ragged cries from her throat. Her bottom sizzled in a spasm of erotic pain that got her rocking back. The movement drew Luke's finger deeper still into her tender passage. The second smack sent her mind reeling in a rapturous rush of pleasure as her body quaked for more.

"Wait."

Dimly she heard Adam's halting word. His grip on her hips tightened once more, and then he pulled her body down, sheathing his cock in her throbbing channel.

"Adam, yes, thank you!" Lara gasped as her inner muscles tightened around his thick cock. Having his full length inside her at this moment when her body shuddered with so many sensations she couldn't name brought tears to her eyes.

"Are we hurting you, sweetheart?" Concern washed over Adam's expression.

"No!" She couldn't explain the tears any more than she could explain her body's reaction to Luke's forceful touches or Adam's tender loving. "More. Please, Adam, Luke. I want more."

"Not yet. I have to prepare you." Luke pulled his finger free only to return it a moment later. It felt slicker, smoother as it eased inside her back entrance once more. "You're so tight, so dry. This oil will help to loosen your hole."

He worked more of the oil into her anus, delving his finger deeper each time. When he added a second and then a third finger to stretch her tender opening, Lara thought she might pass out from the sheer pleasure.

Luke growled in obvious frustration. "I can't do this." His admission shocked Lara and, judging from the expression on Adam's face, it surprised him, too. "I can't wait to be inside you another second, Lara."

*But Adam is inside me.*

The thought skidded through Lara's mind a second before Luke's fingers again left her pulsing bottom. Then she felt him shifting, felt something much thicker than his fingers probing at her oiled entrance. "Oh, oh..."

"Hold still, darling. It might hurt for a minute, but then you'll know only pleasure. I promise. Relax and accept me."

"Look at me, Lara." Adam's soft command cut through the fear settling in her mind.

Lara locked her gaze with Adam's and forced her body to relax. It wasn't easy keeping her muscles loose when they wanted to close like a vise, to deny Luke entrance to a hole he shouldn't be going into. His cock felt so thick and stretched her tender opening made narrower by the enormity of Adam's cock buried in her pussy. Luke's cock filled her to a measure of impossibility, unrelenting in its pursuit to claim until his cock settled inside her as far as it would go.

"Holy mother," Luke growled and folded over her back.

"Lara, are you okay?" Adam's voice sounded as tight as Luke's.

Lara opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed and nodded. She felt more than okay. She felt full to the brim, possessed and teetering on the edge of an orgasmic bliss she'd never known. "I want you to move now. Both of you." She let a smile tilt her lips. "I want you to fuck me."

Adam chuckled, albeit breathlessly. "What are we going to do with you?"

"Give the lady what she asks for," Luke answered and pushed himself to his knees. He pulled back. His cock eased from the depth of her anus, and then thrust in again with enough force to push her body on Adam's dick. They cried out in unison, the sound of flesh

smacking flesh joining their passionate gasps in an erotic blend of love that drove them to a shattering release together.

Lara lost track of how long they lay entangled together, their rapid breaths mingling and slowing until all returned to normal. Except, she thought, things would never be normal again. Not in the way of before in any case. She felt immensely glad for that, too.

Luke found the strength to move first, rolling off her back to a sitting position only to hook her waist and pull her into his lap. She laughed, amazed when Adam got to his knees in front of her.

"You asked many times how it was supposed to be." Adam touched her chin and then his finger traced a line down her throat to the valley between her breasts. "This is your answer, my love."

Luke's hand flattened on her belly, and he kissed the side of her neck. "I want you rounded with our baby, Lara. I want you with child, *our* child."

His words touched her heart more than anything he'd ever said to her. Tears sparkled in her vision as she looked from Luke to Adam. "I might already be."

"You might," Luke agreed. He quickly cleaned himself and then lifted her just enough to position her body over his astonishingly erect cock. "But, in case you're not, I think we should try again."

"Little Jeb needs a hell of a shot at being born, don't you think?" Adam asked as his hands covered her breasts.

Lara gasped, not from the touch, though their hands had already sent her body humming for the pleasure to come. Her breath lodged in a throat tightening with tears because they wanted to name their baby after her brother. A man who meant so much to the three of them, who's death changed all of their lives. A man who would've given anything to know his sister found love.

Lara knew as Luke's cock entered her throbbing pussy and Adam's lips closed around her breast that with Luke's vigilante heart and Adam's soft passion, she had indeed found love forever.



**THE END**



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