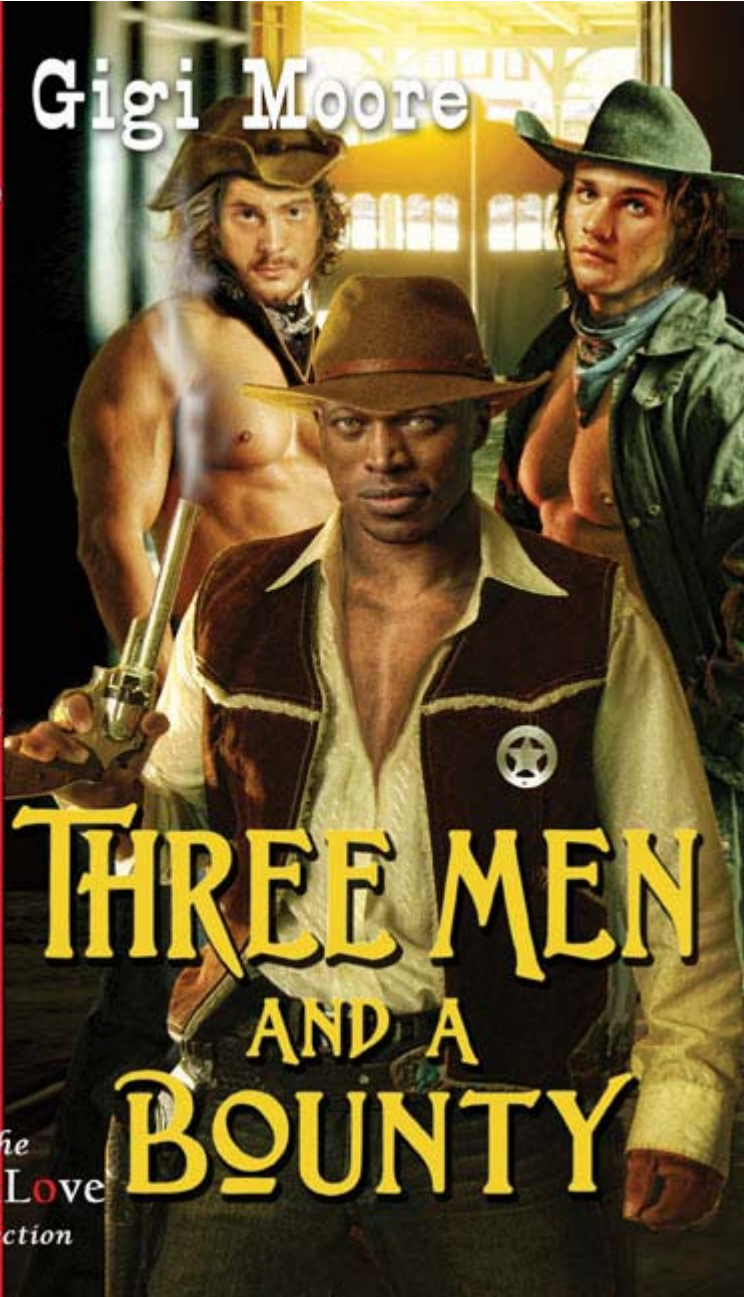


SIREN  
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Gigi Moore

*Ménage Everlasting*

The  
ManLove  
Collection



# THREE MEN AND A BOUNTY

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*The ManLove Collection*

**Gigi Moore**

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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# **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to all the unsung heroes--men and women alike--who tamed the Wild West.

# THREE MEN AND A BOUNTY

GIGI MOORE

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## Prologue

*Barrow Homestead, Utah Territory – 1860*

The acrid aroma of smoke tickled Troy Barrow's nostrils before he opened his eyes and sat up in a panic.

The house was on fire!

The thought registered in his mind the same instant that Troy's bedroom door burst open and a tall, broad shadow filled the doorway.

"Pa!"

"I'm here, boy." His father rushed across the bare wood floor, trailing a blinding cloud into the room as he approached Troy's bed. And even though he was thirteen, considered a man in most circles, his Pa draped a large damp towel around Troy before lifting him up into his arms and carrying him through the house toward the back door like a nipper. Pa had taken over where Troy's Ma had left off.

Alien chants drifted to Troy's ears from outside. The melodious chords penetrated the roar of surrounding flames and almost hypnotized him. He pressed his face close to his father's chest, the coolness of Pa's damp nightshirt grounding Troy as he held tight. The next moment, his father burst through the door onto the back porch and into the dawning day.

Pa lowered him to the ground, kneeling in front of Troy and grasping his arms. "You all right, boy?"

Troy nodded, his smarting eyes tearing. His throat felt like he had swallowed a cup of sand, but he was okay.

Pa pulled him close, hugged him tight, and brought his lips near Troy's ear. "Run, boy. Run as far as you can and don't look back, no matter what happens, no matter what you hear. Understand me, boy?" He pulled away, caught Troy around the biceps, and stared at him.

Two painted Indians rounding the house caught Troy's attention, and when he didn't answer quickly enough, his father shook him. "Understand?"

"But, Pa—"

"You run and don't look back!" He roughly pushed Troy away.

Troy stumbled back and watched as his father turned and charged the two Indians. He caught them off-guard, flinging his body at them horizontally, and Troy watched them stagger beneath his father's weight.

"Run, Troy!"

Heart pounding in his ears, he listened to his father and took off in the opposite direction, barely hearing the struggles behind him before a shot rang out.

Troy froze and turned to see his father slump to the ground, blood staining his shirtfront as the two Indians stood over him. "Pa! No!"

"Run, boy..."

His father's weak rasp barely reached him, but Troy saw his lips form the words, still torn between running to and from Pa.

The Indians turned their sights on him, shouting at him in their foreign tongue, and took the decision out of his hands.

Troy turned and ran, fear and the sound of rifle fire making his legs churn.

"Skinwalker, die!"

The accented, guttural words stirred a memory in him that, until now, he had thought only the product of his wild imagination.

Had the Indians killed his father because of the wolf? Had his father died because of *him*?



Heart thundering and tears streaming, Troy heard footsteps gaining on him as he ran through the forest bordering his home.

Not his home anymore. And, with his mother a year in the ground from consumption and now, he reckoned, his father dead, too, he had no family neither.

Troy swallowed a sob as he stopped and leaned a palm against the trunk of a towering aspen. His lungs burned, and he tried to catch his breath.

What he wouldn't do to be the wolf now, to run free as he had so many nights before.

He'd thought them dreams or that he'd been sleepwalking in the brambles and that's why his nightshirt had been so dirty and shredded.

What about the blood? It hadn't been his.

Another shot rang out, and the bullet took a chunk out of the tree an inch above Troy's head. He ducked down. His skin tightened, becoming too small for the rest of his body while he broke out in a cold sweat.

Something happened to him. He didn't know whether to be plumb scared of the approaching change or glad for it. Maybe if he became the wolf the Indians would let him be.

*Skinwalker, die!*

He thought of the blood the other night, hoped it had been an animal's, maybe a rabbit or a stray sheep. If it hadn't been...maybe he deserved to die. Maybe the Indians were right to come after him.

Did they have to kill his father, though?

The beast inside raged at Troy's loss, making his skin tingle with the shift. He hadn't recognized the changes in his body the other occasions, hadn't known what they meant, but he understood them now and knew that he could control it if he wanted to.

He didn't want to.

He wanted to be wild.

He wanted to escape.

He wanted *revenge*.

Troy growled deep in his throat as the wolf clawed at his insides for release. He turned as the Indians burst through the brush in front of him, rifles and bows and arrows raised.

Bones stretched and popped out of place into a new arrangement, shredding his nightshirt from his body. Troy howled as he went down on all fours. Another bullet pierced the air, whizzing past his pointed ear. His muscles rippled with new definition as fur sprouted all over his body and his jaws elongated.

Intense pain washed over him, but Troy welcomed it. It took his mind off of what had happened to his father, his home. It took his mind off his new station, his aloneness.

He bared his lengthening and sharpening teeth, body completely shifted by the time he charged at the Indians the way his father had charged at them only a short time ago. It seemed like a lifetime.

Troy felt no pain as another shot rang out and an arrow flew through the air, both hitting their target before he took down his prey in a veil of torn flesh and spilled blood.

## **Chapter 1**

*Wolf Creek, Oklahoma Territory – 1877*

A flash of lightning lit up the sky above Christopher Michaels, and several heartbeats later, a crack of thunder shook the deserted area around him.

He was bone-tired and in too much pain to notice or care about Mother Nature's brazen show. He just wanted shelter.

Cradling his ribs with one hand, Chris shambled forward, continuing on the path he had started on miles and miles ago after he had been dry-gulched and left for dead. He had but one destination in mind where he knew he would find refuge and maybe a hot meal and work.

Six months ago, he'd visited the town fresh from a cattle drive. When he'd stopped into Barrow's to celebrate and spend his money with the rest of the drive cowhands he'd instantly cottoned to the saloon owner.

He'd come across Troy Barrow's kind of compassion in his life few and far between, so he learned to value it whenever he did come across it.

Chris tried to tell himself that just because Troy treated him with a modicum of kindness didn't mean the saloon owner cottoned to him the same way he cottoned to Troy. From what Chris had seen, Troy treated everyone with kindness, and Chris didn't want to be treated like just everyone.

He wanted to be special to Troy, despite knowing how offensive that desire was. There were laws against buggering, and desires like

that could get a body hurt real bad around here—or dead. And Chris ought to know since he'd gotten a world of the former right before being let go from his most recent stint as a cowhand.

He'd tried to keep to himself as much as possible and had learned his lesson after watching his mentor Cooper Houston get shot down for cheating at a game of poker, at least that's the way the story had gone. Chris knew the real reason Cooper had been killed, though. And, as Cooper's partner, he knew he would have been next had he stayed in town a minute longer, so he'd hightailed it out of there.

Christ, he was so tired of running. He felt like he had been running all his life.

At Whitfield Ranch, he thought he had found a home. The owner liked him without wanting him and respected a man who knew his job and could do it well. It hadn't stopped him from letting Chris go the minute trouble had broken out between Chris and some other hands who'd wanted to *teach him a lesson*.

Chris straightened now as much as he could before pushing in the swinging doors of Barrow's. He paused just inside and took in his surroundings as the doors flapped behind him.

The atmosphere proved a drastic change of pace from the outside. Most of the change was pleasant, especially the lack of water. Chris still shivered, the chill afflicting him bone deep.

He took a yawning breath, and his bruised lungs instantly reacted to the smoke-filled room, which had him fitfully coughing. He haltingly made his way toward the bar, but one of the young painted ladies of the establishment hooked an arm through one of his and waylaid him.

She steered him toward a corner table where she pushed him down into one of the bar's few empty chairs. When Chris tried to rise, she straddled his thighs, showing a healthy bit of leg as she lifted her ruffled skirts.

Chris felt his cheeks heat at the sight of her colorfully hued petticoats beneath.

He had been away so long he'd forgotten how plumb brazen some of the saloon girls could be. He understood the necessity, though the girl's womanly wiles didn't affect him the way they might another man in his situation. Chris was more embarrassed for her than stimulated. He was much more taken with his view of the saloon's owner wiping down the mahogany bar with a dingy white cloth several feet away than he was by what was under the saloon girl's petticoats.

Chris licked his cracked lips as Troy pierced him with a look. His shaft hardened in his pants, and his balls grew heavy and tight.

The saloon girl took his chin in one hand and turned his head to face her. "I'm Hannah, and you look like you could use some tender loving care, cowboy." With her other hand, she slyly fondled his bulge and made him gasp.

Hannah smiled, obviously believing his condition a response to her attentions and not the man tending bar behind her. And this was good, because no one needed to know about his hopeless infatuation, his dangerous infatuation.

"Tell me where it hurts, and I'll kiss it and make it all better."

Chris winced as he caught the girl beneath the arms and lifted her up off his lap to stand on her feet in front of him. He stood then, trying to soften the blow of rejection when he tenderly cupped her face. She wasn't peddling something he wanted, but he saw no reason to hurt the little filly's feelings.

"Just a drink will do me fine, ma'am." He left her gaping like a fish on land and once more headed for the bar.

A large hand landed on Chris' shoulder and spun him around before another hand fisted the front of his already crumpled and weather-beaten shirt.

"I think you owe the little lady an apology."

Chris stiffened at the sight of the big, ruddy-faced owner of the hands as the unfamiliar cowpuncher teetered in front of him. He didn't think he could handle the puncher on a normal day when he

wasn't all beaten up and sore, so he certainly didn't think he could do it now. The man outweighed him by at least a hundred pounds.

"Bart, don't you be starting no trouble. You know what kind of establishment I run here," Troy said from behind the bar, fists on his hips.

"That's why I'm conversing with the varmint. He mistreated my Hannah."

"I'm not yours, Bart. And the kid ain't done nothing of the sort."

"So it's settled," Troy said. "Pull in your horns, go back to your little card game, and call it a day."

"Well, I'm begging to differ," Bart said.

"Are we having some difficulty here?"

Chris turned at the sound of the deep, commanding voice coming from the table adjacent the bar. He saw the tall, dark man standing there with a black Stetson worn low over his brow and a matching trail duster covering most of the rest of him. He cut a powerful, imposing figure.

Slowly, the man lifted his head and separated the folds of his coat to reveal a shiny U.S. Deputy Marshal's badge pinned to his vest as well as a holstered Colt pistol, butt forward.

The sound of several men scrambling to their feet and backing away from the numerous tables on the barroom floor echoed throughout the room. The saloon's piano player abandoned his instrument to join Barrow's other denizens running for cover.

Chris had lead feet, though. He didn't know whether he was more entranced by the fact that the lawman was a Negro or that he was the most beautiful man Chris had ever seen in his life—colored *or* white.

Chris caught himself staring and closed his mouth before anyone else noticed.

Of course everyone else stared themselves so they probably wouldn't notice him staring.

Towering over most of the men in the saloon except the owner, the marshal had to be at least a few inches over six feet. And, with the

wide breadth of his shoulders, he would stand out anywhere, even among his own people, but he especially stood out at Barrow's.

"Ain't no difficulty. I'm just settling a disagreement with the shorthorn here," Bart said.

"From what I can see, the young'un's not heeled and doesn't look like he wants any trouble, so why don't you back off and leave him be?"

"And why don't you mind your business, *lawman*?"

The marshal didn't flinch as Bart turned on him with a sneer, one hand on the butt of his holstered Dewey. The marshal had already drawn and cocked his own weapon, though.

Thanks to Cooper, Chris demonstrated pretty good skills with a firearm, but nowhere near as fast as the marshal. He'd wager not many gunslingers in this town were much faster, either, then he glanced back at the bar and saw that Troy had soundlessly drawn his rifle, too.

Bart looked from each man, glowering as he turned to Chris and motioned to draw his weapon.

Chris didn't move. He didn't have a chance to move before a shot rang out, the bullet striking Bart's hand and forcing him to drop his gun.

"Next one's in your head, and I won't miss."

"No, marshal, please. He's just roostered. He didn't mean no harm." Hannah came to the cowpuncher's rescue, catching the marshal around the arm to make her plea.

The marshal tipped his hat at the saloon girl, never taking his eyes off of Bart as he addressed her. "If you're sure, ma'am."

"Bart can be a real donkey's tail sometimes, but he ain't a hard case."

"Since the lady's vouching for you, I won't take you down to the hoosegow to cool your heels. You're going to have to leave your gun behind and leave the saloon for the night, though."

Bart shuffled his feet, murmuring an oath before he raised his head to eyeball the lawman. "I'll be going then."

"I don't want to see you in here again starting any trouble."

"Oh, you won't see me."

"You can get this back from the sheriff's office."

Bart looked at his gun the marshal had retrieved from the floor and gritted his teeth. It wasn't until he had grudgingly spun on his heels and headed for the swinging doors that Chris realized he had come so close to being shot down in a barroom brawl.

All his life he had tried to avoid trouble like this, but his time on God's green earth had taught him that trouble found him when he wasn't looking for it.

"You're shivering."

Chris almost jumped out of his skin when Troy wrapped an arm around his shoulders and led him to the same chair Hannah had dragged him to earlier. He hadn't even heard the man come from behind the bar. "Hannah, can you get me a towel and ask Josie if she'll draw him a nice hot bath in one of the upstairs rooms."

"Sure will, Troy."

Chris watched as Hannah hopped to follow Troy's orders, his heart expanding at the care and attention everyone showed him.

"You got everything under control?" the marshal asked, coming a couple of steps closer.

"I suspect so," Troy said.

"I'll be taking my leave then."

Chris watched as the marshal tipped his hat and turned to head for the doors. Feeling desperate and as if he were about to lose his best friend, he blurted, "What's your name?"

The marshal turned back and looked at him, full lips lifting at one corner in a rakish way that made the butterflies in Chris' stomach flutter and his shaft harden the way it did when he looked at Troy.

What was going *on*?

"James Hayden."



“Thanks, Marshal Hayden.”

“James is fine.”

“I’d like to show my appreciation, too, James. How about a drink on the house?” Troy offered.

The marshal hesitated for just a moment before saying, “I’d best be on my way.”

Chris didn’t realize he held his breath until the lawman turned to leave.

“The offer’s always open,” Troy called as the lawman waved at them over his shoulder and headed for the swinging doors.

Chris’ disappointment left his lungs in a long and louder-than-he’d-meant sigh.

“I know what you mean, kid,” Troy murmured, and when Chris turned to him, he saw the surprise on the older man’s face, as if he hadn’t expected anyone to hear him.

*Did* Troy know what he meant? Could he possibly know that he, and now James Hayden, turned Chris inside-out with hankering?

Troy cleared his throat, then put a hand on Chris’ shoulder and squeezed. “Let’s get you out of these wet clothes and into a hot bath before you catch your death.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me.”

“Good to hear.” Troy smiled, and the sight was liked to set Chris on fire. The man had dimples that went from here to the next county, kind of a match for the marshal’s cleft chin, come to think of it.

*James Hayden.*

Chris tried the name on for size in his mind. He liked the way it sounded. He would have liked nothing better than to call it in the throes of passion as James pounded away inside him.

He closed his eyes to better visualize the fantasy and wasn’t surprised when he saw Troy in the fantasy, too, with Chris sandwiched between the two larger men. The contrast between James’s mahogany skin and Chris and Troy’s fairer complexions

made his stomach lurch and his cock jerk with longing in his ragged jeans.

Thinking like *that* had gotten him in trouble at Whitfield's. Best *not* to think like that.

"You might want to have a doctor look at those ribs, son."

Chris jerked up his head at Troy's husky voice, lifting his eyebrows in question.

"I saw you favoring your side when you first walked in."

And here Chris thought he had hidden his pain so well. "I'll be all right."

"Eventually, yep. It looks to me like you took a pretty good licking, though."

He wondered what Troy would say to the other things that had happened to him. What would Troy say if he knew what had led to his being out on the road all alone with his war bag and horse, easy prey for petty thieves?

Would he be sympathetic or believe that Chris had deserved what he got? That someone like him, who yearned the way he did, should be punished?

Hannah came back down the circular staircase, panting and holding the front of her ruffled skirt up to keep from tripping over it. "Josie said you can send him up whenever he's ready."

Troy nodded and bent to circle Chris' waist with an arm, helping him to his feet. Hannah mimicked the act on his opposite side, and between them, Chris headed for the staircase until Troy released him after climbing the first couple of steps.

"I'm going to leave you in Hannah and Josie's capable hands for now. When you finish up, come on down and we'll get you something to eat and then talk about a job."

He must look pretty darn pitiful and needy that Troy knew he would ask.

Chris nodded, unable to get any words past the lump in his throat. He'd admittedly wanted Troy's kindness, but after all the violence

and cruelty that had been dished out to him in the last forty-eight hours, he hadn't expected it. Between Troy's generosity and Marshal Hayden saving his life, Chris counted himself one lucky waif.

He figured he'd look pretty darn ungrateful if he asked for anything else, but he wanted nothing more than to ask Troy if he would be coming up to check on him at all rather than him coming back downstairs.

"What do I call you, pardner?"

Chris turned at the sound of Troy's voice, and his heart did a little dance in his chest at the sight of the man standing behind the bar.

Troy looked so capable and every bit as dangerous as he had when he'd pulled his rifle on Bart. A man would certainly think twice before dry-gulching *him* on the road. He didn't think Troy would ever do anything to call for him being alone on a deserted road with nothing but his horse for company, though. He was too smart for that and probably had a lot more common sense than Chris.

Common sense would have told him to keep his distance, take the bath and meal offered but hightail it out of there as soon as possible. Maybe he should try to get a job somewhere else far, far away from a man he wanted as fiercely as he wanted Troy Barrow.

No one had ever accused him of having common sense, though.

"Name's Christopher Michaels," Chris murmured. "You can call me Chris."

"I'm Troy Barrow, but you probably already knew that." He grinned and the sight hit Chris in the chest like a hammer. Before he could confirm or deny his knowledge, Troy continued. "See you when you're done."

"Okay." Chris gulped and continued following Hannah up the stairs as if he were the guest of honor at a necktie party.

## Chapter 2

Troy felt Josie's eyes on him as he paced the length of his office—back and forth, back and forth—until he thought he would wear a hole in the floor.

He considered that the marshal recognized him. Why else would James Hayden have given him such sharp looks? True, he hadn't been on the wrong side of the law in a powerful long time, not since his teens, but that kind of past tended to follow a man. Just like all the men who'd bought the farm at the end of Troy's Dewey, the least of which had been the leader of his former gang. All of them were faces permanently etched on the landscape of his recollections.

Troy paused in the middle of the floor and closed his eyes at the memory of having to shoot down a man who had cheerfully nurtured and indoctrinated him in the outlaw life. If it hadn't been for the memory of his honest, hardworking parents, their roles could have been reversed and Troy would be the one spending the rest of his days rotting under the ground in a bone orchard. Thankfully, his life of crime with the Baird gang had been short-lived, not nearly long enough to earn him the infamous status that the rest of the men in the gang boasted. He'd earned his freedom and a fresh start at a great cost, though.

Troy opened his eyes to look at Josie's grinning face, glad for an excuse not to think about how things had turned out between him and Jack Baird. He had enough reminders with all the wanted posters up in town heralding the lawless antics of one Cain Baird. If he had still been in the life and bounty hunting, he'd be out on the road like any other huntsman looking to make a pretty penny off of Baird's capture.

He wasn't in the life, though. He'd sworn it off with Jack's death. By then he'd made his little fortune so he could settle down and leave the life behind.

Was there really any way for him to leave that life behind when a bloodthirsty enemy ran around the countryside, dodging the law and preaching about Troy's impending death?

"You should see yourself over there, just a fretting so," Josie said.

He chuckled, releasing a little of the tension when he imagined the picture he made, practically ringing his hands like a nervous female.

"No help for it. I've got a mess of stuff on my mind." How to stay alive without revealing who and what he was uppermost in his mind. After the Indians had killed his father, he'd sworn never to let the wolf out to kill again. Instead, he'd taken up the way of the gun.

Three years after collecting his final bounty, he'd settled down and built a peaceful, law-abiding life here in Wolf Creek, one he enjoyed, and he didn't want to see it end because of some stupid twist of Fate.

"Let's deal with some of that *stuff*. How many lawmen have come through this town with nary a pause after seeing you? And have we forgotten that you were a lawman yourself once? It's possible Marshal Hayden remembers you from your bounty hunting days."

He supposed that possible. He'd rubbed elbows with and helped numerous lawmen bringing in wanted men throughout the years. However, he knew he'd remember someone like the marshal even if the marshal didn't remember him.

Damn, he should never have pulled that rifle. When he'd seen Bart threatening the kid, he couldn't help himself and instantly reacted, though. And now he might have to pay for that overprotective deed with not just his freedom but his life.

How long before Cain's patience waned and he got hungry enough to come out of relative hiding to collect his own pound of flesh?

“Might as well face it. You’re being mistrustful for no reason,” Josie said.

He knew she was right. Plenty of men pulled guns. It was a natural reaction next to ducking and running. And if he had things to do over, Troy figured he’d pull his gun again. No way could he let someone hurt that kid, not on his watch. Obviously, the boy had been through enough already. Troy wondered what.

“Is he still in the bath?” he asked.

“He’s been done a while now. I had Hannah settle him in a room to catch some shuteye, though. Poor thing didn’t argue a peep, so I’m guessing he needed the sleep.”

Troy nodded. He thought that about right. Maybe when the boy woke up, Troy would call Doc Clayborn and have him check Chris out. He wanted to make sure he fared well, at least physically. He didn’t think saw-bones or anyone else could do anything about the cause behind the dark shadows Troy had seen in the boy’s gaze.

“What room did you settle him in?”

“Yours, of course.”

“You always were too smart for your own good.”

Josie put a hand on her chest and fluttered her long eyelashes at him, feigning innocence. “What? Little ol’ me?”

Troy laughed and shook his head, admiring Josie’s smile and twinkling eyes. She wasn’t his type by a long shot, but he sure appreciated her beauty and intelligence.

When Troy had first arrived in town, she and several other available women had thrown their bonnets in the ring, hoping he would show some interest. He’d let them all down as easily as he could. Josie proved the only one willing to stick around without the promise of a ring and soon realized that she and he were far better suited as friends and business partners than lovers. When he’d opened Barrow’s, he’d allowed Josie and her girls to use several of the rooms upstairs for *entertaining*, and Troy and Josie had been splitting the profits ever since.

“I reckon if you wanted to go check on him it’d be easier to do if he was in your room.”

“I reckon.”

“He looked like he could use a nice, hard shoulder to lean on.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I know hankering when I see it, and that boy near ’bout swooned every time Hannah or I mentioned your name.”

Troy felt heat flood his cheeks and his groin at Josie’s mention of Chris’ infatuation. He hadn’t wanted to believe it could be so. He didn’t want to get his hopes up that a kid like that would even be thinking about an old sidewinder like him in *that* way. The idea had him just about busting out of his pants that he’d been right and hadn’t imagined the boy’s lingering, charmed stares. Sure, he was getting a little long in years, but his horns hadn’t been sawed off.

“You look about as cute as him when you blush.”

“You are such a rabble-rouser.”

“I’m serious. You two would make a good couple.”

Troy heard the suddenly serious tone of Josie’s voice and peered at her. He noticed the concerned look on her face right away. He knew what she thought. A talk like they were having could get a man beaten up or killed. And it was sweet of her to risk it.

Was that what had happened to Chris out on the road? Had he hitched his wagon to the wrong man, one who’d turned on him?

He counted his lucky stars every day that his first mentor had been a kind and tolerant man like Josiah Maynard, a miner who’d come across Troy after he’d escaped the Indians. He knew, however, that men like him and Chris weren’t always lucky enough to meet a kindred spirit like Josiah. Meeting his second mentor, Jack had taught him that.

“If you ain’t interested, something tells me he’s got his eyes set on other options.”

“Who?”

"I heard from a little birdie he seemed just as smitten with that colored marshal as he did with you."

A little birdie named Hannah, no doubt. Though he could see why the kid would hanker for James Hayden. If he weren't so worried about his past and the animal that lived inside him, he might have thrown his hat the marshal's way himself.

"You don't say."

"I do."

"Guess I should go check on my guest to make sure he's nice and comfortable."

"Guess you should."

Troy turned and headed for the door before Josie's voice stopped him. "He's young, Troy, but he's been through a lot."

"Another little birdie?"

She shrugged. "Woman's intuition."

Troy stared at her for a long moment, searching her features. Josie didn't do much talking about herself, so he didn't know a lot about her past. He couldn't begrudge her that, since he didn't talk too much about his, either. Still, he recognized someone who'd experienced hard times, and he knew that Josie had. Temptation almost had him asking about her life, but he thought better of it. Let sleeping dogs lie, at least for now.

He had other fish to fry, anyway, with Chris Michaels.

\* \* \* \*

*He was an uppity coon and a phony to boot.*

*Who did he think he was, anyway, flashing that fancy marshal's badge and shooting up the place like he thought he owned it? Shooting men just because he could? Someone needed to put him in his place, but good. Just wasn't right for a man like that to be walking around with a gun and all that say-so. Parker had made a powerful mistake appointin' all them coloreds and mixed-breed Indians to such*



*high posts, charging them with bringing in Indians, coloreds, and white men alike. T'wasn't right locking up God-fearing men just trying to make a living and put food on the table for their family.*

*Didn't know what chapped the hide worse—that the colored boy lorded over all the more deserving white men in the community with his authority and his badge, or that he pulled the wool over everyone's eyes, appearing normal, bedding the black whores in their house of ill-repute when he knew he preferred a man's company in bed to a woman's.*

*Wicked pervert. He wouldn't pull the wool over the eyes that counted.*

*The marshal would be getting his comeuppance.*

*And he would get it powerful soon.*

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't get away from them, no matter how hard he fought. He was smaller than them, and there were way more of them, enough to wrestle him to the floor and bind his wrists as if he was a helpless calf. He tried to scream, but they stuffed a rag in his mouth to keep him quiet, and when he kicked out, two of them grabbed and held his legs down.

The aroma of manure and hay assaulted his senses. Chris fairly gagged on it when he took a deep breath through his nose to calm himself down. He tried to convince himself that they wouldn't, they couldn't, do what he thought they would. But then one of them jerked his pants and long johns down over his hips as the others stood by. They watched and laughed, saying things like "Teach the little chuck-eater a lesson." or "Show him who's boss." One of the men brought the hot branding iron within a couple of inches of his face, so close he could see the Whitfield emblem glowing orange and could hear the sizzle of the scorching metal.

He'd been on a couple of round-ups and seen cowpunchers brand beasts young and old, but despite its necessity, he'd never cottoned to the act much himself. He always imagined the animal's pain, what it would feel like to have a brand seared into his flesh against his will, but cowboys and ranchers claimed animals didn't have no will, none but what man gave them.

Chris gagged against the rag at the thought of where they would brand *him*. He thought how they had taken away his will and put him at their mercy—like an animal. He felt the tears on his cheeks and heard one of the men above him say, “You’ve got a right pretty little ass for a boy. Pretty as a picture, perfect for this little ol’ brand.”

Someone touched him. Chris felt the calloused pad of a hand fondling him. He squeezed his eyes shut against the shame when fingers strayed close to his back hole as if to enter him but suddenly stopped and the hand was snatched away.

“Gimme that iron.” The voice came out gruff and disgusted, as if the owner hated himself for touching Chris the way he had.

He struggled anew against the ropes and hands securing him but couldn't get free.

The heat of the branding iron neared his backside.

Exhausted, Chris said a prayer, his struggles waning. He had about given up all hope of someone helping him when the barn door finally burst open.

“What in tarnation is going on here?”

The branding iron dropped, and men went scrambling away from him.

Mr. Whitfield pulled the rag out of his mouth, and that's when Chris started screaming and screaming until his throat grew raw.

Strong arms came around him as he pulled away from the nightmare, eyes yet squeezed shut.

Chris threw his own arms around a strong back and held tight, as if his life depended on it. “Don't let 'em hurt me. Please, don't...”

“I won't. No one's gonna hurt you here.”

Not Mr. Whitfield's voice. It well and truly had been a dream. Thank God.

Chris pulled back slightly to stare up at the face of the man holding him. "Troy?"

"Who else you expecting?"

Chris couldn't say, except that the only other person whose arms he wanted to be in proved just as forbidden, if not more so, than Troy's.

*Marshal Hayden.*

Chris stared at the chiseled features of the man in front of him, heart fluttering at the upward tilt at one corner of Troy's mouth like he found Chris' confusion amusing. It took everything in him not to bury his face against the solid wall of Troy's hard-muscled chest to escape that amusement and find his comfort in the flannel folds of Troy's shirt. He'd learned his lesson but good. Men didn't cotton to shows of affection like that between men. If his time with Cooper had taught him anything, it had taught him that.

Troy didn't seem to mind Chris clinging to him, though. In fact, he did a little clinging himself, like he didn't want to let Chris go.

"Want to talk about it?"

Chris shook his head again. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was ruin the moment by opening up his pie-hole.

He swallowed hard at the memory of what had almost happened to him, and his face heated at his shame. He did bury it against Troy's chest then. It felt like the most natural thing in the world for him to do, and when Troy's arms tightened around him rather than pushed him away, Chris knew he'd done the right thing.

He didn't know he cried until he heard Troy's husky voice delivering soothing, soft words as if he tried to calm a spooked horse.

Chris' shame took a back seat to his hankering when he felt heat flood his groin as blood rushed straight from his head to his shaft. The flood made him dizzy.

Would Troy be like the others and hurt Chris because he was different? Or did he share Cooper's kindred spirit?

At twenty-one, Chris still proved inexperienced at the right way to cozy up to a man, but for sure, there was only one way to figure it out. Chris' heart pounded at the notion of feeling the older man's full lips against his, giving and taking and—

He lifted his face out of Troy's shirt and gazed up to see the heat in the man's eyes. The smoky gray color darkened with lust. Then Troy licked his lips, and Chris' heart skipped several beats before he closed his eyes and tilted back his head, automatically parting his lips.

Shock scudded through him like ice water when Troy's firm lips covered his.

It took all his willpower to keep his eyes from flying open. He didn't want to ruin the fantasy, didn't want to see the revulsion that might be in Troy's eyes when the man came to his senses and realized what he did and with whom. It had happened before.

Troy pulled away from him several moments later but not in the way Chris had expected. No. Troy dragged his lips away from Chris' with a long groan. He sounded like he hurt and didn't *want* to stop for fear that the pain would get worse if he did.

"Christ, you're just a kid."

That was a new one. Usually he got "What kind of odd stick are you?" right before the man in question knocked him flat on his backside or worse. Even the men who wanted to bugger him didn't want to kiss him. Heck if he understood the difference or what made one act better or worse than the other. Men could be an odd lot, and he had the bad luck of preferring them to women.

"I've been on my own since I turned ten." Not that it made any difference. He still came off as a wide-eyed greenhorn and wasn't as tough as he could be. Cooper had told him when they'd met it was a wonder Chris remained in one piece. To Cooper's way of thinking, innocence and inexperience like Chris' could get a body hurt or

killed. Heck, Cooper had been as far away from a shave tail as they came and look what happened to him!

“Ten, huh?”

Chris nodded. It wasn’t like he’d had a choice in the matter. A cholera outbreak had taken his parents away from him eleven years ago, and Chris went to work in the factories in New York not long after and before he’d made his way out West. He wasn’t necessarily proud of the things he’d done to survive since, but fact was fact.

“You’re all alone?” Troy pushed a stray lock of hair away from Chris’ face real gentle like, looking down into his eyes as if he wanted to protect Chris, not hurt him.

Chris just barely puffed up his chest. He didn’t want pity. “I get by.”

“I reckon you do.” Troy peered some more, like he tried to figure out what made Chris tick. “How old *are* you?”

“Old enough.”

Troy chuckled and shook his head. “I suspect you are.” He sighed and braced his palms on his thighs before standing up. “Well, Mr. Old Enough, think you’re ready to hold down some grub?”

Chris looked toward the window for the first time since he’d waken up from his nightmare and saw that daybreak had arrived. The sun shone bright, spilling through the floral-print curtains to warm the four-poster bed.

He glanced around the room and spied the bedroll on the wood floor at the foot of the bed then winced. “I took your bed.”

“Don’t go vexing yourself about it.”

“I didn’t mean to...Miss Josie said it was okay that...I thought it was her room what with the flowers on the curtains and the ruffles on the bed and...”

“Josie has a habit of putting her stamp on things even when they don’t belong to her.” Troy laughed. “She said the room needed some color and style.”

“Oh.”

“So what do you think?”

“About the room?”

Troy nodded.

“I reckon it’s pretty.”

Troy grinned, and the show of dimples was liked to knock the wind right out of Chris’ lungs. The man’s next murmured words, however, finished the job and took his breath away.

“Not as pretty as you.”

### Chapter 3

In the dark, James imagined the head bobbing up and down between his thighs belonged to another person, another sex. It was the only way he could stay hard.

He closed his eyes tight to bring the vision of shaggy, honey-blond waves and wide blue eyes into sharper focus. The boy had one of the most beautiful faces James had seen in a long spell, if he ever had at all. Cheekbones didn't come any more sculpted except on the Indians he'd taken refuge with back before Emancipation. Sharp enough to cut glass they were. If his hair was darker and he wasn't as fair, he might have been mistaken for at least a mix-breed. The eyes, however, those innocent blue eyes, were a dead give-away.

He wasn't from around here, for certain. Probably a chuck-eater or a shorthorn like old Bart had called him last night, his accent giving him away like a shirt full o' fleas. He might have been out West for a few years, but there was no mistake he'd come from somewhere else—New York maybe.

And James never would have met him had he not gone into Barrow's.

It wasn't usually his habit to frequent white establishments, especially those patronized by drunk, armed cowboys. He could handle himself just fine, but he preferred not inviting difficulty if he could help it. He liked to keep a low profile and peace and quiet, particularly when he just arrived back from a hunt in Indian Territory.

Troy Barrow had a reputation for being about as open-minded as anyone around these parts, though, known to treat everyone with the same respect he expected to be treated with.

James had banked on this when he'd come through the doors tonight because he'd been too tired to go to Nellie's. The blacks-only establishment was all the way across town, and after dropping off his latest quarries at Fort Smith, he'd just wanted to relax for a spell with a quick drink. Wolf Creek was the closest cow town, if a body could call a three-hundred mile ride close.

Relaxing had been the last thing he'd done once that young'un with the honey-blond hair and wide blue eyes had walked into the bar and caught the attention of near everybody in the place, though, him included. Unfortunately, all the attention hadn't come from the most seemly of characters, Bart just being the *most* vocal and roostered.

In the end, James had wound up at Nellie's anyhow, partaking in the special entertainment that only one of old Nellie's sporting women could provide.

It wasn't enough, though, never had been.

He wanted more.

He wanted honey-blond hair and blue eyes.

He wanted smoky-gray eyes and wavy chestnut hair.

He wanted Troy's broad shoulders and hard muscles that stood up to his own. He wanted to hold on to Chris' slim hips when he slid his cock into the manchild's tight little rear.

He wanted the impossible.

James muttered an oath and pulled away from the woman between his legs. His limp cock slid from her mouth with a soft pop.

She caressed his thighs with both hands, looking up at his face in the dim light with a confused expression on her face. "You're all tense, sugar. What's the matter?"

"It's nothing you can help me with."

The woman sat back on her haunches and put a fist on her hip. "I thought I was doing a darn good job of helping before you stopped me."

"I reckon you were doing okay, ma'am."



“Why are you always so all-fired formal, *James*? You come here often enough to call me by my Christian name.”

True enough, but he just couldn’t cross that barrier with her, with any woman. He wouldn’t, not when he couldn’t truly give her what he knew she wanted—commitment.

James couldn’t commit to any woman. And to commit to a man, any man, would just shorten his lifespan right and proper.

“I’m sorry I wasted your time, Sarah.” He stood up from the bed and turned his back on her as he pulled up his long johns and pants. He should never have given his permission for Nellie to send him a girl, but he found it hard to say no to the woman, to most women. This inability remained the bane of his existence. “I’ll pay you the full price for the hour.”

She stood, too, caught him by the arm, and turned him around to face her. “You’re not just a job to me,” she murmured.

“I can’t be anything else.”

She sighed and cupped his face, piercing him with a somber look that spoke to him better than any words ever could.

What he wouldn’t give to return her affection, to want to. It would have made his life so much easier if he could be with Sarah the way she wanted.

James caught her hand and held it against his chest.

She deserved better than to be strung along, and he’d tried his darnedest not to. He tried to be a gentleman without betraying his nature, a difficult juggling act during the best of times. However, as one of several black U.S. deputy marshals appointed by Judge Parker, he had reputations to uphold—that of black people and that of the United States federal government. His loyalty to Sarah and his nature placed a distant third and fourth to these duties.

Times like this he wished he had stayed with the Choctaw. They had a far different view of sexuality among their people. Their males, the *hoobuk*, who chose to live their lives as females, were celebrated and held in high esteem rather than seen as deviant.

James swallowed as he brought Sarah's hand up to his lips and gently kissed the palm, his way set. "I'm powerful sorry, Sarah."

"James..." She grabbed his free hand with hers, her eyes glowing with desperation. "I want to be with you. I don't care about what you are."

His heart thudded at her words. He wasn't as nervous when he tracked down bootleggers, horse rustlers, and murderers in the Cherokee Hills as he was right then peering into Sarah's eyes because he suspected she wasn't talking about his job.

"You know."

She had the decorum to lower her eyes, a fierce blush coloring her maple-brown cheeks when she finally raised her gaze back to his. "I reckon I always have. You bluff a good game, but a woman knows."

"Then why would you want to be with me?"

"You're a good, honest man, James Hayden. That's a rarity in these parts. Not to mention I just plain like you."

"I can't give you what you want."

"These days a woman just wants companionship."

Sarah may have been willing to settle, but James wasn't. He'd rather be alone, which was probably the best thing for him, especially considering his profession. He suspected not many women besides Sarah would put up with the demands of a job that kept him away from the homestead six months at a time.

Would a man put up with it?

James shook his head, determined not to go down that lonely, hopeless road. He was dreaming, being as impractical as Sarah.

For certain he'd heard tell of stag dances where cowboys entertained themselves with polkas, waltzes and quicksteps. And acts of *mutual solace* between young, unmarried cowboys out here where women remained scarce were common. James, however, knew he couldn't get away with the same things a white man could, despite the prestige of his job or the remoteness of the cow towns he frequently passed through.

James easily released Sarah and stepped back. “I’m powerful flattered that you’d choose me to settle down with, sugar. You’re a pretty little thing who shouldn’t have to settle for someone who can’t meet your needs, not when you can have any man you want, surely.”

She turned her back on him then and sat down on the four-poster bed, the big mattress seeming to swallow her slim figure up as sure as the whale that swallowed Jonah.

James went to her, sitting on the edge of the bed, putting a hand on her shoulder and that’s when he felt her body shaking with silent sobs. Lord, he didn’t know what to do about a woman’s tears. He didn’t deal with too many crying females in his line of work, unless he counted the mother of two of his latest captures. That hadn’t been as much crying as it had been shrieking and cussing at James for hoodwinking her to get to her boys, though. Lord, James didn’t think he had ever heard such profanity come out of the mouth of the fairer sex before.

He wrapped his arms around Sarah and pulled her close. Sarah, in turn, flung her arms around him and clung tight. When she drew her face away from his chest and reached for his lips with hers, he didn’t pull away. She kissed him, her lips hungry and searching as if trying to drag a reaction out of him that she thought would come to light if she just wished hard enough.

James let her kiss him, closed his eyes and even tried to let himself get into the feeling, but it didn’t work. He just didn’t feel anything beyond mild affection and certainly not the fire he sought. Something remained missing—always missing.

She jerked away from him with a strangled cry, roughly wiping the tears away with the back of her hands. “That was a mistake.”

“I’m sorry, Sa—”

She put up a hand. “You don’t have to apologize. It’s not your fault you feel the way you feel. I was just hoping that maybe, if I could get a rise out of you, you’d see that it’s not so bad, you know,”

she shrugged, all of a sudden seeming shy before continuing with a murmur, “being with a woman.”

She wasn’t the first who thought she could change his mind. He sorely wished she could get a rise out of him, but he felt the way he felt and wanted what he wanted. A woman wouldn’t do, not if he remained honest with himself, and he was sorely tired of living a lie.

“You’ll find someone, Sarah. You’re young and you’re pretty...”

“You don’t have to go. You’ve still got the room for the rest of the day. Might as well stay and relax for a spell.”

He caught her by the hand as she rose to leave, a sudden horrible thought dawning on him. “You won’t...say anything to anyone, will you?”

“Who would I tell? Who would believe me? The big bad Marshal Hayden, a legend in his own time, prefers to bugger men instead of women.” She grinned sadly. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

He just looked at her, thoughts of the reporter camped out in the hotel across town even now writing up an account of James’ latest exploits for his newspaper filling his mind.

Someone knocked on the door, and James and Sarah stared at each other before he asked, “Who is it?”

“It’s Nellie, and you have a...visitor. He wouldn’t leave a message. He said he needs to speak to you in person. I couldn’t get him to leave.”

Could it be the reporter? He had been fairly insistent about getting quotes *from the horse’s mouth* for his paper, and James had been just as insistent that he didn’t want to be quoted. He didn’t have time for such foolishness. Bringing in criminals was just his job, and he didn’t want or need accolades or recognition for doing what was in his blood and the right thing to do, like last evening with the kid in the saloon. He’d been born to help out those in need. His way just happened to be with his gun and trailing and finding the bad guys.

“Marshal?”

“Come in.” At least he wasn’t in that much of a compromising position.

Nellie turned the knob, pushed open the door and stepped aside so that James’ visitor could step into the room.

His waif from the evening before stepped over the threshold and paused, glancing around the room as if to steady himself before he looked at James and Sarah sitting on the bed.

*My waif. Mine.*

“I didn’t know you were in the middle of...things.”

“I told you he was entertaining.” Nellie huffed and put a hand on her hip.

“I thought you were just saying that because you didn’t want me to see him.”

Nellie chuckled. “Chil’, I ain’t got no reason to lie to you or anyone else. If I tells you something, then that’s the way it is. Folks ’round here know Nellie’s word is her bond.”

The waif had the courtesy to duck his head and avert his eyes, but James didn’t miss the fierce blush that colored his high cheeks.

Lord, his fingers itched to trace those contours, feel the peach fuzz covering the boy’s otherwise smooth face. Kid couldn’t have been more than seventeen or eighteen, which made James a dirty old man, no matter how he cut it. He didn’t care. He plain wanted the kid. He hadn’t wanted anything as much in his life, except his freedom. And what did freedom mean when he couldn’t do with it what he wanted?

Sarah stood, headed over to the door, and passed the kid. “He’s all yours. I was on my way out anyway.” She glanced back at James and gave him another of her sad smiles, then left.

He hated that he’d hurt her, but there was no help for it. He’d be lying to her and himself if he fostered anything between them more than the limited carnal acts they’d shared so far.

“Well, I guess I’ll be on my way, too, then and leave you to your...business.” Nellie glanced at James with an expression that

proved at once questioning and then knowing. She looked at the boy before she turned and left.

“Close the door and come in,” James said.

The kid did as ordered and took several steps into the room, still much too far away for James’ liking.

“I’m suspecting you had a good reason for coming all this way and to Nellie’s.” The implication was clear—what was the boy doing on this side of town?—and the kid didn’t hesitate to pick up the gauntlet.

“I don’t have a problem with black folk, never did.”

“That’s good to know.” James hid a grin, cock throbbing hard in his pants at the boy’s gumption. He remembered that kind of bravery in his own youth. He had acted on it, in fact, when he ran away from his master and fled to Indian Territory to take up refuge with various tribes where he’d honed his firearm skills. He patted the mattress beside him. “Come here.” He used the deep, commanding voice that brooked no argument and garnered him a reputation as a hard man, fully expecting the boy to obey. When he didn’t make a move forward, however, only held his hat in front of him, nervously fiddling with the brim, it surprised James.

He gave the boy the once-over, letting his gaze linger on his flushed face before sliding down to his clothes. The shirt and pants looked almost new compared to what he’d had on last night, though both items of clothing had a couple of cuffs rolled in them to keep them from brushing his knuckles and the floor.

“Troy loaned ’em to me,” the kid said as if anticipating James’ question.

“It’s a decent improvement over last night.”

“He’s a decent man.”

“I’m sure he is.” James wondered how decent and whether that decentness could ever extend to him. He’d had a glimpse last evening but couldn’t dare hope that the hankerings he’d felt were mutual despite the offer of a drink. Could he?

He had never had such impossible dreams before. Why now? Was he getting that long in the tooth that he invited his own downfall?

“I just wanted to come to thank you right and proper for what you done for me yesterday.”

“And what did I do for you exactly?”

The boy looked at him as if he had grown a set of horns, and James almost burst out laughing, except he didn’t want the boy to think he mocked him.

“You saved my life.”

James took in his wide-eyed, awe-struck expression, heart filling with some unnamable emotion. “Don’t go getting all worked up over it now. I’m no Bass Reeves.”

“Near enough, I reckon.”

He’d had his moments and some memorable captures in his short career, but he didn’t like bragging about any of what he did. It was all in the line of duty.

“So, what do I call you, besides kid?”

“Name’s Christopher Michaels. You can call me Chris.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Chris. Now come here.” James watched as Chris swallowed hard before he took several steps forward, still not close enough for James’ tastes. “You afraid of me?”

“No, sir.”

“What’s my name?”

“James.”

“Then that’s what you call me.”

Chris raised his eyes and looked at him with such hunger, James almost groaned out loud.

“If you’re not afraid then come here and sit on the bed.”

Again, Chris did as ordered, except he only sat on the edge of the mattress as if to say, “There, I’m sitting!”

“So you came to thank me.”

“That man would have killed me had you not stepped in.”

“I don’t think that Troy would have allowed any such thing to happen on his property.”

“I reckon not.” Chris shook his head, and James watched as honey-blond ringlets danced around his angelic face.

He reached to tuck a stray strand of hair behind the boy’s ear, entranced by the silky-soft feel of the wisps flowing around his hand and tempted to rake both hands through the shaggy mop right and proper.

“I like to pay my debts,” Chris murmured.

James arched a brow. “That’s why you came?”

“I reckon.”

“Tell me, Chris. What do you reckon would erase this *debt*?”

Chris frowned, looking adorable and tempting all at once.

“What did Troy want for *his* kindness?”

“He said nothing.”

James almost laughed at the imagined exchange. He could see the kid insisting to Troy that he owed him the way he did to James now, wondered if Troy had been as amused. Or maybe he had been insulted. “You don’t believe him?”

“Troy’s already given me room and board, a hot meal and clothes. And he’s teaching me the finer points of tending the bar so I can help him out and earn my keep.”

Scratch the insulted part. It sounded more like the man was as smitten with the boy as James proved to be.

What was he getting himself into? He barely knew Chris and what he did know spelled trouble. “Sounds like a good deal to me. Why do you think you owe him? Or me, for that matter?”

Chris swallowed again and gave him a piercing look that about had him leaking into his long johns. James could feel the liquid heat of his hankering in his slit and shifted on the bed to get more comfortable.

“Folks ain’t nice to you for no reason.”



James used to believe that, too, but he had come across enough people like Troy in the world to know this wasn't gospel. If Chris' assumption proved true, then James wouldn't be able to read and produce the correct warrants when he went out on a hunt, at least not as easily as he did. A rancher had taught him how to read and write when James had joined his buckaroo crew right after Emancipation and the rancher discovered he didn't know how. He'd wanted nothing in return for his good deed other than a hard day's work for an honest day's pay and assurance that James wouldn't waste the gift he'd been given. James had been glad to give both and had been devouring the written word in as many forms of literature as he could ever since. Some folks, black and white, didn't like that he spoke and carried himself so *proper*. Some folks didn't like the idea of an *educated* Negro. They thought him uppity, but he didn't put too much stock into what people thought. He tried not to, anyway.

He cleared his throat, unsure how to respond to Chris' cynicism. He knew he had to set the kid straight somehow so he'd know folks did do things for others without expecting a damn thing in return...unless Chris *wanted* to give something in return.

"You know, you've got it all wrong, Chris."

"Got what all wrong?"

"According to an old Chinese proverb, since I saved your life, I'm responsible for you now. That makes *me* pretty much in debt to *you*."

"Well, I'll be. I never heard that one before."

"I've got a mite more years of living done than you have, and I've heard a few more things, I suspect." James smiled. He'd learned a few other things from the Chinese and Greeks in his travels and through his reading, intimate bawdy things that no decent folk should know about, things that he'd love to try with Chris. "So if you're responsible for me now, what does that mean?"

More than anything, James wanted it to mean that the boy would stay with him, by his side and under his protection. However, he didn't have the luxury. Not when he would be going back out on the

trail eventually. What would he do with Chris then? How would he protect him from out on the trail? And who could say Troy hadn't already staked a claim? Would he let the boy travel all the way across town by himself if he had?

"Where's Troy now?"

"Back in Wolf Creek. He loaned me his horse to ride over here."

Definitely smitten, James thought. In some cases, a cowboy's horse proved more important to him than a woman. If Troy lent Chris his horse then things were serious between the two men, or at least Troy wanted them to be—the same as James did.

"I reckon he'll be expecting you back soon to help out at the bar?"

"I reckon." Chris lowered his gaze for a moment, then fixed James with a penetrating stare that was liked to blow his boots off. "That woman that was here earlier...Is she your *woman*?"

"Sarah? No. Not by far."

"Oh."

"How old are you?"

Chris huffed and rolled his eyes. "Troy asked me the same thing."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That I'm old enough."

James closed the space between them, bending his head until his lips were a hairsbreadth away from Chris', close enough to hear the hitch in the boy's breath. "You're sure about that?"

"I—I'm sure."

"You don't sound sure."

"I'm twenty-one, and I know what I want."

Twenty-one! He might as well have been between hay and grass, neither man nor boy, for the fourteen-year gap linking their years.

He *sounded* sure, but many a stronger, older, and wiser man had been brought to his knees with hankerings that he dare not satisfy.

"I'm a sight older." And he had seen a sight more, more than he wanted to remember—as a slave, in the war, on the trail...

Chris licked his lips, and the critter in James' pants liked to leap for joy, pulling him away from his violent past. Here and now with Chris mattered to him more than anything.

James cupped the boy's face with both hands and drew him near as he covered Chris' mouth with his own. The taste of him set James' senses on fire. He slid one hand down between them, cupping the solid evidence of Chris' desire burgeoning between his legs. James rubbed the hard bulge and captured the sound of Chris' hunger when the boy groaned into his mouth. He thrust his tongue past Chris' parted lips and toppled the boy down against the bed.

Their erections met flush, hot and hard. James rocked and circled his hips until Chris writhed beneath him, meeting his thrusts as a whimper climbed from his throat.

James pulled away slightly, pausing when Chris drew his arms around his neck. He remembered how the boy had arrived in Barrow's last night. He remembered the pain that had been etched on his fine features.

"No. Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

He lowered his face to Chris'. "You want this?"

"I want *you*. Have since I saw you in the saloon."

James chuckled, feeling reckless and younger than he had in years. "Feeling's mutual." He dipped his tongue into Chris' mouth and swirled it around to the kid's decided pleasure if Chris' groans were any indication. Ready to take his fill even more, he reached for the button on Chris' britches right before someone pounded on the door.

James popped up his head and pushed up, his weight on his palms, as Chris scrambled from under him and sprang to his feet. He stood a good several feet away from James—much too far away.

"Who is it?"

"Marshal, there's trouble downstairs! You need to come now!" Sarah's anxious voice broke through the sexual spell that Chris had woven around him since he'd arrived. James bounded from the bed

and to the door in a few quick strides, flinging it open to reveal Sarah's tear-stained face.

He caught her by the shoulders. "What's happened?"

"He's got a gun, James."

He didn't ask who. It didn't matter. He needed to get downstairs before anyone got hurt.

James turned back to Chris standing in the center of the room now, hat in hand again. "Don't move from this room."

"But—"

"Stay here!"

He nabbed his holster and gun from the foot post of the bed and closed the door behind him as he headed for the stairs, trailing Sarah. He strapped his holster on while he walked, slowing down as he neared the bottom of the staircase to take in the scene in the entry hall. A white man stood just inside the threshold. The front door was open behind him. He had an arm crooked around Nellie's throat, holding her close to his side as he threateningly waved a gun in front of her face.

A white man in Nellie's proved an incongruity on a normal evening, but this evening had proven to be anything but normal and looked to be getting stranger by the minute.

James caught Nellie's gaze and signaled her not to let on that he approached. Her nod would have been imperceptible to almost anyone else but him.

"Where is he, girl? I know your precious black marshal is in here somewhere!"

James thanked the Lord for the well-cushioned carpeting that camouflaged his maneuver. However, two doors on the first floor opened at the commotion, and James frantically signaled to the girls and their customers to go back into their rooms.

The man holding Nellie hostage caught the movement on the stairs and swung around to see James near the bottom, Sarah close behind him.

“I knew you’d come down to save your precious whore girlfriend. Well, come on then and let’s get a look at you.” The man waved his gun toward James and smiled. “You can leave the gun behind ya, though.”

“No can do, pardner.”

The man pressed the muzzle of his gun against Nellie’s temple, and James watched as her eyes filled with tears. They weren’t tears of fear, though. Rather, they were tears of anger and frustration. James could tell from the way her jaw worked as if she chomped at a bit.

He peered at the gunslinger. Something about his face was familiar. Maybe he was a younger version of someone else he knew. Then it clicked. He’d recently brought in a fugitive who looked uncannily like this young man—his older brother, maybe?

“Let the lady go. She hasn’t done anything to you. It’s me you want, right?”

“You know damn well it is. You should have never arrested my brother. Not you.”

James suspected the man had more of a problem with a black lawman arresting his brother than his brother being arrested at all.

“I’m going to need you to drop your gun and give yourself up.”

Connor McClary’s younger brother laughed and waved his gun in defiance. “And why should I do that? I already got the bulge on you, marshal.”

Heart drumming, James drew his gun, prepared to do something he’d done countless times in the past, something ultimately necessary, the outcome of which he almost always regretted.

McClary’s younger brother, however, easily pointed his gun in James’ direction and pulled the trigger. Not before James dove to the right and fired his own gun.

His bullet found its target, striking the younger McClary in the shoulder of his gun hand and disabling him enough to make him drop his weapon.

Nellie pulled away from him as soon as the gun clattered to the floor, kicking it farther out of the gunman's reach as she flung herself into James' arms.

James held Nellie with one arm and continued to point his gun at the younger McClary with his gun hand. "Guess you'll be joining your brother in the hoosegow then."

"Guess you'll be joining the devil in hell, marshal." The younger McClary leaned against the doorframe, eyeing James' gun and Sarah as she retrieved his. He gritted his teeth. "Your time's coming, *boy*. Soon."

James didn't flinch. He'd been called worse. "No doubt, pardner."

## **Chapter 4**

Chris had hung back as long as he could, biting his bottom lip with indecision, until he heard the shots ring out downstairs.

He rushed to the door, flung it open and ran down the hall to the stairs just in time to see James take down the gunslinger threatening Nellie.

He stood at the top of the staircase, still amazed and awestruck by the time James put handcuffs on the gunman.

James turned as he finished, eyes widening when he caught sight of Chris. “Are you all right? Were you hit?”

Chris didn’t know what his expression looked like to James, but something in it must have said that he’d been hurt, so he quickly shook his head to reassure the other man.

“I told you to stay in the room.”

“But I heard—”

“I don’t care a continental what you heard! When I tell you to do something, I need you to do it.”

Chris’ face fell. He’d been all set to feel James’ lips against his once more as soon as they could be alone together again but could see the folly of his desires now.

Sarah put a hand on James’ arm and squeezed. “You’re being too hard on him.”

He wanted to tell her that he didn’t need her to defend him, that he could take care of himself, but realized that would be mean, and he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Something told him that she’d had her feelings hurt enough for one day. And so had he.

"It looks like I've overstayed my welcome. I'll be taking my leave." Chris moved to go down the stairs but stopped at James' growl.

"Don't go."

He stared at James, praying God gave him the strength to hold his own against the lawman, though the hard look in James' eyes told him he didn't stand a chance. It served him right for idolizing the man. All the way out west, he'd read about men like James in his collection of dime novels. All the way out, he'd fantasized about meeting and making one his own. Now he knew the meaning of "be careful what you wish for." He knew that he could never *make* James anything, much less his own.

Chris gathered his courage now and jutted his chin a tad just for good measure. "Is that an order, marshal?"

James gritted his teeth. "You can consider it one."

Chris held in a gasp.

Would James really arrest him for disobeying him? The look on his face said he'd do what he deemed necessary to keep Chris put. And he didn't know what scared him more—the possibility of being imprisoned or that he *wanted* James to imprison him more than anything.

"I'll be back after I take this man over to the jail in town. Stay put until I get back." James turned and left, prisoner in tow, the door closing with a loud thud behind him.

Nellie and Sarah looked at him as if they sympathized, but he couldn't see how they would. Had they ever been dressed down by a man they wanted more than anything in the world, a man they wanted only to impress with their courage and brains?

Maybe he should have stayed put, but he couldn't see staying behind, sitting on his hands as if he were helpless when someone he cared about could be in trouble.

Why should James take all the risks?



He'd really botched up with his half-assed notion of rescuing James the same way James had rescued him. Not that it would have ever made them even, not by a long shot.

"Supper won't be for a little while, but would you like something to eat while you wait?" Sarah asked.

Chris looked at her, not surprised that she took it for granted that he would be staying. He had been given an order by the legendary James Hayden, after all.

Would Sarah and Nellie stop him if he tried to leave?

Tired and unwilling to try his luck, Chris just nodded and headed back to the room where he and James had kissed and, he was sure, been about to do so much more.

\* \* \* \*

The wolf dogged James and Court McClary's trail all the way back to Wolf Creek.

James thought he had picked up the animal's presence soon after leaving Nellie's and mounting his horse, but he didn't let on. No need in riling his detainee anymore than necessary, especially over an improbability.

When James mounted his horse to make it back to Nellie's before twilight and the wolf continued his tracking, however, James became a mite concerned.

Wolves spurned human contact as a rule, and this one acted more like a loyal, domesticated dog than a feral predator.

James had second thoughts, however, when the animal boldly circled in front of his horse, growling and baring his teeth, nothing like a domesticated anything. Not to mention he was bigger than the average wolf by about sixty or seventy pounds. The animal could probably take down a stallion with not too much difficulty, or easily rip out James' throat once he did. He leaned forward to speak to Midnight in reassuring tones before his horse got good and spooked

enough to throw him. Already, the large stallion backed up, blowing rollers to signal his distress. James stroked his neck soothingly before he slowly dismounted so's not to antagonize the wolf. Once standing on the ground, he held his hands up in the most unthreatening manner he could manage.

"Easy, boy, real easy now."

The animal, a timber wolf as far as James could tell, tilted his head back, snout pointing at the darkening, rose-hued sky, and let out a loud howl as if calling for reinforcements.

James glanced around him to make sure they were still alone and that the wolf's pack wasn't nearby. Even if he was a lone wolf, which looked to be the case, he still posed a danger—probably more than if he had a pack. Lone wolves could be unpredictable—both the human and the animal variety. He knew from experience.

This wolf, however, seemed like he had a personal beef to settle. He acted like he wanted to sit down for a pow-wow with James.

He didn't want to shoot the animal and vowed to himself that he would do everything in his power to keep from doing so—unless the wolf made any threatening moves.

For now, the animal seemed satisfied that James had stopped and gotten off his horse.

"Okay, boy, you got my attention. Now, what is it you want from me?" He knew he was barking at a knot, trying to accomplish the impossible in trying to have a conversation with the animal. And, as if to punctuate that point, the wolf walked in a tight circle several times before settling himself down on the dirt road. He silently curled his legs beneath himself and watched James with a piercing gaze, unmoving.

Getting back on his horse and galloping off would have probably been a good idea, but the wolf had roused his curiosity, even if he couldn't exactly play chin music with the animal.

Midnight had calmed down considerably, so James got down on his haunches to better look at the wolf, breaking another law of the

wild—never look an animal in the eye. He couldn't help it, though. There was something familiar, almost friendly, about the silver-gray gaze the animal fixed on him, at once intense and serene—beautiful.

“You're not exactly what you seem, are you?”

No response from the wolf.

Not really expecting one, James grinned and said, “Bark once for yes and twice for no. Are you what you seem?”

The wolf barked twice before falling silent again, looking at James.

James' heart sped, kind of like it did when he was on a pursuit. He felt that thrill of closing in on a man among the willows. His blood pumped through his veins and warmed his body with a sense of insight and accomplishment when he brought in a man dodging the law.

He had the wildest idea about camping out for the night and hanging with the wolf before heading back to Nellie's. Then he remembered Chris.

He was anxious to get back to the young'un, especially after the way he'd left things. He wouldn't blame the kid if he hated him right now. He knew he deserved it. Seeing Chris there at the top of the stairs looking as surprised as a hound dog with his first porcupine, however, had just about put the fear of God into James. He hadn't seen any blood to speak of, but he had been afraid that McClary's stray shot had somehow struck Chris. And the thought of the boy injured or dead just made him feel plain empty inside.

Wasn't it too damn soon to be feeling so attached to someone, especially someone he had no hopes of really being with? Well, there was no help for it, no accounting for feelings, either, and he surely felt something for that boy, something he couldn't even put a name to yet.

James told himself that Chris would be safe enough at Nellie's until he got back, knew that Nellie and Sarah and the rest of the girls would take care of him if he'd bothered to hang around after James' departure. If not, James would just put his skills to use and track him

down. Not that he'd have to do too much work. Didn't take a genius to guess where the kid would go. He frowned at the thought of Troy and Chris together and the idea of the other man benefitting from James' bad behavior. He was jealous at the thought of anyone touching Chris except him, then deliberated on the situation some more. If Chris had to be with another man, James couldn't think of a better choice than Troy. In fact, the idea of the three of them together was powerful appealing. James' britches got might snug between the legs at the idea, and his critter grew by painful leaps and bounds.

He envisioned Troy and his intense silver-gray eyes, the exotic shape and color reminding him of something else.

James intensified his gaze and took in the wolf staring at him as if he knew what James thought. Maybe he did and had been sent to James as a sign.

The thought should have spooked him more than it intrigued him, and he probably owed this to his spending so much time among the Indians.

Most tribes were powerful spiritual and believed that if man put his ear to the ground, he could hear Mother Earth's heartbeat. Animal totems in particular were acutely aware of this heartbeat and, in fact, were said to walk in time with the beat of the Earth's heart.

The more James thought about the wolf and some of the things its totem symbolized—cunning, high intellect, and loyalty among them—the more he began to believe that this wolf had been sent to him as some kind of message.

White men would have called his thoughts just plain superstitious, but he knew the Choctaw he had come to think of as his family and many other tribes would not.

James reached for the leather strap around his neck, caressing the small wood carving that hung from it. The carving portrayed a wolf with head tilted back like his new friend's had been, as if howling at the moon. The carving had been given to him by Miakoda, the tribal healer of the clan James had been living with at the time. A *hoobuk*

and kindred spirit, he had given James the tribal name Nayati—he who wrestles.

At the time, James hadn't understood the significance of the title. Since he'd left his adoptive family and rejoined *civilization*, daily straddling the lines between Indian, black, and white cultures and customs, however, he'd begun to understand the meaning of his tribal name more and more. He wrestled with the repercussions of his race and his proclivities every day.

The wolf howled, seizing James' attention as if he sensed him drifting too far into his past and wanted to prevent him from wallowing in self-pity.

James' breath hitched in his chest when he noticed the animal's proximity, how close the animal had managed to come to him without making a sound. Then he saw the animal's furry tail eagerly wagging behind him, as if he wanted to play with James. He'd just like to think that the wolf's playing didn't involve ripping out a human's throat.

Cautiously, he reached out a hand to touch the wolf's snout, his fingers coming away cool and moist. James chuckled as the wolf moved closer and pushed his head against James' palm, insistently begging for more attention.

He was a right friendly critter, friendly and smart as a whip.

James still wasn't so sure what he was facing, making nice with the animal. He was a wild animal, after all, but for the moment, James felt unthreatened.

He petted the top of the wolf's head, sinking his fingers into the dense gray fur of the animal's neck and enjoying the sensation of the soft pelt against his skin.

Suddenly, the wolf got up on his hind legs, planting his powerful front paws in James' chest and tumbling him back onto the dirt.

James lay on his back, two-hundred pounds of predator on his chest. He chastised himself for letting his guard down and allowing the wolf to lull him into a feeling of safety.

The wolf lowered his muzzle, sniffing James before bending his head farther to lap at his throat like stick candy.

James closed his eyes and shuddered more from the alien rasp of the animal's wet tongue against his throat than from any fear, though there was a mite measure of that deep down. Right behind the animal's harmless tongue stood a row of razor-sharp teeth that could sink into his jugular at any time.

His hand hovered over the butt of his gun. He had automatically moved his hand toward his gun when the wolf first made his move, but James hesitated in drawing and opened his eyes.

The wolf stood over him, panting. Hurting James seemed to be the furthest thing from the animal's mind.

"So are you going to rip out my throat or not, critter?"

The wolf barked twice and continued panting.

"Then let me up, beast."

The wolf barked once then leapt off of James' chest, bouncing back and forth, waiting for James to get to his feet. He seemed enthusiastic to show James something.

James dusted off his britches with his Stetson once he got up. "Guess I'm going to have to come up with a name for you if we're going to be spending time together, huh?"

The wolf barked once.

"All right, then..." He clapped and rubbed his hands together as he stared into the wolf's silver-gray gaze and that familiarity struck him again. "You remind me of someone, critter. Think I'll name you...Troy Junior. I'll call you T.J. for short. How's that?"

The wolf tilted back his head and howled as if with approval, his response sending pleasant spikes of awareness scudding through James—so much so the critter in his britches started doing a jig.

What in the Sam Hill!

T.J. caught a piece of James' pant leg and jerked hard enough to get his attention but not hard enough to rip the material. Thank the Lord for durable wool.

“Okay, okay, T.J. What’s got your fur in a knot?”

The wolf pulled on his pant leg again, directing him toward the nearby lake.

James glanced out at the peaceful green water, and it had never looked more refreshing and inviting as it did right then with the idea of sharing it with this new *friend*.

“You want to go for a dip? Is that it, boy?”

The wolf barked once, then darted to the water’s edge before turning back to howl at James as if impatient with the man’s slowness.

“Hold your britches, boy. I’ll be there directly.”

T.J. barked like this would hurry James along, and in a sense, it did as James sat down on the ground and began to pull off his boots. Once done, he hurriedly stood to shuck off the rest of his clothes in short order, the animal’s anxiety transferring to him.

James stripped down to his long johns before he actually paused to think about how reckless he was being, how out of character he behaved, and that he didn’t care.

T.J. watched him from the water as he paddled close to shore. He seemed to be waiting for James to make up his mind, seemed to sense a momentous decision.

James squinted at the animal in the waning light, then reached for the waistband of his long johns and slowly slid them down over his hips and his legs. He shuddered from the bracing spring breeze, admiring the sun setting over the horizon as he stepped out of the last of his clothing and left it folded on the neat pile of britches and shirt he’d already shucked.

He slowly approached the shoreline, trying to connect with the much talked about heartbeat of Mother Earth’s. He’d only heard whispers of it before tonight but nothing that had touched him as much as the wolf.

James picked up a stray branch and walked out into the stream until he was waist-deep. He flung the stick out into the water and

watched the wolf go after it before he took a deep breath and dove under himself. He swam a bit before coming up for air and finding the wolf a few feet away from him with the stick in his mouth and peering at James again as if waiting for his next move.

“You are a strange one, aren’t you?”

The wolf paddled closer and offered James the stick before barking once when James took it. It didn’t even surprise James anymore. He expected an answer now when he asked the animal a question. It might not have been the communication that he was used to, but it was communication nonetheless.

James turned on his back to float a while, enjoying the enveloping coolness of the water, enjoying the calmness as he drifted.

He must have lost track of time for when he next heard the wolf’s bark it came from a little distance. He opened his eyes to see that T.J. had returned to shore and was busy shaking his thick coat dry. Deciding it time to return to reality, James swam back to shore, tossing the stick as soon as he had gained his footing and laughing as the wolf took off into the woods beyond the cove to retrieve it. T.J. returned within a minute, dropping the stick at James’ feet as James finished sliding on his long johns.

He’d thought retrieving the stick would take the wolf a little more time, at least time enough for him to get back into his clothes. He felt strangely bashful and vulnerable around the animal now when he hadn’t been so in the water with nary a stitch on. Now, on land and back down to earth, his priorities re-emerged.

He needed to get back to Chris, wanted to, and hoped the wolf wouldn’t try and stop him now that they’d had their little romp in the water.

The animal sat back on his haunches now, panting as his tongue lolled out of his mouth while he watched James dress. Once James finished, the wolf barked and ran back into the direction of the burgeoning woods.



If he wanted to make a getaway now would probably be the best time to do it.

James went to Midnight and quickly mounted the horse, kicking him into a gallop back toward town and away from his mysterious friend. He had a feeling he hadn't seen or heard the last of T.J.

## Chapter 5

*Shuddering at what almost happened between the man and that animal, frolicking out in the open, in the water together like...like lovers.*

*No more than a heathen and degenerate. What could anyone expect from someone with his ancestors—no account slaves and barbarians.*

*More and more the way was set and becoming obvious what needed to be done to avenge the two men rotting in jail because of that black marshal.*

*Months ago, when he'd first appeared on the scene, he'd been a minor annoyance along with the rest of the colored men Judge Parker and his marshal James Fagan had deputized. Now, after several famous arrests and captures, Connor McClary and his brother Court included, Hayden had garnered legendary status. He had become a hero, even in the eyes of some of the white people in Wolf Creek and some of the other surrounding towns. They liked the order that Hayden and men like him brought to this untamed territory, said it made them feel safe knowing that men so capable and strong looked out for their welfare.*

*Capable and strong. Ha! More like uncivilized as the red savages that taught and bore the mixed-breeds. And now Hayden and his ilk lorded over the territory with more authority than some white men and had a weapon to back him up.*

*Gritted teeth punctuated the silence.*

*It frustrated a body to know that friends and neighbors held the enemy in such high regard. T'wasn't right, no way, no how. And it had to stop.*

*It would stop, if it was the last thing ever done.*

\* \* \* \*

He'd almost swallowed his tongue when James called him Troy, Jr., automatically second-guessing his wisdom of appearing to the marshal in his wolf form.

Troy hadn't been able to help himself, though, fear and confusion riding him when he initially followed James out of town after he'd gotten wind of the incident at Nellie's. Once he'd shifted on the outskirts of town and began following James and his prisoner, fear and confusion had finally been replaced with a healthy dose of plain old-fashioned hankering.

He still hadn't recovered from that adventure, adrenaline spiking through him at the thought of losing the two men he wanted before he even got to know them.

Troy still hadn't gotten to know either man as well as he wanted, but watching Chris sleep last night and swimming with James in the lake this evening made him feel a lot closer to each than he had been before.

He told himself he had something to build on, but what, really? How could a relationship between him and either man ever work? As if he didn't have enough trouble starting a relationship with one man, here he thought about forging a relationship with two?

Troy's life had always been about impossibilities, his very existence the essence of impossibility. Yet here he existed, both man and animal in one body, able to shift between worlds and accepted by neither.

Maybe those Indians had had it right and he should have died in that fire. He refused to believe, however, that he hadn't been brought

into this world for a purpose. He just hadn't figured out what that purpose was yet.

*And you think Chris and James can show it to you?*

Still wet and naked, Troy slid down to sit at the base of a lush, towering oak. Sighing, he pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them. The evening air felt invigorating against his damp skin, just enough to keep him alert.

He'd sensed another in the surrounding area but had been too busy trying to corrupt the marshal to home in on the individual's exact location. Now he wondered who or what was stalking him as he had stalked James.

It wasn't like him to be so all-fired foolish. He'd learned the hard way that he needed to always be on his guard. His enemies had taught him that over the years.

Troy peered into the darkness, vision easily adjusting to the lack of light. He didn't see anything, and unlike humans, he could see well in the dark, much like his animal. The idea that someone had watched him and James in the water, though they hadn't really done anything unseemly, made him decidedly wary and vulnerable.

Still, he didn't regret the impulsiveness that had put him in this position. He did not regret the jealousy or over-protectiveness that led him to follow James all the way to Wolf Creek and halfway back.

He'd thought to give the marshal a piece of his mind, to stake his claim for Chris, but best laid plans. Really, how much could he do in wolf form that wouldn't give him away, except hurt the marshal? And, despite his competitive nature or proprietary feelings for Chris, that had been the last thing he wanted to do.

Troy leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. He didn't feel the presence anymore and figured he was far enough inside the woods to be safe from prying human eyes at least. Funnily enough he didn't worry as much about animal eyes. Animals didn't judge like humans. They had sex without reservation, shame, or worrying about an audience.

Maybe if he had sex more often himself, he wouldn't be so on edge. Troy hadn't been with anyone in a long time, though, and even then, it had been careless and fast groping in the dark, nothing fit for a proper body. It had been something more fit for an animal—the animal he was.

There had been a couple of times, though, way back when he'd been between hay and grass and imagined himself enamored. He'd had to leave Jack out of self-preservation, and Josiah had been taken away from him. He hadn't been able to explore the depths of what he was feeling with either man, and since they both were dead now, he never would.

Troy's body buzzed with the memories of his youth and unreleased hunger. He needed to take off the edge.

He stretched his legs out in front of him and let his hand slide down to his lap. His cock rose up out of a nest of brown curls, hard and painful. Troy curled his fingers around his erection as far as they would go, but even with his sizeable hand, his fingers didn't meet around the firm girth of him. His member pulsed inside his fist, a large, living thing that made Troy wonder if he had ever grown so big before. Had he ever been so enthused?

He squeezed his eyes tight, drawing on the image of James naked, his mahogany skin glistening with lake water. The memory of James and his hard, jutting shaft set fire to Troy's need, and to his senses further.

He tightened his grip slightly, feeling velvet skin stretched over hard steel. The underside ridges ignited the nerve endings in his palm as he slowly began to pump his hand.

A pearl of liquid squeezed to the head of his penis, and Troy imagined first James then Chris licking him then sharing his taste between them. He shuddered at the vision, pumping his cock harder and faster. Icy white heat rode him hard, rushing and spreading from his groin down to his stiffening legs. Troy's moan of pleasure echoed loudly, but he had no chance to worry about startling any furry

woodland creatures that might be in the vicinity as his senses whirled on a cloud. Gasping, he spurted over his hand and onto his leg. Troy fell headlong into a mind-numbing climax that had him seeing double once he finally opened his eyes.

He was bleeding. He tasted the blood in his mouth from where he must have bitten his bottom lip to keep from crying out. He licked the bite, the sample triggering a memory of the Indians and how they'd tasted when he'd ripped into them. The flavor hadn't been entirely unpleasant. On some bone-deep level he had cottoned to the kill and the taste of his prey.

He hadn't cottoned to the reasons behind the attack, however. He had to believe he never would have harmed another human being like that without provocation—*had* to.

Troy blinked several times to clear the tears that had suddenly formed in his eyes at the memory of his father. They hadn't lost Mama much before the Indians' visit. Troy soon found himself, once again, grieving, this time for his father.

He thought of Chris again and how much they had in common. He thought of the losses they'd experienced in their lives. He wouldn't fool himself to believe he understood what made a kid like him wake up screaming in fear the way Chris had. Since he'd undergone his first shift and had his growth spurt as a young teen, he hadn't been afraid of too much of anything. He wouldn't pretend that the near ten-year age gap didn't matter to him, either, even if it didn't matter to Mr. Old Enough Michaels. He had much more important things to worry about, the least of which involved catching up with James and making it back to Nellie's.

With everything that had happened and everything going on around the territory, he didn't want either man out of his sight for too long.

\* \* \* \*

Chris felt the weight on him as he woke and had to force himself not to panic before a large hand slapped over his mouth. The memory of being held down by those hands, of being bound and gagged and the heat of that brand, had him struggling as if his life depended on it. And then his eyes flew open. He blinked a few times to bring the face hovering above him into focus, the kerosene lamp on the bedside table helping a little.

Chris said his visitor's name in awe, but the sound came out muffled against James' hand until he removed it.

"What time is it?" Chris asked.

"Did you eat?"

"I had dinner with Nellie and the girls."

"Nellie and the girls, huh?" James grinned.

Chris shrugged. "They invited me to eat with them downstairs. Did I do something wrong accepting?" He watched as James winced, or maybe he saw something that wasn't more than a trick of the light.

"You didn't do anything wrong—then or now."

"You ain't still mad at me?"

James brushed a stray lock of hair behind Chris' ear as he rested his chin in his free palm and his elbow on the mattress beside Chris' face. "I was never mad at you."

"But you—"

"Shh." James bent his head to take Chris' mouth with his, thrusting his tongue past Chris' parted lips when Chris gasped in surprise.

James pulled back just far and long enough to say, "I wasn't mad. I was scared. I thought you..." He shook his head and closed his eyes. He pressed his forehead against Chris' and sighed. "I reckon I'm not sure what I thought, except you might have been hurt. I—"

"Was scared?" Chris watched James' Adam's apple as it bobbed up and down. He rested his palm on James' face, liking the way the stubble rasped against his hand, so unlike his own peach fuzz. He

rubbed his thumb over James' light mustache and felt the tough marshal shudder beside him. "I'm okay. I'm not hurt."

"Not physically, no."

Chris averted his eyes. He'd gone over this ground with Troy. Not that Troy had gotten any more out of him than James would, but he didn't want to go through this again. He didn't want to spill his guts. He didn't want to reveal his soul. There was nothing to tell. He was here now and didn't want to think about his past—not ever.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken so harshly to you."

Chris grinned, knew how hard it was for a man like James to apologize or, worse, to admit wrongdoing. The West was a hard place peopled with hard men—and women, too. They were people with no time for flapping their gums and explaining why they did what they did. They just did what they had to do when they had to do it.

He had been out here long enough to know how things worked, and what he hadn't seen and heard for himself, Cooper had taught him. Just once, though, he wanted to feel like he had been born for more than just to provide pleasure to a man or even a woman before he was kicked out to pasture like a worthless animal.

He missed Cooper. He didn't realize how much until just now. Cooper had been the only man before Troy and James to show Chris any sort of kindness, to let Chris know that he wasn't a bad person for feeling how he felt and wanting what he wanted. Mr. Whitfield had abided Chris' proclivities because Chris had proved himself a decent cowhand and a quick learner, but when it got right down to brass tacks, Whitfield hadn't wanted to abide the sort of difficulties Chris' proclivities triggered more than anyone else. Chris had been let go "for the good of the rest of the ranch."

*"Got to keep up the morale of my other 'hands, you understand."*

Yep, Chris understood. He proved too much trouble to keep around. He wasn't necessary, not at the expense of the peace.

Whitfield had apologized for letting him go, and Chris had seen how uncomfortable it made the old man to send him off with just his



wages, war-bag, and horse. However, send Chris off he did. And what Whitfield and the hands had started back at the ranch, the horse thieves outside of town had finished—taking his worldly possessions and the rest of his dignity.

“You did what you had to do,” Chris said, rubbing his thumb over James’ chin now, glancing over the cleft like he’d been dreaming about doing since he’d first seen the marshal in action at Barrow’s.

Chris thought the moment would be complete if one other person was here with them, and that’s when a howl rose up from outside—haunting and drawn-out.

He watched James frown at the sound and said, “Almost sounds like the animal is in a world of hurt.”

“About as much as I am, I reckon.” James took Chris by the wrist and guided his hand down between them. “Touch me,” he rasped.

“You want—”

“To feel your hands on me.” James gritted his teeth and stared at Chris, brandy gaze gleaming and intense. “I need you.”

Chris audibly gulped. His heart thudded as James growled and brought Chris’ hand down between his legs. Chris opened his hand to stroke the hard bulge in James’ britches. A wave of lust washed over him when James hissed in a breath and closed his eyes.

“Take a hold, young’un. Don’t be afraid.”

“I—I’m not.”

“Prove it.”

Chris stiffened at the hard edge to James’ tone and returned the older man’s gaze. He saw the calculation, the challenge. The marshal thought he could scare him off—him the young, inexperienced tenderfoot.

Trying to protect himself or Chris?

He had news for the marshal. He wasn’t going to be scared off that easily.

Chris reached for the top button on James' britches, not once taking his eyes off of the older man's except to catch a flash of James' self-assured grin.

James lay on his back, obviously to make things easier, but when he folded his hands behind his head and spread his legs, wordlessly giving Chris full access, it made things a lot harder for Chris in more ways than one.

He wasn't used to men giving themselves over to him, leaving themselves at his mercy. Chris usually found *himself* at others' mercy—men, women, it didn't matter as long as he submitted to another's whims. He had never had anyone submit to his.

"If you're not going to shuck my clothes, then at least shuck yours." James leaned up on his elbows and slowly ran his tongue along his full bottom lip. "I want to see you. Now," he murmured.

Chris reached for the buttons on his shirt with shaky fingers, then hesitated.

He wasn't normally shy about undressing in front of anyone, especially someone he planned to have sex with. He had sex so often over the years he had come to think of it as his job. He hadn't had anything invested with those other people, though, nothing emotional.

With James, he did, at least on his part. And he wanted there to be more, much more.

James put a hand on his arm and rubbed up and down in a way that should have been soothing but that excited Chris even more. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

"I want to. More than anything."

James arched a brow as if to say *then what's the hold up?* He reclined back on the bed in his former relaxed position and waited.

Chris silently commended the man's patience at the same time he mentally kicked himself for his own hypocrisy. He'd told James he wasn't afraid. Well, it was about time for him to live up to that bold forswearing.

"Well? Have at it, boy."

Chris finished unbuttoning his borrowed shirt, pulled it over his head, and tossed it.

Troy's woodsy aroma lingered in the air around him, and he closed his eyes to inhale deeply, trying his darnedest to keep the man in the room with him and James in some form.

Straddling James' ankles, Chris crawled up the mattress until his face hovered over James' crotch. He licked his lips, glancing at James through lowered lashes while heat crept up and warmed his cheeks. He closed his eyes against the lightheadedness. If being this close to tasting James left him so woozy, what would he do when he had James inside him?

*I'll probably die.*

What a sweet death it would be, though.

James reached up and cupped his cheek before sliding his hand to Chris' nape and caressing the hair that fell over his hand. "So soft. Like a baby's."

Chris swallowed hard, thinking that there was nothing at all soft about the man beneath him and wondering how he was supposed to handle him.

He concentrated on unfastening the buttons on James' pants to take his mind off of the monumental task ahead of him, his own britches becoming tighter and tighter in the crotch area the more he unfastened James'.

James pushed up on his heels and lifted his hips to help Chris take off his britches and long johns then must have finally lost his patience because he sat up to unbutton and shuck his own shirt.

Chris sat back on his haunches to look at the man sitting naked on the bed in front of him, and his heart pounded wildly.

No other word came to mind to describe the marshal except magnificent. Unclothed, his broad chest looked like a powerful mahogany wall covered in skin that Chris wanted to lick.

He followed the path of muscles tapering down to a slim waist and farther down where James' lean, impressively muscled legs seemed to stretch out in front of him with no end.

"Get your fill?"

"Not by far." He looked James in the eyes. "You're beautiful."

James frowned. "Don't reckon I've ever been called that before."

"You are."

"Take off your britches, young'un. I want to see the rest of you and how beautiful *you* are."

"Ch—Chris. Call me Chris."

James grinned. "Take off your britches...Chris."

He reached for the buttons on his pants without taking his gaze off of James. Chris pleased himself looking at James' chiseled stomach muscles. His gaze just barely glanced over the brown cock jutting toward the ceiling, but not so fast that he didn't notice the pearl of liquid gathered at the slit.

His hands itched to touch the hard shaft. His mouth watered with wanting to lick the ridges leading up to the smooth head and that tempting liquid. He wanted to adore James the way a man like him deserved to be adored.

Chris lifted his gaze from James' lap to find the marshal watching him intently.

James smiled and reached for his cock, moaning and smearing the liquid around the head of it with his thumb as if to spruce up his already appealing member.

"Come here, Chris."

Naked and on his knees, he went to James as ordered.

On his knees now, too, James bracketed Chris' face with both hands to draw him closer. He bent his head in what was becoming a more and more familiar act of possession than Chris could have ever imagined.

He wanted to be possessed by James in every way and had his wish when James' fingers tightened slightly in his hair. James urged

Chris' head back, forcing him to arch his neck before he kissed and sucked the spot right over Chris' pulse-point and sent tremors rushing throughout his body.

Chris shuddered in James' embrace, drawing his own arms up around James' back as James tumbled him down onto the mattress on his back again.

"I want you so much it hurts."

"Hurts me, too." *Hurt me so good, James. Please.*

James put his mouth on Chris', thrusting his tongue in like he owned Chris, every part of him. His hands roamed as he took his fill of Chris' mouth, smoothing over Chris' chest down to his cock. He gently squeezed Chris' full-to-bursting balls as if testing Chris' stamina.

Chris whimpered when James dragged his mouth from Chris' to latch on to a nipple. He licked and sucked until Chris writhed beneath him. Chris wrapped his arms around James and clutched so tight he thought he might squeeze the life out of him.

James showed no signs of slowing down or dying out, though. Instead, he intensified his efforts. He broke from Chris' hold and kissed a path down to Chris' penis standing at full mast.

James paused, then took the organ with his tongue the same way he had taken Chris' mouth—with authority and passion.

Chris bucked his hips, his entire lower body feeling like it was on fire. "Please, James..."

James answered the plea by sliding a hand down to Chris' bottom before he slipped a finger into Chris' anus and slowly turned it.

Chris bore down on the digit, wriggling to impale himself farther as James added another finger and pushed passed the first ring of muscles to delve deeper. He bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out. He moaned instead at the sweet invasion, eyes fluttering and rolling up into his head at the burning sensation of being partly filled.

"More. I can take more. Please..." He hadn't begged anyone to take him before, always just praying that the man or woman he had

sex with wouldn't hurt him out of spite, always afraid of being rejected for being himself.

He didn't think James would spurn him like the others had. Chris hoped he wouldn't. He prayed. He didn't think he could take seeing the disgust in James' eyes that he had seen in the eyes of those 'hands who had tried to brand him. James pushed the self-pitying thoughts out of Chris' mind when he curved his fingers and pressed against something inside Chris that made him scream.

James slapped his free hand over Chris' mouth just as another howl rose up from outside as if in commiseration.

"Think you can keep it down a mite?" James asked, but there was no censure in his voice, just a touch of amusement. Chris nodded, and when James took his hand away, he gasped at the climax that continued to crash through him in rippling swells.

"What did you do to me?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Chris watched as James lathered his cock with soap and water from the basin on the nightstand, heartbeat speeding when he realized what James set to do. Now that the moment had arrived, and as desperately as he wanted James, he wasn't sure he was ready.

"Don't vex yourself. I'll be as gentle as I can be. Trust me?"

Chris wordlessly nodded as James planted his palms on the mattress on either side of him and hooked Chris' knees over each well-muscled arm.

James lifted Chris and spread his legs enough to accommodate his width. "Relax yourself now and take a deep breath." He nudged Chris' back hole with the head of his penis, pushing past the first ring of muscles the way he had with his fingers, but this time the anticipation of being penetrated proved stronger, the burning sensation more intense.

Chris had never had anyone as big as James. He'd never wanted anyone as much neither.

"You okay?"

Chris nodded again and took a deep breath as he'd been instructed to.

James leaned in and brushed his lips over Chris', tracing Chris' mouth with his tongue before he thrust past the final ring of inner muscles barring his entry.

Chris gasped, and James swallowed the sound with an eating kiss that stole more of Chris' breath away before James circled his hips and thrust again.

"Oh, God...James!" Chris clutched James' shoulders just short of digging in his nails. He moved his hips to take James deeper.

James buried Chris' cries beneath another hard, lingering kiss. This time, however, he didn't take his mouth away as he drove into Chris. He sank deep before pulling back and sinking in once more until he touched that spot inside Chris again.

Chris pushed his tongue out to meet James', for the first time acting the aggressor as another climax overwhelmed him. His spirits spurted onto his stomach as James continued to pound above him until he gained his own release in a quaking explosion.

Slick with perspiration and panting, James rested his forehead against Chris' for a long moment before pulling back to stare at him.

"Still okay?"

"More than okay," Chris whispered and kissed James.

Outside, the wolf bayed.

## Chapter 6

“What in tarnation happened to you?”

Troy brushed by Josie on the staircase leading to the upstairs rooms without speaking. He should have known he couldn’t get away with such impoliteness, but he hadn’t anticipated bumping into anyone this late in the evening, not even the ever-vigilant Josie.

“You heard me, mister.” She caught him by the bicep and jerked him back around to face her. “What happened to you?”

Troy didn’t know what to tell her. He knew he couldn’t tell her the truth and wasn’t sure what else she would believe.

That he had stumbled into another wolf’s territory in the woods and decided to stand his ground rather than retreat and play it safe like he usually did with wild animals didn’t sound believable despite its truth.

How much of her woman’s intuition would accept the truth or think he was making up crazy tall tales?

“Is that blood?”

Josie pointed to a spot on his chin, and he remembered how he’d fought for his life, defended himself against the other wolf’s vicious attack. He remembered how he’d bitten into the lone wolf who’d had the misfortune of challenging him. He remembered how they’d clawed and snarled at each other as savagely as a person wielding a meat axe.

It had been the first time he’d fought with another animal while in his wolf form. He’d always tried to avoid confrontations, one, for fear that he’d never survive a scrape with a truly wild animal and not just a shifter, and, two, for fear of being discovered by one of the Indian



tribes. That he'd survived this long without detection proved a testament to his caution and skill. He knew also that luck had been on his side.

Before tonight, he'd never wondered if there were others like him. Now he did. The Indians even had a designation for people like him, so surely, he wasn't the only *skinwalker*—couldn't be. There must be others—somewhere.

"It's not my blood."

"What's the other feller looking like?"

"He's a little the worse for wear."

"Don't say."

"It's not serious."

"Did you catch up with that young'un of yours?"

Troy peered at her as she dropped her hand from his arm with the change of subject. "He's not my young'un."

"You want him to be, don't you?"

"What I want and what's reality are two different things."

Josie frowned and put a hand on her hip. "Well, what bee got in your bonnet since you left here?"

Troy pressed a thumb and forefinger against the bridge of his nose and squeezed, suddenly overcome with a bone-deep weariness he hadn't even seen coming.

He could still smell them, could smell their lovemaking despite the blood that still filled his senses from the fight.

Oh, how he had wanted to be a part of it, how it had pained him to be on the outside of that house and know what was going on inside without any recourse except to howl his outrage at the moon.

It wasn't like he could go up to the door, knock, and ask for the marshal and his guest. He didn't have a reason like Chris had. He certainly didn't have the gumption of the kid.

Where had it gone? He'd been as fearless once when he hadn't had anything to lose, when he'd been desperate for acceptance and love.

He remembered how he'd wanted to thank Josiah for his kindness the same way Chris wanted to thank James—right and proper. He remembered how Josiah had gently but firmly turned him down, too.

*"I'm powerful flattered, boy, but I'm an old coot, too old for you. Maybe twenty years ago...Besides, there are rules against what you're offering. Much as I want to, I cain't, boy. I just cain't..."*

Now he owned a successful saloon and led the life of a law-abiding citizen. He'd settled down and couldn't remember what it was like to yearn for somebody so much it turned him inside out the way Josiah had. He couldn't remember what it had been like to be out on the road for weeks and months at a time, tracking a quarry—that is when he wasn't quarry himself—with no one to answer to *but* himself. Back then, he hadn't cared about or valued anything or anyone more complex than his next bounty or his next meal, so he hadn't feared losing anything.

He did now. He feared losing everything he had amassed during and because of his cavalier days. He cared about losing something he hadn't even gained yet, but it was something he wanted almost as much as he wanted to go back and change what had happened to his father.

"Troy, tell me what's wrong." Josie put a gentle hand on his arm and waited.

"There's nothing wrong." He patted Josie's hand and gently removed it from his arm before heading for his room. He hoped she took his cue and didn't follow.

When he made it to his room unharassed, Troy closed and locked the door, just to be on the safe side. Fully dressed, he collapsed on the bed and unwillingly revisited his discussion with Josie.

There was nothing wrong at all except that he was having second thoughts about his life and his place in the world.

For most of his existence since his parents' deaths, all he'd wanted was a place to belong, a place where no one judged him or

looked at him as if he were a menace or a pervert. He'd thought he found this at Wolf Creek, but now he wondered.

What would happen to everything he'd built if he got involved with Chris or James or both? And who was to say that either man would willingly risk their own standing to be with him? Would either of them think the risk they took to be with each other worth the same risk it took to be with him?

He supposed he wouldn't know anything unless he outright asked them. The worse that could happen was either man would say no.

What if they didn't? Could he be with them without being honest about his beast? Would his beast allow him to have a normal relationship without letting its existence be known?

It hadn't so far, but then he had never been involved with anyone beyond the time it took him to find his release. He had never been in a relationship beyond the superficial. He had never found anyone that made him think about forever. The thought of revealing himself to two men he wasn't about to kill, but two men that he wanted to make love to instead, sent a shiver of pure terror through him that he had never imagined before.

He'd thought he'd experienced the most paralyzing fear of his life when he'd had to confront Jack with his desire to leave the gang more than a decade ago. He'd done everything he could not to reveal his animal. Jack, however, had forced his hand. To this day, he remembered the look of shock on the older man's face, the look of horror when Troy had finally shifted and stood before Jack, growling and baring his long canines. Jack let him leave. He'd had no choice, but he hadn't allowed Troy's defection without a fight. Troy bore the bullet wounds to prove it.

He'd licked his injuries, literally, and survived to see another day. He'd moved on.

Had he not been so eager to bury his past and forget the old miner, Josiah Maynard, he never would have fallen in with the Baird gang. Troy had been blinded by pain and the loss of what could have been.

And Jack had come along at just the right time, preying on Troy's loneliness and pain like the predator he was.

Troy understood all that now, but back then, no one could tell him that Jack didn't like him just for him, that Jack had less-than-honorable intentions.

He didn't want to be that man to Chris and knew that if he forced himself into the middle of what was going on with the kid and the marshal, he could be seen as the bad guy.

Normally, Troy would have gone out for a run, let his wolf out to take off the edge, but he'd already done that and it hadn't helped. It had only made things worse.

He needed to be patient and bide his time.

They would come to him.

The wolf inside felt it, and the wolf had never led him astray when he bothered to listen.

\* \* \* \*

The boy jerked awake in his arms, screaming about a wolf coming to get him.

James clamped a hand over Chris' mouth as gently as possible and whispered soothingly in his ear. He brushed a loose tendril of hair behind the boy's ear and kissed his temple.

"I won't let the wolf get you. You're safe here. Shh."

Had Chris seen the same wolf in his sleep that James had met out at the lake?

James shook his head at the impossibility, still not sure himself about what had happened to him at the lake. Still not sure he had seen the wolf at all.

He pulled Chris closer, holding him tight until his trembling slowed before finally stopping. He loosened his grasp to let the boy turn in his arms and face him.

A pair of startlingly blue eyes stared up at him, blinking as the boy appeared to get his bearings.

James watched him lick his lips, and his critter jerked below, instantly awake. He cleared his throat before saying, "Troy is probably worried about you."

"I know. I need to get back to Barrow's today. I feel like I've taken advantage of Troy's kindness already, especially in not coming back to help out at the bar."

"I'm sure he'll make out okay." Business-wise, anyway, James thought. Emotionally, he wasn't so sure how Troy made out. He knew if Chris belonged to him, he'd be a mite upset if he just up and disappeared, even if it was on the pretense of a goodwill *mission*.

"I'll escort you back to Wolf Creek so he'll know you made out okay."

"Would you?"

"If you want me to."

"I do."

James frowned at the young'un's eagerness. He wondered what he had up his sleeve.

He didn't seem to have any reservations about James and Troy being in the same space together, but then why should he? It wasn't like he betrayed a spouse being with James. Maybe in his heart he felt like he *had* cheated, at least on Troy's kindness.

Did he prefer Troy over James? Had he been with Troy already to even know the differences between the two men?

James doubted it. He couldn't see the bar owner letting the boy out of his sight for so long so soon after they had been together. He knew he wouldn't, which proved why he wanted to accompany the boy back to town.

If he wanted to be honest with himself, he had to admit a mite curiosity on his part, too—curiosity and *hunger*.

He wanted to see Troy again. He wanted to see if the feeling that had shot through him the other night at the bar when he'd laid his

gaze on the saloon owner proved as strong now as it had then. He wanted to know if his feelings proved mutual.

Not that any feelings for Troy diminished what he felt for Chris, even though he wasn't exactly sure what feelings he felt—not yet.

James bent his head and kissed Chris' upturned nose. "We'd better get to going, then."

Chris laughed and pulled himself out of James' grip to get out of bed.

James leaned up on his elbow, chin cupped in the palm of his hand as he watched the boy walk across the room to retrieve his clothes.

Naked, the young'un took away James' breath the same way those wide blue eyes and honey-blond hair did. Slight, at about five-foot-nine, several inches shorter than James' own six-foot-three, and at least fifty pounds lighter, Chris nonetheless proved to be made of sturdy stuff. His lean muscles stretched taut under his smooth, tawny skin flexed and rippled as he bent over to pull on his long johns.

James knew that Chris was aware of his scrutiny when the little firebrand wiggled his hips in such a way that made James' mouth water as he watched the way the material clung to the boy's round, tight rump. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard at the memory of how he had pounded inside that hot rear end last night and into the wee hours of the morning, how the warm squeeze of Chris' inner muscles had felt around his hard shaft. The young'un had been so willing last night and showed no signs of embarrassment this morning.

"Enjoying yourself?" James blurted.

Chris turned to him with an encouraging, lopsided grin lighting his face. "Are you?"

"Not as much as I'd like to." James pulled back the covers and patted the mattress beside him, trying to ignore the bruises covering Chris' ribs. Asking him what had happened rested on the tip of his

tongue, but he couldn't summon the words, saying instead, "We've got a little time before we have to be on our way."

Chris' eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

He looked so unsure of himself all of a sudden, as if he expected James wanted to throw him out rather than cuddle.

Is that what usually happened to him? James wouldn't be surprised. Young kid like him, so open and honest. He was just the perfect candidate for being taken advantage of and hurt by the wrong people.

Besides the one or ones responsible for putting the bruises on him, how many wrong people had Chris come across in his short years, and had they totally ruined him for a relationship with anyone, much less him and Troy? Odd, how he instinctively thought of the three of them together, as if they were all meant to be, as if they had all discussed what lived between them and already agreed on what to do about it.

James wondered if the situation would be more workable if Chris and Troy were female. Would it be any more acceptable for him to have designs on a relationship with two women instead of the two men he found himself so attracted to?

He knew the answer intrinsically. What he was thinking about nurturing, even with one man, would be frowned upon by everyone he knew. They were ideas and desires that could get a man killed, especially himself, with his two crosses to bear—respect and position notwithstanding.

When Chris crawled back into the bed beside him, wrapping his arms around James to cuddle close, James' throat clogged, and all thoughts of repercussions flew out the window.

He knew he would do whatever it took to be with Chris and Troy, too, if the saloon owner proved willing to take a chance. He knew there was something there, something he wanted to explore with both men.

For the first time in his life, James didn't want to worry about what others might think or how his behavior would affect his

reputation. For once, he had serious ideas about settling down with someone, maybe two someones, and balancing his profession with a personal life.

He felt as excited at the thought of flouting authority and tradition and going after what he wanted as he did at the prospect of a good fugitive hunt. He knew the feeling would be ten times better when he got his man this time than it ever had before.

James gingerly returned Chris' hug for fear of hurting the boy's ribs, instantly regretting how rough he'd been the night before, even if Chris hadn't complained. Several times he had come close last night to asking the young'un what had happened to him, but he had kept his pie-hole shut for fear of ruining the moment. He didn't want to cause the boy anymore discomfort than he already experienced.

*Coward.*

Ignoring the self-castigations, James placed his lips over the Chris', holding back as much as he could. The kiss proved leisurely at first before James wanted more and pushed his tongue past Chris' parted lips into his willing mouth.

They attacked each other hungrily. James' hands buried in Chris' honey-blond locks before trailing down his body until he reached the young'un's nipples. He caressed a swollen, tight little nub with his thumb, instinctively circling the nipple and skin around it until Chris groaned into his mouth and pressed against him.

Chris rubbed his erection on James, and the friction he produced near 'bout sent James through the roof. Before he could flip Chris onto his back, though, Chris tumbled James onto his back and climbed on top of him.

"Bossy little thing, aren't you?"

"I wanna taste you."

James arched a brow, hiding his pleasure behind his tough lawman's façade. "Have at it, young'un."

"Chris. Call me Chris." He delivered the words with much more confidence than he had before, and James grinned.



He reached out to touch Chris' hair, habitually pushing a loose strand behind the boy's ear and cupping the base of his skull. James closed his eyes as he caressed the downy hair at the nape of Chris' neck. "I reckon I could play with your hair all day."

"I reckon I'd let you."

James grinned again, bringing his free hand up to join the other in Chris' hair. He gently fisted the locks and drew Chris in for a hard kiss. He released Chris and pulled away after an endless moment.

"I'm wanting to feel your mouth on my cock now," James rasped and watched as Chris' pupils dilated before he closed his own eyes. He heard the young'un's breath hitch in his chest, too. From his reactions, he knew that Chris liked him giving orders as long as it was for something he wanted to do anyway. James sensed the boy's tough backbone and thought if Chris really objected he would say so.

Good. He didn't want a doormat. And he already knew he wouldn't get one in Troy, either.

James' eyes popped open, and he gasped when Chris licked the head of his penis. The rascal had slid down his body when James wasn't looking.

"Wait." He quickly reached for the wash cloth in the basin of water beside the bed and squeezed some of the water out before handing it to Chris.

Chris smiled, his movements almost reverent as he washed James' shaft from root and balls to tip before replacing the wash cloth in the basin.

James' hands automatically went to Chris' head again to guide him. Not that the boy needed much guidance. His lips wrapped around James' freshly cleaned erection as if he had done it a thousand times before and knew exactly how James liked to be sucked. He circled the smooth head, licking the liquid from the slit of James' penis before he swallowed him whole.

James stiffened, caught in the grip of powerful lust as Chris moved his mouth up and down his shaft. Chris simultaneously pumped it with his hand while he sucked.

James palmed the back of Chris' head. "God, boy...don't stop."

Chris did stop, but only long enough to lick James' balls before he pulled the full weight of each testicle into his mouth and sucked until James growled deep in his throat.

"Want you. Want you now."

Chris quickly moved back to James' shaft, and by the time his lips reached the base, James proved ready to explode. Seconds later, he released in the cavern of Chris' welcoming mouth, his member throbbing and pulsing as Chris sucked him off.

When James finally opened his eyes several moments later, it was to the alarming sight of Chris' solemn face. He didn't look like a man who had entirely enjoyed his experience, but his next words explained some of his expression.

"I missed the wolf," Chris whispered.

James heard the wonder in his voice, as if the boy was shocked by his own words. "I did, too." Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part, but James had a feeling the animal wasn't too far away even if they hadn't heard him.

His gut instincts, which had never steered him wrong before, told him that they would be seeing the wolf, and very soon.

## Chapter 7

Troy felt the two men long before he heard their horses gallop to a stop outside. His beast had sensed them before they entered the town proper—and another figure shadowing them at a far enough distance that the two men weren't aware. His beast proved aware and recognized the figure on a level bone-deep.

Had Cain decided to make his move and come out of the shadows to finally avenge Jack? Had he been the presence in the woods that Troy felt the other evening after he'd left James?

Troy stood still, stopped rubbing his rag over the bar top, and imagined the two men outside tying off their horses to the hitching post. He inhaled and caught their road-influenced pine scents before the doors swung open and they entered the saloon.

Troy's eyes flew open as Chris crossed the floor toward the bar, looking so small, vulnerable, and young walking next to the colored marshal flanking him. He caught his breath at the sight of them. He had forgotten how striking each man was in his own way.

Where Chris demonstrated light and sunshine and innocence, James demonstrated raw experience and power, dark desires and secrets. They were the flip side of a coin that Troy wanted to put in his pocket, keep next to him and never spend, just own forever.

Schooling his features, he cleared his throat as the men moseyed on up to the bar. Troy found it hard to maintain his poker face when Chris leaned his elbows on the bar. Temptation made him lean forward to meet the kid halfway, and only the most monumental effort made him stop before he kissed Chris. As it stood, they looked like they were in the midst of a private confab, foreheads almost

kissing. This close, he got a good whiff of the boy's pure, natural scent. He wanted to reach out and touch his face the way he had stopped himself from doing yesterday.

He had kept himself from doing a lot yesterday before loaning the boy one of his horses to visit the marshal. After that ill-advised kiss, good sense had prevailed and stopped him cold from doing anything more intimate or from being bad.

He didn't want to be good anymore, not if it involved not having Chris and James.

"So I reckon you were able to extend your thanks to the marshal?" Troy glanced over Chris' shoulder at James as James pulled off his hat, revealing the short, dark hair he sported beneath. Like he wanted to palm Chris' almost smooth cheek, Troy wanted nothing more than to run his hands over the marshal's wavy hair and see if it proved as cottony soft as it appeared.

"I reckon I did."

Troy's heart skipped at the boy's teasing tone. If he didn't know better, he'd swear the kid flirted with him. Why not, after the kiss they'd shared?

How would Chris feel about Troy's beast? Would it frighten him off? Should he introduce the boy to his animal the same way he had introduced him to James, ease him into the idea of being close to the wolf? Not that seeing the wolf as a separate entity would ever compare to seeing Troy actually shift from human to wolf form or vice versa.

The Indians who had attacked his home when he'd been a boy were convinced he was evil. Would Chris and James think the same?

The idea that they would be disgusted by him, that they would see him as less than a human or not deserving love, pierced his soul where only the deaths of his parents had wounded him before. This, more than anything, proved why he hadn't revealed his past to Josie. He knew she wouldn't be able to accept what he became, what he could do. When he got right down to brass tacks, would anyone?

“I apologize for staying away so long. We—”

“You can blame me for keeping him.” James finally stepped forward and leaned one elbow on the bar, keeping the other half of his body aimed at the swinging doors so that he could see whoever entered—the vigilant posture of a true lawman or an outlaw used to running from the law. He wasn’t like Chris, who kept his back to the doors and all his attention on Troy.

He wanted to cuff the kid for being so careless and would have if he wasn’t so busy being flattered by the attention. Besides, he and James had the boy’s back.

Funny that he considered them all a team. After the other night, Troy knew that James lived to protect the weak and would never let anything happen to Chris on his watch, the same way Troy wouldn’t.

“I’m just glad he’s safe,” Troy said finally.

“I reckon.”

“I’m ready for you to put me to work,” Chris said.

Troy had work in mind, all right, but it wasn’t anything that could be done in the mixed company of his saloon and everything to do with why he wanted the two men in the privacy of his own room, or even at the lake.

Troy had a sudden vision of the three of them together, naked, and had to close his eyes against what he saw because it proved so powerful.

He came around some time later to Chris calling his name and shaking his arm. He couldn’t even be sure of how long he’d been away. It could have been seconds, minutes, or an hour. When he finally opened his eyes to focus on Chris and then James, it was to their concerned expressions—Chris’ wide blue eyes and James deep-set brandy eyes.

He wanted to tell them how much he needed them, but how did he go about it when they were both practically strangers to him, kiss notwithstanding. He still didn’t know how James felt about

everything or what had transpired between him and Chris other than sex.

“You okay, Troy?”

He stared at James and nodded. He stood straight, then waved a hand and summoned Josie when he saw her descending the staircase several feet away.

She looked as lovely as ever, and he couldn’t help wondering why God had made him the way he’d turned out. Why did he like men instead of women? He could have settled down and easily been with Josie, living together and running a business, and no one would ever bat an eye. The only way he could be with James and Chris would be behind closed doors, in the dark and secret, never walking down the middle of town in the sunlight, holding hands for the world to see.

Wasn’t Troy used to hiding and running by now, though? He had been doing both all his life. From the Indians who wanted him dead, from the law...from himself.

He had stopped running. Wasn’t it time he stopped hiding?

“What can I do for you?”

Troy smiled at Josie’s amiable tone as she stood poised between Chris and James, and that was saying something since they stood so close to each other.

Josie’s floral scent floated around them now, cloying, nothing like the musky, masculine aroma of Chris and James and doing nothing for Troy.

He leaned in nonetheless, and once Josie did, too, he said, “I need a favor.”

“You and your favors.” She threw up her hands as if exasperated, but she had a smile on her face. “What is it?”

“Can you and the girls take care of the bar for me until I get back?”

“And when will that be?” Josie put a hand on her hip and aimed a wink at the two men waiting for Troy.

Troy followed her gaze, that moment coming to a decision that he knew would change the course of the rest of his life. "I'm not sure yet. If not tonight before closing, then probably some time tomorrow." He gave her a friendly peck on the cheek and left his cloth on the bar top.

"Yeah, yeah, trying to butter me up for the next time. I know your game, mister."

Troy chuckled as he came from behind the bar.

Both Chris and James arched their brows at him in question.

"Let's go for a ride, gentleman. I believe we've got some things to talk about." He needed to get things off his chest in more privacy than the bar or even his room afforded. And he knew just the place to do it.

Troy took the lead and sauntered toward the swinging doors. That James and Chris followed without argument proved a good sign. At least Troy took it as one.

They all unhitched and mounted their horses in unison and again, Troy led the way, this time out of town. Adrenaline rushed through his body at the sound of two sets of hoof beats behind him, and it lightened his heart to know that he wasn't alone in the world, at least not in this.

During the entire scenic, hour-long ride to the forest near the lake, no one exchanged a word. Troy was afraid that speaking would break the spell or convince the other two men that they were making a mistake in following him without question, in trusting him.

He hoped they at least enjoyed the lush burnished-gold and green landscape en route.

Right then Troy realized why he had confronted James where he had last evening. He must have wanted to share a little of nature's gift with someone other than the other four-legged beasts he occasionally found himself surrounded by.

When he thought about it, even they kept their distance from him, instinctively knowing that he was different and not *like* them. They'd never attacked him the way the wolf had last night, and they didn't

mingle. It made him wonder *why* the wolf attacked him last night. What made him so bold and unlike his brethren? Or had there been something about Troy that incited the other animal?

Once they reached the hidden cove, Troy dismounted and watched his horse go and take a sip from the lake.

He turned as James and Chris dismounted.

James put his fists on his hips and took a deep breath as he surveyed the area around him with a speculative look in his eyes.

By the time James brought his gaze to Troy, Troy knew he had done the right thing in bringing him and Chris to his favorite spot in the world. Troy came to this place whenever he needed to think or get away from it all. Until last night when he'd confronted James in his wolf form and before he'd been attacked, he'd always found safety and solace in this cove.

That he chose to bring James and Chris here proved how much he trusted them. He just hoped his trust wasn't misplaced.

"It was you last night."

Troy's breath hitched in his chest at James' quiet words, his knowing look. He didn't consider himself a coward, but he thought if he had seen anything but acceptance and awe glowing out of the marshal's brandy eyes, he might have turned tail and run. However, the non-accusatory expression gave him some confidence.

He stood a little straighter, silently nodding.

"You're a Skinwalker."

"Y—you've heard of my kind?"

"I lived and worked among a number of tribes in Indian Territory for several years. I picked up a thing or two."

And it was then that Troy noticed the small wood carving hanging around James' neck—a wolf with his head flung back in a pose as if he howled at the moon.

"What are you two talking about?" Chris came to stand beside James, glance darting between him and Troy and back again. "What about last night? What's a Skinwalker?"



“I’ll show him,” Troy murmured. His heart lodged in his throat as he took several steps away from the two men and slowly began to shuck his clothes.

He studied each man during the entire process, and by the time he got down to his skin—boots, hat, and a puddle of clothes at his feet—he had their rapt attention.

He could well understand their interest, considering his critter jutted straight out from his groin, hard and totally aroused with the tip weeping.

Troy turned from the two men and concentrated. He couldn’t help thinking he might have been off his mental reservation for doing what he was about to do. He couldn’t stop himself, either. He trusted the moment, and something about being around Chris and James made him feel indestructible and untouchable.

He took a deep breath and willed the change. Over the decades, he had become adept at completing it almost instantly. Though the pain proved a given and inescapable, he had learned to ignore the bone crunching and popping so that it didn’t affect his focus overly so.

Several breathless moments later, he stood before the men on all fours, completely changed and waiting as if for approval.

James spoke first, words bursting from his lungs in a long sigh of wonder rather than shock and disbelief. “My Lord...”

“The wolf,” Chris whispered.

Troy turned his look on the kid, barked once and trotted over. He expected Chris to turn and run. The kid didn’t. Whether fear froze his legs or if he genuinely wanted to stay, Troy couldn’t tell until he reached the kid and caught his scent.

Chris wasn’t afraid. Troy sensed it. He smelled more inquisitiveness on him than any fear.

Chris reached out his hand, and Troy took several more steps until he was close enough to push his head against Chris’ palm.

Troy’s chest puffed up with pride when he heard the intake of Chris’ breath, then he shuddered with pleasure at the feel of the kid’s

fingers stroking and then burying in his fur. He growled deep in his throat, pleased when Chris didn't jerk away. Instead, he continued petting him.

"I dreamed about you." He looked up from his crouch to James. "How?"

So many questions inhabited that one word. Troy had asked himself the same question and more so many times. How? Why him?

James cleared his throat as if in answer. "The Navajo believe that there are witches who can imitate any animal they choose to be—a cat, a coyote, a bear, anything." His tone proved as reverential and sincere as Chris' expression proved spellbound. He crouched beside Chris, burying his hand in Troy's pelt, too, and Troy closed his eyes and rumbled deep in his throat. "It's been said that the Navajo witch picks his skins for the ability he needs to exhibit. Wolves are known for their cunning, intelligence, and loyalty, among other things."

Troy barked once to indicate his agreement.

"If the witch is intelligent when he shifts, he'll carry that intelligence with him into his animal form. Skinwalkers have also been known to stalk the night wearing their animal skin, looking for unsuspecting victims to hurt..."

Troy popped open his eyes and barked twice.

He'd learned about the Navajo witches from Josiah.

Josiah had found Troy aimlessly roaming around near his cabin, injured and bleeding in his wolf form after the Indians had attacked Troy's house.

Josiah showed no fear and seemed to know exactly what to do for Troy to help him heal, which wasn't much except give Troy a clean and quiet space to let his body do its own work. Like James, he wasn't shocked to see Troy shift. He seemed to accept that there were creatures on this earth like Troy who did not mean anyone any harm despite his strangeness. Josiah proved unlike the Indians who'd attacked his home, assuming he meant harm to all.

James deepened his kneading, his fingers at once firm and gentle around the scruff of Troy's neck. "I reckon we're dealing with something a little different from most Skinwalkers, though. This fella here is something the Lord made, not magic or witchcraft, and he wouldn't hurt a fly that didn't hurt him first."

"I know." Chris solemnly nodded.

Troy barked once and settled onto his side, delighting in the sensation of being massaged and fondled in kindness. He hadn't felt so accepted and loved since Josiah had taken him and nursed him back to health, subsequently taking Troy under his protective wing. Josiah had understood what he was, understood his sexual proclivities as well as his animal.

He'd learned so much from Josiah, especially how to hide his nature—both aspects.

The old miner had been taken away from him much too soon.

"I've heard tell of Skinwalkers using witchcraft and mind control to make their victims hurt or even kill themselves," James stated.

"Not him."

James looked at Troy and shook his head. "Not him."

"Are all Skinwalkers...bad?"

"It depends on what tribe you listen to. Most Navajos deem them evil. There are other tribes that believe the Skinwalker shapeshifts to escape the horror of discrimination. Still others say the Skinwalker is a medicine man, a healer, not someone who harms."

Chris cupped Troy's muzzle with both hands. "Will you change back for us now?"

Troy barked once, stood on all fours, stepped back, and began the process of shifting to his human form, aware of James and Chris' extreme interest the whole while.

A few moments later, he stood before them on two shaky legs, naked and skin still tingling. The thrill of shifting, the rush he got going from one form to the other proved more intense when done under the watchful gazes of Chris and James. He liked the feeling, the

exhilaration. He felt like he had when he'd been a young teen and had originally discovered what he could do.

The first time he'd changed he'd been thirteen years old. He'd been shocked and afraid that he wouldn't change back—be human again—but more terrified that he had done something to cause the change. He'd heard the sermons on Sundays when Ma and Pa took him to church. He understood right, wrong, and perversion and thought God punished him for wanting to love who he wanted to love. He thought God punished him for being an aberration.

His father knew Troy was different but tried to deny it, ignoring the signs of his son's proclivities. And despite Troy being small for his age, or maybe because of it, Pa chose instead to teach him how to handle a gun, hunt, and use his fists. He chose to teach his son how to protect himself, his family and property—how to be a *man*.

*"You can't be soft in this world, boy. Especially not out here. You have to know how to defend yourself, how to fight..."*

Troy heard the arguments, too, between Ma and Pa, how Pa thought Ma mollicoddled him and treated him like a baby with all the hugging and kissing.

*"You're going to make him into a nancy-boy, Rose. You gotta cut the apron strings and stop fussing over him so much."*

*"He's my baby boy, my only baby."*

*"He's almost a man, Rose. Out here, he's a man."*

By the following year his mother had died, his father had taken over the mollicoddling, and Troy had undergone his first change.

He understood what his father tried to do, how he didn't want Troy to hurt or be hurt.

He couldn't protect Troy from himself, though. No one could do that but Troy.

Neither James nor Chris said anything now, just watched him, their fierce gazes heating his skin like twin flames, making him flush. Troy imagined his whole body beet red from their interest.

*"You're beautiful,"* Chris murmured.

Troy didn't think he could be any more uneasy until James stepped beside Chris and wrapped his arm around Chris' shoulders. He looked at the teasing grin James sported beneath his mustache and got hard.

"I thought you said *I* was beautiful."

Chris blushed and tilted his head back to look at James. "You *are* beautiful. You both are." He lowered his gaze to include Troy.

Troy's heart tightened in his chest watching Chris, watching both men. They looked so right together, so contented and in love.

Did they have room between them for him?

As if reading his mind, Chris eased out of James' grasp and took the taller man's hand in his before leading him over to Troy.

No one could have told Troy that Chris wasn't the one pulling the strings in the relationship, that he wasn't the one in control. Smaller and younger he may have been, but it remained obvious that he had James and Troy wrapped around his smaller and younger finger.

The kid presented more of a threat to Troy's sanity and well-being than any Indian, vengeful outlaw with a grudge, or a marshal who might or might not have remembered Troy from his lawless days.

Right then and there, Troy realized he was in a mess of trouble.

## Chapter 8

“Please don’t.” Chris caught Troy’s arm as he bent and tried to retrieve his clothes. He had to stop himself from fondling the hard biceps that flexed beneath his fingers and made him eager to explore more. “I want to look at you.” Chris glanced at James a couple of steps away and saw him nod his agreement. It emboldened him to go on. “*We* want to look at you.” The color that flooded Troy’s already slightly tanned complexion made Chris’ heart pound. He liked seeing someone else blush for a change, liked putting the boot on the other foot.

Troy stood, switching his weight from one leg to the other, and folded his well-muscled arms over his chiseled chest as if he didn’t know what else to do with his limbs.

Chris rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets as he took his visual fill, enjoying the view of Troy’s tall, lean body unclothed. He enjoyed looking at all that skin he couldn’t wait to run his hands over.

His palms itched at the idea of touching Troy and feeling the rasp of chest hair beneath his fingers. It wasn’t overwhelming, just an all-over dusting highlighted by a pleasant sprinkling that tapered down the middle of Troy’s rock-hard stomach and farther arrowed to the nest of chestnut curls where his arousal jutted.

Chris licked his lips, hungry for a taste.

“I have to admit, I’m plumb lost as to what you want me to do now.”

“Just stand there,” James said as he circled Troy, stopping just behind him.

Chris watched as James pressed close, slid his arms around Troy's chest, and reached for his ear with his mouth. He closed his eyes as James licked and nibbled Troy's earlobe, knowing just how enjoyable it felt to have James so close, breathing down his neck.

His eyes popped open when he heard Troy release a groan. He echoed Troy's sentiments, his nipples immediately becoming hard and tight as if the harsh sound of Troy's voice had a direct link to Chris' body.

Troy leaned back against James, and James slid his hands down Troy's front until he reached the Promised Land and grasped Troy's arousal.

He pumped Troy's cock once, then twice, until a pearl of liquid shimmered from the slit. "Come taste him, young'un. I want to watch you take him in your mouth. I want to feel him tremble when you make him come."

"Jesus..." Troy gritted his teeth.

Chris saw his Adam's apple bob up and down and the muscles in his neck strain as he arched it until the back of his head rested against James' shoulder. His legs appeared to give way just a tad, but James remained a rock and accepted Troy's weight.

"It's all right, Troy. I've got you. You just lean back and let the boy please you the way he knows how."

"Yes, please. I want that."

The ragged sound of Troy's words acted like a magnet, pulling Chris forward until he found himself helplessly dropping to his knees before Troy.

James moved his hands up from Troy's groin to slide his arms around Troy's waist instead. His hands crept up Troy's body until he found Troy's erect nipples. He pinched each of the hard nubs at the same instant that Chris put his mouth on Troy.

Troy released a shuddering breath and sank deeper into James' embrace.

James gently stroked Troy's chest, circling the skin around his nipples as Chris lowered his head until his mouth reached the base of Troy's shaft.

Troy bucked his hips, hands instantly burying in Chris' hair. He caressed then fisted the strands, and his touch pushed Chris to suck harder and pump faster. The feel of Troy's cock hard and throbbing in his mouth and beneath his fingers proved as satisfying as Chris had imagined. He inhaled as he sucked and licked, Troy's raw, musky scent making him hunger even more.

"Oh...Christ..."

"That's it, Chris. He's coming..."

No sooner had James spoken than liquid spurted into Chris' mouth—warm, salty, and sweet. He eagerly swallowed it down, then licked his way from the root of Troy's member to the head. He dipped his tongue into the slit, teasing Troy, milking the dregs of his climax.

"What have you two done to me?"

In answer, Chris let Troy's cock slip from his mouth, but not before giving it one final lick as he watched James turn Troy around in his arms.

"Nothing you didn't want," James said simply, cupping Troy's face in both hands and drawing him forward. "You want us."

"Yes."

James covered Troy's mouth with his, sliding in his tongue and making Troy moan deep in his throat. Troy's arms slid up to hug James as if of their own accord.

Chris moved closer, sandwiching Troy between him and James as he wrapped his arms around Troy's waist. He pressed his cheek against Troy's back, relishing his moist, silky skin stretched tight over hard muscles. He inhaled Troy's fresh, natural scent, the smell of man and animal. An air of warmth and power seeped from Troy's pores, one that called to Chris' hunger and need like a flame to a moth.



Troy pulled back from James, breathless. "Take your clothes off. I want to see you." He turned to Chris, gaze smoldering as it raked over him. "I want to see both of you."

Anticipation scudded through Chris at the throaty words. He stepped away and reached for the front of his shirt at the same time that James reached for the front of his vest.

From here, it proved a race to see who could shuck his clothes the quickest and catch up with Troy standing naked and waiting for them.

By the time Chris and James stood unclothed facing each other, Troy had already silently slipped away from them toward the water's edge.

Chris watched as he gave them a big, dimpled grin before turning to dive into the lake. He caught just a flash of Troy's smooth, round backside before Troy cleanly cut the water. He took Chris' breath away with the gracefulness of his moves.

Several moments later, Troy's head broke the surface some yards away from shore. He shook water from his wavy, chestnut hair, and the deed drew attention to the way his wet shoulders and hair glistened beneath the late afternoon sun.

Chris stood spellbound by the way the water clung to Troy's long, thick lashes. The water reflected the light so that each hair sparkled like tiny crystals before the drops sluiced down his chiseled cheeks.

"Let's join him, young'un."

"Age before beauty."

James arched a brow. "Oh, really?"

Chris smiled, backing away from James toward the water. "You're the one who keeps calling me a young'un, old pod."

"I'll show you old man, smart aleck" James pounced before Chris could react. He scooped Chris up into his arms as if he weighed no more than a nipper and took a running leap into the water.

Chris surfaced, shaking water from his hair as Troy had and sputtering from the bracing cold of the water.

James swam up behind him and slid his arms around Chris' waist as Chris treaded water. "You make quite a sight, all wet," he whispered in Chris' ear before nibbling the lobe and making Chris shiver as much as the water did.

"Speak for yourself."

"Private party or can anyone join?" Troy swam over to tread water not too far from them.

Chris turned to him and smiled, glad to finally have the two men he wanted most in the world together. He hadn't exactly had them yet, not really, but he decided that he would.

\* \* \* \*

James' critter proved more alive and erect than it had ever been since he'd learned how to use it right and proper. And it had taken these two men to bring him to this point.

The idea of not having either one of them in his life, of letting either one of them go now, just made him plumb disheartened. He'd done without the companionship and passion of a man long enough that he didn't want to go without them anymore.

*Time to take the bull by the horns.*

And, as if reading his mind, Troy reached down between him and Chris to grasp James' cock, skillfully flicking the slit with his thumb before James said, "I think we need to take this on dry land before we all drown."

Chris and Troy both laughed as James turned and swam back to shore.

Arriving first gave James the opportunity to watch Troy and Chris as they followed his lead. He admired their bodies as they emerged from the water and stepped onto dry land. Both of them looked nothing less than spectacular, like creatures not of this earth. And knowing Troy's nature, this comparison seemed more than appropriate.

James' gaze automatically went to the puckered skin delineating past wounds on Troy's otherwise smooth torso. Like Chris' bruises, he wondered how Troy had gotten the scars. They were more than likely bullet and arrow wounds, but he didn't want to agitate the fragile balance and peace the three of them had found out here in the wilderness together by opening healed wounds and asking outright. James released the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding as the two men neared, lake water glistening on their naked skin.

Silently, James picked up his clothes, turned, and headed into the forest. He went far enough in that they wouldn't have to worry too much about prying eyes, but not so far that they couldn't keep an eye on their horses. Although with the way James felt, he didn't think he'd be able to keep his mind on anything outside of the two men following him past the tree line.

Chris and Troy followed James' lead and left their clothes folded on the ground before they advanced to where James leaned against the trunk of a tall, sturdy aspen.

Troy reached James first, hesitating once he got a couple of feet away as if waiting for permission to move forward.

James gave his tacit agreement, putting out his hand and firmly grasping the hand that Troy placed in his. He pulled Troy forward until the other man fell into his arms.

Breathless, Troy asked, "Now what?"

"What do you want?"

"I-I..."

"Let me help you." James grasped Troy by the shoulders and turned him around so that Troy's back rested against his chest. They proved so evenly matched in height that Troy's cleft perfectly cushioned the head of James' hard cock without James having to crouch, stand on his toes, or otherwise make an adjustment. James rubbed himself up and down the crack between Troy's butt cheeks and closed his eyes at the groan that escaped Troy's lips. His arms

automatically went around Troy, imprisoning him as he hugged Troy tight. “Lord, you feel so good! I can’t wait to get inside you.”

“I can’t wait to feel you inside me.” Troy reached back and grasped James’ shaft, drawing it closer to his hole.

James about shot off at the feel of Troy’s fingers gripping him, at the promised warmth of Troy’s anus surrounding his cock.

Rather than ram himself forward the way he wanted, James took a deep breath and slid one hand down to Troy’s ass. He eased a finger inside, pushing past the first ring of muscles and feeling Troy clamp down on the digit right firm. Lord, he was tight!

“You need to relax.”

“I’m trying, but...I’ve never...I’ve...”

James bent his head to nibble Troy’s earlobe, heart clenching in his chest at what he thought Troy tried to say. He proved tight enough to be a virgin, but...“You’ve never had a man inside you before?”

Troy silently shook his head, then leaned it back to cradle against James’ shoulder and worked his jaw muscles.

James reached up his free hand to cup Troy’s cheek. His palm rasped against the other man’s light stubble. He felt Troy’s shudder all the way through his own body. He ached to have this powerful, unusual man under him, to bury himself deep inside Troy and ride him until they both exploded like nitro.

His gaze shifted to find Chris standing in front of Troy with an indulgent expression on his face. He’d almost forgotten the boy was there with them and smiled at Chris’ look. He seemed so old, much older than his years. There proved so much pain and wisdom in that gaze, too.

As much as either he or Troy had seen, James decided.

“We’ll help you through it,” he murmured to Troy and watched Chris nod his agreement.

*Yep, right old and wise beyond his years.*

“I know it’ll be painful, but I want this. I’m ready to—”

“Don’t have to be no such thing, at least not awfully so.” James bent his head and placed his lips on Troy’s throat. He caught a small piece of flesh between his teeth and nipped before licking and sucking the sore spot to take Troy’s mind off of the coming invasion. He’d have to soften him up right and proper to make sure this experience proved as painless and pleasurable as possible. He wanted Troy to enjoy himself, not fear what James would do to him.

Troy squirmed in his grasp, and James let his imagination run wild without letting his hand do the same. Slowly, he added another finger, pushing past the second ring of muscles inside Troy’s anus until his fingers disappeared to the third knuckle.

Troy opened himself up then, pushing back against James’ hand and riding it.

“Take it slow, Troy. We’ve got time,” James whispered in Troy’s ear. Not as much time as he would have liked. He wanted to savor being with Troy the same way he had been with Chris. He wanted to experience having both of them in a place they all called home.

Lord, he was jumping ahead of himself!

Focusing, James held Troy close with one arm as Chris went down on his knees in front of Troy—a full frontal and rear assault.

James smiled at the thought.

He wiggled his fingers inside Troy, stimulating the delicate nerve endings and making Troy’s muscles spasmodically clench right before he slid his fingers out. James grasped himself and used his pre-ejaculate as a lubricant, coating his shaft and mixing it with the water that still covered him. Extra moisture would have helped, and he wished he had come more prepared. However, he hadn’t had much forewarning before this jaunt. Certainly not enough that he could have brought along what he considered the essentials for this situation.

Oh, the things he had learned from the Chinese and the Greeks, the knowledge he had acquired to make sex more gratifying! Thanks to his own powerful curiosity and that rancher teaching him to read,

he had picked up all sorts of information that could help him please another man. And he was eager to use it.

James synchronized his first thrust with Chris' first stroke, watching as the young'un swallowed Troy almost to the hilt. Troy stiffened, then bucked his pelvis, and James put his hands on his shoulders to hold him still. He breached Troy's anus with a decisive plunge, effectively pinning him between a rock and hard place as Chris' lips reached the base of Troy's cock.

Troy quaked as Chris sucked him, and James pushed farther until he rested balls-deep and his pelvis smacked flush against Troy's ass cheeks. He felt Troy barely holding off coming. He barely held off himself, focusing before he began to circle his hips in a gentle but firm rhythm. The head of his cock just teased the spongy organ inside that James knew would make Troy go off like a rocket once James really stroked it.

Troy's head fell forward. He buried his hands in Chris' hair and made fists as if trying to get control of himself.

James would have none of it. He wanted Troy to lose control and angled his hips, changing the direction and intensity of his thrusts. He pushed forward as deep as he could while Chris heaped on his own efforts, drawing Troy into his mouth hard.

Troy released a hoarse cry that James was sure would have stirred the bears from their hibernation had it been winter.

"Oh...God!" Troy went stiff as a corpse and his every muscle tensed before he finally released into Chris' mouth for the second time since they had come out to this little hideaway. James ran his hands up and down Troy's smooth back, then drew his arms around him. He stroked Troy's stomach, also smooth but for a smattering of hair and the scars.

James kissed Troy's neck like he couldn't get enough of the feel and taste of him, comforting himself more than he knew he comforted Troy.

Troy's scent proved raw and natural, like the trees and the grass around them, the underlying animal aura of the wolf hovering just beneath. It all moved James as surely as a punch to the gut. It made him hunger even after he had indulged in such a succulent meal.

However, the crack of a rifle in the distance moved all three of them a second later and shattered the balance and peace.

## Chapter 9

*Laughter exploded from a chest that up until that moment had been filled with a tight ball of indignation.*

*Still fuming from what had been seen, by the idea of what those men did to each other.*

*What in tarnation!*

*Eyes blinded by the abominations they experienced today. A body hadn't seen that coming. Maybe if it had, a body could have prepared better.*

*There was no preparation for this kind of shock, a doozy to the system to be sure.*

*Hadn't wanted to play a hand too soon but had to do something to stop the madness. Also, patience had been stretched too thin. Things had gone on too long to be tolerated. By then, a body proved ready to burst with rage.*

*How dare they?*

*Oh, what fun watching them duck and scramble for cover from the three shots fired into the air. A body would have been plumb privileged to see bullets strike and rip through their wicked hides. They deserved nothing less.*

*There would be no bloodshed today, though. No. A body wanted to be up close, see the eyes of the ones who'd been so disrespectful and make sure they knew what sins they had committed and why they were about to die.*

*The marshal remained firmly at the top of the hit list. However, now that young pretty drifter and the freak-of-nature Barrow had gotten themselves involved right and proper. No turning back now.*



*It proved a dilemma, for sure. Didn't have no beef with the two of them. They did wrong, though, so very wrong, and they had to be taught a lesson—just like that colored marshal.*

*Had to settle back against the trunk of a tree, needed to focus. Cradling the rifle in the crook of arms aching to do more, a body tried to relax—and plan its next move.*

*First, let's see if the three fornicators went back to town and reformed.*

*It proved too late for all of them. However, it would be a sight to see them try.*

\* \* \* \*

As soon as the shots went off, Troy instinctively grabbed Chris and shielded him with his larger body.

James followed the same impulse, seeming to gauge the direction of the shots and putting himself in front of Chris and Troy like a shield as if to fend off any approaching bullets.

“Get your clothes and get back to the horses!”

“What about you?” Chris struggled in Troy’s grasp.

“I’ll be right behind you. Now git, young’uns!”

Troy’s throat tightened at the thought of James sacrificing himself for them, protecting him as if he couldn’t protect himself. He hadn’t been anyone’s *young’un* since Pa. He’d never felt as cared about even if he knew he could defend himself and Chris if need be.

Nonetheless, he scooped up their clothes with one hand and dragged Chris through the forest with the other.

“We can’t leave him,” Chris said.

“We’re not. Put your clothes on.” Troy began doing just that as he watched Chris stubbornly plant his feet and fold his arms across his chest. He wished he had more time to appreciate the spirit and beauty of the kid, but they needed to move.

“I’m not a kid. I can help.”

“The best thing you can do to help is get dressed so you’ll be ready to go once James catches up with us.”

Chris paused as if thinking things over, then hesitantly took the clothes that Troy handed him and began dressing.

Troy took it as a good sign that they hadn’t heard any more shots. It didn’t mean that they were out of the woods yet or that James was safe by himself.

He couldn’t let anything happen to them, not after finally discovering Chris and James. He wouldn’t let anything happen to either of them.

Crouching low, Troy took Chris by the hand. “I need you to get the horses geared up and bring them to the edge of the woods. Have them ready when we come out.”

“You’re going to go get him?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t need any rescuing, but yeah, I’m going to check on him.”

Chris took a deep breath and smiled. He seemed to calm down at Troy’s words. “Promise?”

“We’ll be back directly. Promise.” How many people had broken that promise in the kid’s life? How many times had people walked out on him and never come back?

Troy didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to remember the kid proved as alone in the world as he. He didn’t want to believe that anyone was that miserable and without anyone in their lives.

Troy took his rifle from its sheath on the side of his horse and headed back to where he and Chris had left James. He found James fully dressed and peering into the dimly lit woods as if he knew someone was out there watching them.

The idea that someone had been spying on them when James had...that someone had seen them in so intimate a position made Troy sick.

The moments he'd spent with James and Chris belonged to him, moments he could go back and relive in his memory again and again for years to come if he had to.

He didn't want to rely on just his memories of what had happened this afternoon. He wanted to make new memories every day to supplement and relive what he and James and Chris had done together.

"Chris all right?" James asked without turning.

"Yep. Worried about you, though."

James turned, smiling as he took several steps toward Troy and paused. He reached out a hand to cup Troy's face, his thumb rasping over the whiskers on Troy's jaw, making him close his eyes to immerse himself in the sensations.

"What about you? Worried, too?"

Troy opened his eyes and smirked. "I've seen you in action."

"I've seen you, too. You're mighty fast with that rifle."

"I do all right."

"You do better than all right. One day you're going to have to sit down and tell me exactly how you got to be such a quick draw."

Troy stared at him, wondering what went on behind those brandy eyes. He wondered if James knew anything about his outlaw past. If he did, it didn't seem to make a difference to him, not as far as being with Troy.

"We'd best be getting back. I don't want Chris to start worrying. He doesn't do well following directions or being alone for too long."

Troy grinned. He understood James' allusion to what had happened at Nellie's the other day. "He cares about you."

"I care about him, too, and I don't want to see anything happen to him, especially not because of me."

Troy frowned, trying to frame his next words just right. "You think those shots were meant for you?"

"I think they were meant as a warning. Now as to which of us they were being delivered to..." James shrugged. "Could have been for all

three of us. I know I've made an enemy or two. And I'm thinking you've made more than a couple of your own."

"What makes you think that?" Troy wanted to know, wanted everything out in the open. If James had a problem with his past, Troy needed to know about it now before they took their relationship any further.

"Ain't too many men in this country reach our age without having a bit of a past with a gun—whether on the side of the law or against it. And it ain't uncommon for today's outlaw to be tomorrow's lawman."

That was true enough.

When Troy didn't respond, James said, "Seems this Cain Baird has a powerful score to settle with you."

"Could be."

James just stood and looked at him for a long time.

Troy didn't flinch. His past wasn't something he was ashamed of. He was, however, wary of what it meant to his future, especially with someone like James. Bad enough they were two men who wanted to show their affection with a kid like Chris and each other. He didn't want to compound their issues with dishonesty or putting either man's life in jeopardy, at least not without their knowledge. They deserved to know what sort of danger they might be in because of Troy's past.

"What's taking you two so long?"

Both Troy and James turned toward the forest entrance where Chris had led their three horses and now stood before them looking as fresh and innocent as an angel with the afternoon sun reflecting off of that honey-blond hair.

"What did I tell you?" James asked Troy, and Chris glared and marched across the moist forest floor to confront James.

Now he looked more like an avenging angel, all indignant and impatient with his fist on his hip, nothing like the fresh, innocent kid Troy had become accustomed to.

He supposed he shouldn't think of Chris as such a kid. He'd been on his own for more than a decade, after all. And who knew what he

had seen and done in all that time. Truth be told, there was no such thing as innocent once a man reached a certain age out here. And Troy had never really gotten the whole story from Chris on what had happened to him that night he had dragged himself into Barrow's.

It made a body wonder.

Had he confided in James? Troy wondered.

"Well? What have you two been up to since I've been minding the horses?" Chris asked, and Troy detected more concern in the kid's voice than anger.

Troy put an arm around Chris' shoulder and pulled him close. "We'll talk about it once we get back to the bar. How about that?" He kissed the top of Chris' head just because he could, glad when the kid sank into his one-armed hug rather than pulling away.

"O-okay."

Troy hated hearing hesitation in the kid's voice. He wanted to wipe away any doubt Chris had about him or James, or just the human race in general—a tall order to be sure, especially since Troy still had doubts himself.

"Okay, then, let's mount up, boys."

Troy chuckled at James' words and pulled away from Chris so that the kid could mount his horse. Once Chris sat on his mount, Troy and James mounted their horses, and James fell in front. He turned back to ask, "Mind following me for a spell?"

Troy looked at Chris then back at James before nodding.

The three of them remained silent for the duration, not because they didn't have anything to say, Troy suspected, but because they probably had too much to say.

It wasn't every day that he experienced what he had at the cove with James and Chris. Those moments had been special. And they had been ruined by some faceless, nameless voyeur.

Could it have been Cain?

Cain didn't strike Troy as the *warning* type. Aside from his bad-mouthing Troy all over the countryside, besmirching his reputation,

Troy suspected he wouldn't see the man's final attack coming. Spreading the word and letting Troy know he was out there just proved half the fun to someone like Cain. If he proved anything like his older brother, Jack, the real fun for Cain would be when he had Troy at his feet, bleeding and begging for mercy.

They had been riding for close to an hour before Troy began to pay attention to the countryside they were passing by. He didn't notice where they actually were until he felt the suspicious glances of the town's people in the all-black community they were riding through.

Troy realized then that he trusted James a lot to blindly follow him into what could be hostile territory, especially after what had happened to them less than a couple of hours ago.

He recognized Nellie's coming up on his right, watched as James tipped his hat to the handsome brown woman sitting out on the porch. She returned his silent greeting with a warm smile and a nod.

Troy and Chris followed suit but didn't meet nearly the reception that James had, receiving a piercing glare from the woman instead.

Might that look be a warning? Hurt our marshal and we'll hurt you?

Troy could understand the woman's protectiveness and mistrust. He and Chris were strangers, after all. White strangers.

When they didn't stop at Nellie's, Troy wondered where they were heading but refused to ask. He didn't want to seem on edge.

They rode several or so miles past the outskirts of town before James turned off the main road and slowed down.

It wasn't until he brought the horse to a complete stop to dismount the animal that Troy noticed the house they had all stopped in front of a sturdy A-frame house with an adjacent corral and barn. Several horses and cows grazed in the nearby field and drank water from a water trough under a tall, shady oak.

Troy and Chris looked at each other then at James, who at that moment dismounted his horse and took the animal by the reins.

“Come on in and set for spell. I won’t bite...” James turned then to wiggle his eyebrows at the two of them. “Not unless you want me to.”

Chris laughed and threw one leg over his horse before dismounting and walking his horse over to where James stood.

Troy watched them for a moment, thinking how right they looked together before he followed suit and dismounted.

They didn’t just look right, but their looks perfectly complemented each other—James tall, dark, and powerful, Chris smaller, fair, and fresh-faced. The kid wasn’t powerful at a glance, but Troy sensed in him a well of inner strength that had only been hinted at before now. That strength attracted Troy as well as Chris’ pretty looks and obvious need.

Troy caught James’ glance, and James reached out a hand to welcome him over. He didn’t even know when his feet started moving, but in seconds, he found himself by James’s side with Chris, and the three of them glanced up at the house.

“Yours?” Troy asked.

“Lock, stock, and barrel.”

Troy heard the pride in the other man’s tone, and he remembered how he had felt when he’d first opened Barrow’s for business. It wasn’t the fanciest place in town, though it surely proved the most profitable. And it belonged to him, something he had built from the ground up.

His one regret about the saloon remained that his mother and father had not lived to see him make a decent living for himself. However, knowing the God-fearing people they had been, they might not have approved of the set-up.

Troy dragged himself from his past to look at James.

The idea that the marshal had invited him and Chris into his corner of the world, obviously a very special place to him, filled Troy with a fair amount of wonder.

Did he even deserve the lawman’s consideration?

“I built it a few years ago, figured I’d need a place to settle down once I stopped gallivanting all over the territory catching outlaws.”

Troy figured it only right that a man of James’ years would think about settling down eventually. Most men his and James’ age were already settled down with a woman and maybe a few head of kids.

Most men weren’t him and James, though, not that Troy knew of. Most men didn’t love other men and, beyond being cowboys, didn’t want to spend their lives with other men.

Troy realized right then he wouldn’t be reluctant to spending his life with James and Chris if given the chance. More than likely, he’d have to *take* the chance.

He vowed to himself that he *would* take it.



## Chapter 10

Chris hadn't felt at home with anyone in a long time. Even with Cooper, he'd never allowed himself to think further than one day at a time. He knew they were just passing through in each other's lives. Admittedly, he'd latched on to Cooper for the protection he could provide, and Cooper used him for sex. Sure, there had been some affection mixed in with the manipulation and necessity, but Chris hadn't fooled himself to think they had anything lasting.

With Troy and James, he dared himself to believe that there could be more than just the older men using him for physical pleasure. He wanted to believe that they cared about him for him in the same way he had grown to care for them.

He knew it was kind of soon to be mapping out a future like that. None of them had known each other all that long. Out here in the territories, though, a few days could seem like months, especially when he was never sure where his next meal was coming from or whether he would even live to see another day.

That James had a house of his own, one he had invited Chris and Troy to, made Chris feel right secure and protected, like he finally belonged somewhere. Maybe he jumped the gun feeling this way, but he could help it nonetheless.

"So what do *you* think, Chris?"

He turned to James and grinned. "Did you build all this?"

"Sure did."

"I think it's the most beautiful house I've ever seen."

James chuckled. "If you feel that way about the outside, you'll plumb love the inside, then." He put an arm around Chris' shoulder to

lead him up to the front door right before it flung open and an attractive colored woman came out to stand on the threshold.

“Well, it’s about time you showed yourself since you been back in town a spell.” She wiped her hands on the front of the apron she wore as she took a few steps forward then stopped to take in Chris at James’ side and Troy standing just behind him. Unlike the people in the colored town that they had passed on their way to James’ place, this woman didn’t look angry with him and Troy for being with James. In fact, she looked right amused, a small grin curving her plump lips. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

Chris didn’t know what she referred to, so he turned to James and found his mahogany complexion flushed red. In the brief time that he had known the marshal, Chris didn’t think he had seen him blush.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Come on in. I’ve got supper simmering on the stove. And I guess it’s a good thing I always make extra, just in case.”

“You make enough for an army as a matter of course.”

She put her hands on her ample hips. “I ain’t heard no complaints from you.”

“And you ain’t hearing none now.”

The woman folded her hands across her stomach and rocked back on her heels, eyebrows arched. “So who is it you have here? I haven’t had the pleasure.”

James motioned Troy to his side and put an arm around his shoulder like he did Chris’. “This here is Christopher Mi—”

“Come here and let me look at you, chil’.” The woman put her arms out like she fully expected Chris to obey so he did. He felt like he didn’t have a choice since the woman sounded like the one in charge, despite James’ profession to owning the house.

As soon as Chris got within arms’ reach of the woman, she grasped him around the shoulders, shook her head, and clucked her tongue as she looked him up and down.

“Boy ain’t nothing but skin and bones.”

"I'm sure you can remedy that right and proper," James said.

"I'm thinking that ain't the only reason you brought him here."

"Not likely."

"And what about this 'un?" The woman waved a hand at Troy, who stepped forward as if summoned and gave a slight bow.

"Troy Barrow, at your service, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, though I suspect I do have some years on you. The name's Lucy, and I run this here house when the marshal's not here and sometimes while he is." She winked.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, ma'am—Lucy."

She smiled as she took the hand Troy offered and shook it. "I'm expecting you two *are* staying with us for a spell. It's too dangerous to be traveling around these parts this late in the day. Although some of us think danger is his middle name."

"We'd be honored," Troy said.

Chris nodded his agreement, getting the hint that James was the "some of us" in question. He couldn't help remembering how calm James had been when the shooting had started, how he'd worried only about protecting Chris and Troy before he'd worried about himself. Not to mention how James had saved Chris from being shot by that Bart character.

Lucy put an arm around Chris' shoulder and led him into the house.

He smiled as he willingly followed. He liked her fiery, take-charge attitude and sense of humor. He liked *her* and could see why James had hired her. The marshal needed someone as tough as himself to run his household. No one else would be able to put up with his long absences and still welcome him home with a smile at a moment's notice.

Would he be able to? Would he have to with Troy involved, too?

"My husband, Caesar, is out back in the barn seeing to the animals. He'll be in directly, and you can meet him, too."

"Looking forward to it," Troy said, but Chris wasn't so sure.

Women tended to be more accepting of men like him, Troy, and James, and Lucy in particular didn't seem fazed a bit by the fact that James had brought home two men.

Despite the fact that Caesar obviously worked for James, Chris didn't know how tolerant the man would be of him and Troy. He hoped he proved to be just anxious, that his wariness was unfounded. He didn't want to believe that anyone associated with James could be intolerant or as hateful and mean as the men who'd tried to brand him at Whitfield's ranch.

Chris looked at his surroundings, impressed with the simple but comfy furnishings.

The bare floors were polished to a high shine and covered with a turquoise and burgundy Navaho rug.

A fire crackled in the stone fireplace, giving the room a warm, welcoming glow.

Chris had just enough time to admire the living room before Lucy rushed him and Troy through it to the kitchen where the appetizing smells of seasoned meat, potatoes, and vegetables filled the air.

His stomach immediately started to growl.

Lucy laughed and patted him on the back. "Sounds like someone's hungry." She turned to James and scowled. "And someone else hasn't been taking care of this chil'."

"Oh, that's not true. James is powerful good about taking care of me. We just got...caught up in the woods and..."

James pulled Chris to his side before he could say anything else. "I'll show these two the rest of the house and then they can wash up and get ready to eat your delicious meal."

"Sounds like a plan," Lucy said.

Her chuckle followed them through the spacious house, and Chris felt James' grip on his shoulder tighten as if to give Chris strength.

James showed them the rooms on the first level of the house, which consisted of the living room, kitchen, dining room, and a book-lined study.

Chris had never seen so many books in one place except a library. He wondered if James had read all of them and blurted the question before he could stop himself.

“Not all of them, but a fair amount.”

Chris wandered over to the shelves, running his fingers over the spines with a sense of awe. What it must be like to be so smart, smart enough to read any of these books and be a U.S. Deputy Marshal. It made him wonder what James saw in him besides a warm body. Sure, he could read and had digested his fair share of dime novels, but he wouldn't go as far to call himself learned by any means.

Chris turned to James and noticed him begin to fidget after a while, his complexion turning an enticing and flattering red.

“Your admiration is showing again.”

“I can't help it,” Chris confessed.

“I know what he means,” Troy said from his place at the threshold.

“Not you, too.”

Troy ducked his head, shuffling his feet like a little boy who had gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar, and Chris laughed, glad he wasn't the only one impressed.

“What is it with you two? I'm just a regular old man with a little more book smarts than most and a few breaks under my belt. I'm no one to idolize or admire. I do my job, and that's it. Just so happens it's something I like doing.”

“Risking your life to save mine wasn't your job. You could have let Bart kill me, and no one would have batted an eye.”

“I would have batted an eye,” James said.

“And that's what makes you different from everyone else in that bar.” Chris turned to Troy. “Except you.”

Now it was Troy's turn to blush.

Chris smiled at the ability he had to make each man so uneasy, reveled in that power for a brief moment, realizing that just because he was the youngest among them didn't mean he was the powerless

one in their relationship. It made him feel like he belonged, that for once his opinion counted, and he was worth more than the sex between his legs.

“How much time before we have to make an appearance for dinner?” Chris asked.

“What ya got on your mind, kid?” Troy grinned

Chris shrugged, suddenly shy, unable to say what he wanted. He thought it would be easier to show Troy and James what he wanted but didn’t want to be rude to their hostess. Besides, after getting a whiff of Lucy’s vittles simmering in the kitchen, he figured he’d eat first and worry about what he and James and Troy could do for entertainment together later.

“Let’s finish the tour. I’m anxious to see the rest of the house and then eat.”

“Your wish is my command.” James escorted them both upstairs where he showed them two large, airy bedrooms with swanky bedcovers on the roomy four-poster beds and matching bureau, nightstand, and rocking chairs in each room.

The second room seemed more lived-in with a well-worn Stetson and gun belt hanging over the back of the rocking chair and a pair of boots at the foot of the bed beside an old trunk. Chris guessed that this was James’ bedroom just as James confirmed it.

Before Chris’ imagination could run wild with what thoughts of the personal treasures that lay in the trunk and all the things James and Troy could do to him on the big bed, James showed him and Troy to the water closet down the hall.

Suitably impressed with the facilities, Chris asked where Lucy and Caesar stayed, and James explained that the pair lived in a cabin on his property, right behind the main house.

Chris couldn’t remember being anywhere near as fancy as James’ house other than a hotel and said as much to James’ satisfaction.

Still, despite his obvious pride, it seemed like James didn’t like talking about his possessions or how he had gotten them.

Chris could understand that and decided not to bring it up again unless James did.

“Y’all about finished up there? Supper won’t keep forever!”

“Guess we’d better be getting downstairs,” Chris said.

James cupped his face with one hand. “There’ll be time enough for what you had in mind. If you plan to stick around, that is.” He glanced at Troy with the same questioning look, and Troy flushed. Chris grinned, thinking he wasn’t the only young’un in this relationship despite Troy’s being almost a decade older than he.

Being with James and Troy made him feel less alone. They made him feel like he wasn’t worthless after all. He liked the feelings and wanted them to take hold.

Chris looked from James to Troy and back again. He thought twice about saying what lived in his heart but, in the end, couldn’t help murmuring, “I’ll stick around as long as you want me to.”

## Chapter 11

James watched Lucy as she brought various platters and bowls of colorful and aromatic food to the table, acting in her typical bossy and maternal manner, fussing over and making sure everyone had enough on their plates. He appreciated that she made Chris and Troy feel as welcome as visiting dignitaries and thought coming home had never felt so right before. Even the normally soft-spoken Caesar got into the act, talking politics and farming with Troy and getting Chris to talk about his life in New York before he'd come out West.

Though James had more than half-suspected the boy wasn't from around these parts, the confirmation proved more surprising than Troy's background as a farmer.

Through Lucy and Caesar, James learned more about his companions than he had ever hoped to learn on his own, especially in the limited time they'd spent together. That was Lucy. Like Nell, she held nothing back and had a way with folk that just made them drop their guard and talk about themselves. It was a way he hadn't always appreciated when the couple had first turned up at his door looking for work just after he'd put the finishing touches on his house. Though it had taken a while for him to warm up to Lucy's outgoing manner, he'd finally come to like and trust her and her husband, something he didn't do easily after so many years on the trail. He hadn't trusted too many men or women since taking up with the Choctaw so many years ago.

James sensed the same wariness in Chris and, to a lesser degree, Troy, though the boy had come around nicely since they'd all been together.



Of course, a body couldn't help but come around with Lucy on the case. The woman didn't allow shyness on her watch and appeared to have appointed herself Chris' substitute mother.

Chris didn't seem to know what to do with all the attention aside from settling back and accepting it in his quiet way.

James sat back himself and smiled as he let out a notch of his belt to accommodate a belly full of Lucy's delicious meal. He thought, however, that the woman didn't know who she dealt with. Chris may have appeared the picture of angelic innocence, but James knew how wild he could be in the bedroom, how he could bring James to his knees with just a lick of those unusually full lips.

"Well, you four just make a body feel right proud packing away my vittles like this," Lucy said, and four sets of appreciative male eyes all turned to her.

He'd been dealing with Lucy for long enough to know that she loved being the center of attention but loved even more to serve and please those she cared about. Sparing her only a glance, James focused most of his attention on the other men at the table, heart skipping a beat as his gaze fell on Troy and then Chris.

How had he gotten so lucky? Sure, he hadn't considered himself so lucky a few nights ago. He'd considered himself downright cursed to be in the vicinity of Barrow's when that difficulty had started. Now he knew better. He knew that Chris and Troy had been sent to him and that the three of them were meant to be together.

James hadn't been so fatalistic in a long time, not since he left the Choctaw. He saw reason to be now. All the signs that had led him to the two men made him feel like their being together proved destiny.

When Lucy got up to start clearing the table, James snapped out of his daydream to see Troy and Chris offer to help with the dishes like the gentlemen they were. All he could think about was the very ungentlemanly things he wanted to do with them both in his bedroom. He wanted to finish what they'd only started at Troy's little secret

cove. Lucy shooed Troy and Chris away as if reading James' mind, knowing how much he wanted to get his two guests alone.

"Go on, now. Git. You're guests. Make yourselves to home. I'll get these done, and me and Caesar will be out of your hair lickety-split."

Troy and Chris looked from Lucy to each other and finally back at James as if for approval. That's when he winked at them and caught the two men blushing something fierce.

He liked that he could do that to not just one young'un, but two. He liked how they both wore their emotions on their sleeves despite how hard they tried to hide them.

James wondered if he was any better at hiding his feelings from them. He knew he didn't get nearly as red in the face as the other two men, but he was sure his face flushed. He'd felt the heat in his face as well as the rest of his body from some simple little innuendo either Chris or Troy had said or some simple thing they'd done.

"Well?" Lucy cocked a brow and planted her fist on a generous hip. "What are you chil'en waiting for? Get to stepping out of my kitchen."

"Yes, ma'am—Lucy," Troy and Chris chorused and headed toward James already standing at the threshold waiting for them.

He led the way out of the dining room to the stairs, the silence deafening as they all climbed.

James didn't know whether he should keep up appearances and make Chris and Troy comfortable in the guest bedroom or just let them stay in his room with him. Once Lucy and Caesar left for the evening, it would be just the three of them, after all. There would be no need to keep up appearances. The house and land belonged to him free and clear, making up his private domain where his rules applied. He had built the house miles away from his nearest neighbor for a reason—privacy. He'd never imagined that he'd have more reason for it than just to keep to himself and relax after being out on the trail. However, now he had the perfect reason, the best two reasons for his

seclusion under his roof right now. They all stopped at the second landing, Chris and Troy waiting as if to hear his decision out loud, as if they knew how hard it remained for him to make a decision about their status.

He knew what their status was in his heart. He wanted them, thought he was damn near close to loving them, about as close as he could be to loving any human being in so short a time.

Wanting and loving the two men and taking them up on what they were offering him were two different things. Sure, he could tell himself he was entitled to have them anywhere and any way he could, but that line of thinking didn't come anywhere near being realistic.

James sniffed at the term.

Realistically, Troy shouldn't even exist. Which told James one thing—that the conventions that ruled polite, normal society didn't apply here, to them. And the things he wanted to do to and with Troy and Chris couldn't be considered polite in any circles.

James' critter got right antsy when he visualized the locked trunk at the foot of his bed and all the international trappings within. He thought he'd go mad if he didn't get into his room, naked, with these two men as soon as possible and put at least some of his little contraptions to use with someone other than himself.

Chris placed himself between James and Troy and took a hand of each larger man.

Leave it to the little smart aleck to make the first move. And Chris considered James brave? There was nothing braver than taking the lead, taking the reins in a relationship. For sure, the risks Chris and Troy took just revealing themselves and trusting James with their secrets, feelings, and insecurities were a sight more than any danger he'd ever faced in a shootout. He'd go to his grave believing this, too.

Dwarfed by James and Troy flanking him and seemingly unfazed by the differences in their heights, Chris led them to James' bedroom, waited for him to open the door, then led them the rest of the way into the cozy insides.

Troy closed the door behind them and arched his brow at James as if to say, “What are we going to do with this one?”

James didn’t give either man a chance to change their minds or back out. He grabbed the front of Chris’ shirt and pulled him forward, taking the boy’s mouth in a hungry kiss that drew a groan from Chris’ throat as well as James’ own.

Troy moved closer, sandwiching Chris between himself and James. He placed his hands on Chris’ slim hips and drew him back against his pelvis while James plunged his hands in Chris’ honey-blond mane.

James panted now as Chris squirmed against him, moaning in earnest when James and Troy simultaneously ground their hips against him.

Chris pulled back slightly to catch his breath, one hand on James’ waist in front of him and one hand on Troy’s waist in back of him. He acted as if being pressed between them wasn’t enough contact and he wanted more or had to ensure that they wouldn’t leave him.

“Can you both take me now? Please.”

James looked at Troy over the boy’s shoulder, smiling as he slid his hands down to lift the boy up into his arms. “You don’t even have to ask.” And, at this, he took several steps toward the large bed and tossed Chris onto the middle of it.

He landed with a yelp of surprise but didn’t waste time stripping out of his clothes when James gave the command.

James circled the bed, licking his lips as he watched Chris following his movements with innocent, wide blue eyes. His heart sped at the possessiveness he felt over this manchild. He wanted to take him and claim him and let the world know that Chris belonged to him—that they belonged to each other—but knew that they could never make their relationship public.

Rather than dwell on what he couldn’t change, James decided to enjoy what he had for now. He turned the kerosene lamp on the

bedside table up, wanting to see as much of these two men as he possibly could in the fading light.

James moved his gaze to take in Troy standing on the opposite side of the bed from him, already as naked as Chris.

Seemed James was the slowpoke in this scenario, but then he'd been too busy enjoying the view to worry about taking his own clothes off. Besides, he had other plans for how he would get naked.

He moved closer to the bed, gaze locked on Chris like a predator locking on to prey. "I want you to undress me while Troy watches." James looked at Troy, whose entire body seemed to blush at James' words.

"Just watch?" Troy murmured.

"And touch yourself." James looked on as Troy reached for his hard and still mushrooming cock, a pearl of liquid gathering at the slit. His mouth watered at the sight, at the idea of tasting Troy soon. He watched Troy pump his shaft and warned, "Slower. I don't want you to do my work for me."

Troy grinned, eyes drifting closed as he dropped his head back onto his shoulders, face aimed at the ceiling.

James dragged his glance from Troy's chiseled features down his just-as-chiseled body until he reached the hand that grasped Troy's shaft. He licked his lips again and barely noticed when Chris had gotten up onto his knees to unbutton his shirt.

He decided to help the boy along and toed off his boots as quickly as he could. By the time Chris started working on his pants, he just pulled James' britches over his hips and straight down his legs until James easily stepped out of them. He left them in a puddle on the floor as he approached Chris on the bed.

Chris looked up at him with eyes that were at once questioning and all-knowing, a deadly combination to be sure. And the trust James saw in the young'un's gaze struck him like an arrow buried deep in his chest as sure as one that had been fired from an Indian's bow.

He cupped Chris' face with one hand. "I won't hurt you." He didn't know why he said it except that he knew the boy needed to hear it.

"I know."

James was glad Chris sounded so sure because he doubted his own capacity to be gentle, especially once they got into the midst of things. There remained something in the boy that brought out the primal in him as well as the protectiveness.

"Please..."

James glanced past Chris to see the intense concentration etched across Troy's features. He had not opened his eyes, nor had he sped his strokes. As James had instructed him, he pumped his shaft slow and steady.

He could see that Troy approached the end of his rope, though, ready to come. He wanted to take the man out of his misery, but Chris beat him to the punch when he looked over his shoulder at Troy then back at James and said, "Let me."

James didn't have a chance to respond before the boy crawled across the bed on all fours and paused in front of Troy.

As if sensing Chris' proximity, Troy slowed his strokes even more and opened his eyes to see Chris' head bowed over his crotch. He released his penis to plunge his hands in the boy's hair and draw him closer.

James took the opportunity to admire the inviting sight of Chris' tight rear raised in the air as he went to work on Troy's dick, enthusiastically licking and sucking. His own breathing kept pace with Troy's rapid breaths until James couldn't take it anymore.

He retrieved his key from the bedside bureau and unlocked the trunk at the foot of the bed. His gaze automatically went to the black silk bandana. He imagined the cloth settling over Chris' beautiful eyes, taking away that essential sense so that the boy would have to rely on him, Troy, and the rest of his own senses to navigate the coming scenario.

“Don’t let him come yet,” James commanded, and almost instantly, Chris slowed his ministrations to Troy’s distress.

James grinned at Troy’s groan of frustration. He reached for the wooden *olisbos* and the bottle of olive oil. He twisted off the cap and squirted and spread a liberal amount of the liquid on to his erect member and the replica phallus before approaching Troy from behind.

The minute Troy tried to turn his head, James cupped it with both hands. “Face forward and feel.”

“Please...let me come.”

“I promise the wait will be worth your while.”

Troy’s only response was a deep moan as Chris cupped and massaged his testicles.

James slid one hand on to Troy’s shoulder and squeezed. “Relax, wolf.”

Troy bit his bottom lip and nodded, and while Chris had him preoccupied, James slid the phallus into Troy’s rectum.

Troy’s body immediately stiffened as he fisted Chris’ hair.

He and Chris moaned in unison, a musical symphony that made James shudder in repressed excitement.

He pushed the phallus in slowly, past the first and second ring of muscles before Troy began to pant, seemingly uncontrollably.

James squeezed his shoulder again. “Relax and take deep breaths.”

Troy nodded and did as instructed.

James pushed the phallus in until all but the leather strap at the end disappeared inside Troy’s body.

“Oh, God!”

“Does that feel good?”

“Too good. Please...”

“Soon.” James got onto the bed behind Chris and, trusting soul that the boy proved to be, he didn’t even glance back from what he was doing. James did, however, hear him gasp when he settled the bandana over Chris’ eyes and tied it snug behind his head. He folded

his body over Chris' and pressed the head of his cock against the boy's back hole without sliding in. "I want you to belong to me, to us, tonight."

Chris nodded and continued to suck as Troy pumped inside his mouth.

And that's when James finally pushed inside Chris.

The boy panted and groaned around the cock in his mouth before he picked up the pace once more and had Troy chomping at the bit to come again.

"Not yet." James rolled his hips and thrust inside Chris. He anchored himself, gripping one of Chris' shoulders and sliding his free hand down to grasp the young'un's sizable erection.

James thumbed the pre-ejaculate from Chris' slit and spread it around the head of the boy's cock, slow and easy. He pressed his lips close to Chris' ear and whispered, "You make Troy come, and I'll make you come."

Chris mumbled around Troy's cock, nodding as much as he could without losing his rhythm.

James pulled back to change the angle of his entry as he pumped Chris' cock.

Chris sucked Troy's dick and squeezed his balls, and James thrust inside Chris, hitting that familiar soft organ inside that guaranteed he would send the boy into orbit as well as himself.

James didn't know who came or screamed first. He didn't care.

All he knew were the stars spinning bright before his closed eyes as Chris flexed his inner muscles around his stalk and milked James until he thought he would die.

Not until the room became silent and Chris relaxed did James open his eyes to see Chris licking Troy's softening cock as he let it slip from his mouth.

He slowly removed his own softening cock from Chris' rectum and caught the boy's wrist when he reached for the blindfold. "No. Not yet."



“I want to see you.”

“I want you to feel me more.” He caressed the boy’s back, fingers tingling at the contact of his palm against the downy, smooth skin. He slid his hand from the boy’s shoulder to his buttocks and sharply slapped each cheek in rapid succession.

Chris yelped right before James lifted him in his arms and laid him in the center of the bed on his back.

James straddled the boy’s hips and leaned in to kiss his lips. He cupped and stroked Chris’ face as he pulled back. “You trust me, Chris?”

“Yes, James.”

No hesitation. Was that because he proved so young, or was it part of his nature?

“Even after I hit you?” James watched the boy’s cheeks flush at the question, and he knew that Chris had liked the spanking whether he wanted to admit it or not. “Be honest. Don’t be afraid.”

“I...” He frowned beneath the blindfold, plainly confused by his feelings. “I liked it,” he finally murmured.

James cupped his face. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“I believe you.”

Good. He needed Chris to believe and trust him and Troy because the next few moments could prove a mite difficult otherwise.

At the thought, he looked at Troy standing beside the bed, still perched on a razor edge of stimulation with the *olisbos* rooted deep inside him.

The young’un bore the combination of pleasure and pain well, taking to the alien penetration, the feeling of being stuffed, like a duck to water. James hoped he could take to what they were about to do as easily. Silently, James went back to his trunk where he retrieved a couple of lengths of sturdy rope, handing one over to Troy.

“What’s happening?”

It seemed as if Chris knew what James had planned, as if he knew what approached for him. Maybe his residual senses had gone into overload.

Did he already regret the trust he had put in James? Did he remain afraid despite the bravado he'd so far shown with James and Troy?

The last thought gave James pause more than anything else could have except remembering the innocent look of Chris' wide blue eyes.

He realized then he hadn't just blindfolded the boy to mute his senses and make him dependent but to avoid having to see the boy's trust die.

"Nothing you don't want to," James assured Chris and silently directed Troy to bind the boy's wrist to one of the head posts. James went to work tying the opposite wrist and felt the tension in the boy's body as soon as he touched him, felt his internal struggle not to pull away.

James bent his head to rain tender, barely-there kisses across Chris' mouth, cheek, and chin. He went lower, circling each of Chris' nipples with the tip of his tongue before he moved back up to his pulse-point to gently suck and lick until he felt the boy relax.

"That's it. We're not going to let anything bad happen to you. We're only going to bring you pleasure."

"You promise?"

"My word." James crossed his heart, even though Chris couldn't see him. Troy could, though, and he felt the other man's silver-gray gaze watching him like the predator he was. The hair on his arms stood up at the idea of Troy's wolf being so near, close to the surface. James sat back on his heels, his growing cock brushing Chris' already erect member. They shuddered at the same time, which only intensified the sensation of Troy's sharp, questioning gaze on him.

He didn't look too sure about what they were about to do. However, this was okay because James intended to teach the boy and the wolf what it felt like to love freely in the manner they all wanted,

the manner that made them all feel something besides guilt and shame.

James considered giving them pleasure his main responsibility, making them not regret coming with him on this journey his other.

Slowly, he got off the bed and circled it to stand behind Troy.

This time, he didn't turn his head, simply stared straight ahead as James hooked a finger through the ring of leather dangling from between Troy's buttocks.

"Take a deep breath."

Troy did as commanded, and James slowly slid the *olisbos* from his rectum.

He leaned forward to kiss Troy's nape, eliciting the expected tremor as he licked his way down and around before nipping the skin just under Troy's chin.

"I intend to replace *this* with something much better." James set the fake phallus atop the bedside bureau beside a basin of fresh warm water and two wash cloths, silently thanking Lucy for her efficiency and thoughtfulness. He took one of the wash cloths, squeezed excess water from it, then took his very real, hardening, and lengthening penis in hand and washed it. Once done, he caressed the cheeks of Troy's ass with the moistened tip and his free hand.

"I want you to take Chris while I take you." He squeezed Troy's buttocks for emphasis. "Are you up for that?"

Troy nodded unnecessarily. James could see his hard cock already rising to the occasion and smiled.

"James...Troy...please..." Chris writhed on the bed, pulling his wrists against his bonds and moaning. James hadn't tied the rope firmly enough to hurt him, and he knew that Troy hadn't, either. He knew the bindings would keep the boy from going anywhere without his or Troy's say-so, though.

He leaned one knee on the bed and cupped Chris' face. The boy nuzzled closer to James' palm, making James' heart throb uncontrollably. He felt like he and Troy held Chris' life in their hands,

and in a way, they did. For if they betrayed the precious trust that he had so willingly relinquished to them, James knew the boy's soul would surely die.

James released his cock, leaving both hands to roam. He slid them up Troy's back, savoring the smooth, warm skin, the way the muscles rippled beneath his fingertips before he grasped Troy's shoulders. He brought his nose close, inhaling deep and taking in Troy's scent. The spicy musk made his cock swell and twitch with hankering.

"Do you know how beautiful you are in any form?"

"Not as beautiful as you." Troy turned in James' grasp and wrapped his arms around James. He pressed his hands against James' back and drew him closer, angling his head to fit his mouth to James' for maximum effect.

James opened his mouth on a low moan, tangling his tongue with Troy's for several endless moments, almost forgetting there remained a third person in the room before he heard Chris' soft voice call out to them again.

"Please...don't leave me alone."

James broke away from Troy to go to Chris, cupping his face again. "Never. We'll never leave you alone."

Troy joined them from the opposite side before climbing on to straddle Chris' hips.

He looked over at James and planted his hands on either side of Chris. "I'm here. Right here, kid."

Troy lifted Chris' legs and hooked the boy's knees over his arms. Chris raised his hips, opening himself as much as he could to make for the perfect approach. James watched them for a moment, enjoying the erotic view of the two men he cared about the most in the world joining. He retrieved the bottle of olive oil, squeezed some into his palm, and smeared it around his own cock before getting on the bed behind Troy. He curved his arms around the other man and grasped Troy's throbbing cock before massaging the oil on to Troy's penis.

He fairly saturated it and his own member to ensure the most painless penetrations possible.

Chris wriggled beneath them, making his impatience evident.

James gave him a loving swat on the behind and laughed at Chris' yelp. "Hold your horses, young'un. We're going to put you out of your misery directly."

Troy glanced at James over his shoulder, and James nodded to give him the okay to start.

As Troy pushed through the first ring of muscles of Chris' rectum, James did the same to Troy's. He eased his swollen head inside Troy, circling his hips as he pushed forward and tuned his breathing to Troy's deep breaths.

Chris moaned and moved beneath them, pulling against his bounds so hard until James thought he'd break free. "More, Troy. You're not hurting me."

James watched the boy's toes curl when Troy pushed farther, the sight and Chris' words giving him permission to thrust forward himself.

In synch, he and Troy each plunged ahead, and James swore he felt Chris' inner walls swallow and tighten around his cock as well as Troy's. The feeling of penetrating Troy as he penetrated Chris proved indescribable.

He curved his fingers around Troy's waist as far as they would go, bracing himself and Troy as he found Troy's rhythm and matched it.

For several long minutes, they each pounded away, Chris panting beneath them and coaxing them with his soft whimpers and groans. The friction built to such an unbearable level that James thought they would all go up in flames any minute.

"Oh, God...yes!"

Troy must have hit that secret spot inside Chris. The sound of the boy's climax prompted James, and he took his cue. He picked up the pace and drove into Troy until he hit the wolf's secret spot, too.

Troy came with a hoarse shout, collapsing onto Chris and briefly folding the boy's body beneath him before he pulled himself up to balance his weight on his palms. He pushed his ass back into James' pelvis as if for good measure. The movement spurred James over the edge with a growl that echoed through the room as he finally released inside Troy on a mammoth tremor.

James came back to himself several moments later to the heavy scent of sex in the air. He kissed his way down and across Troy's shoulders and back as he slid his cock out of Troy's rectum. Almost simultaneously, Troy slid out of Chris and released the boy so that Chris could lower his legs.

James watched as Troy kissed his way down the boy's chest until he reached the ejaculate that Chris had released during his climax. Troy licked up as much of it as he could, the sight almost bringing James to his knees with want and making him ready for round three as soon as possible until he realized he didn't have to rush and squeeze everything in all at once.

Chris and Troy weren't going anywhere, not if James had anything to say about it.

## Chapter 12

*Keeping a distance proved powerful hard, but it had to be done if the plan would be seen to fruition—had to be seen to fruition.*

*A body remained frustrated and tired with the inaction, the just watching, but didn't want to move forward too fast and muck up things when a body had come this far laying low and being patient. Patience was a virtue, after all, and a body was, above all, virtuous. Why else go through all the difficulty other than sweet justice and revenge? Those remained good reasons, too.*

*The marshal wouldn't know what hit him until the very last minute, and by then, it would be too late for him or anyone else to do anything about it.*

*A body grinned in the darkness, gaze pinned to the shadowy outline of the quaint farmhouse where the three fornicators no doubt engaged in unmentionable deviant behavior.*

*That would come to an end...soon, very soon.*

\* \* \* \*

Troy lay on his side, chin resting in his palm as he watched James and Chris sleeping in the early dawn and beneath the glow of the kerosene lamp he had lit moments before.

He examined the relaxed, smooth planes of Chris' face, reminded of what he must have looked like when his Ma and Pa still lived— young and naïve to the ways of the world.

The kid looked so comfortable snuggled up next to James' side, blindfold still in place though his hands had been freed hours ago and he could have slid it off any time he wanted.

James' wants, however, remained overriding, and the kid obediently had left it in place.

He seemed content enough in James' embrace, the larger man's thigh thrown over the kid's hip in a way that plainly stated Chris belonged to James—body and soul.

*And what about you?*

He wondered how Chris felt about what had happened between them all last night. Because he had to admit that *he* remained powerful confused by his reactions to James' treatment—confused and excited by what James had done to him and what he had done to Chris.

He closed his eyes as a wave of lust washed over him at the remembered feel of James' cock inside of him, how he had willingly submitted to the other man's desires simply because they had been his desires, too.

Despite this, Troy had been admittedly nervous when it came to following James' command to tie Chris' wrist. He'd been afraid of hurting the kid, not necessarily physically, but emotionally. He knew the kid had been through some sort of difficulty that involved a man or two overpowering him physically, taking advantage of his size, his youth, his being alone. He'd plainly been jumped, beaten, and not telling what else when he'd appeared in Barrow's that first night.

Chris wouldn't talk about what happened to him before he'd met Troy and James. This, the bruises on his ribs, and the fading rope burns circling his wrists made Troy's imagination all the more overactive.

He shuddered at the thought of Chris falling victim to a bunch of trigger-happy outlaws like Jack and Cain's gangs, all too eager to show a babe in the woods like Chris the ropes and finer points of



being a violent desperado, all too eager to teach a kid like Chris a lesson or two for his *aberrant* hankerings.

Troy didn't think violence or being a desperado made up Chris' nature. True, circumstances could lead a body down those roads, like the murder of a parent. Troy ought to know. He just didn't think Chris had that sort of aggression or cruelty in him. The kid remained too soft-hearted and pure despite everything he'd been through, miraculously untouched in his obvious quest for affection and closeness.

He didn't think this would be the case if he stayed around the likes of him for too long. Somewhere along the line, his past would eventually catch up with him and therefore Chris.

Troy didn't want to see what had happened to his father happen to Chris or James. He didn't want to have the death of another innocent on his conscience.

"He's beautiful, ain't he?"

Rather than show his surprise that James had been awake for God knew how long, Troy said, "You took the words right out of my mouth."

James moved the arm that wasn't cradling Chris' head to brush stray blond strands away from the kid's face. The usually hard edges of his face looked placid in the dim light, his expression full of tenderness. He didn't take his eyes off of Chris' face when he said, "You're worried about him, worried about what we did last night."

Troy didn't answer, unsure how to, especially since James hadn't really asked a question. James, however, didn't let him get away with not owning up to his feelings.

"I'm worried about you," he murmured

Troy arched a brow. "Me?"

James grinned and reached over Chris' body with the same hand he had used to touch the kid's hair and cupped Troy's face. "The tough act doesn't fool me. You're just as vulnerable as our little manchild here, if not more so."

“How do you figure?”

James answered Troy’s question with one of his own. “What was your turning point?”

“My turning point?”

“When was the first time you killed a man?”

Troy inhaled so sharply the hiss echoed in his ears.

James filled in the ensuing gap of quiet. “I see the shadows lurking behind your eyes. I recognize them as a man who’s taken more than his share of lives.”

“At least you did it in the name of the law.”

“Still doesn’t help the guilt or stop the demons from visiting when a body’s alone during those quiet times of a day.”

Troy turned his face into James’ palm and kissed it before James curved his hand around to Troy’s nape and drew him forward.

Troy pressed his forehead against James’. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Thirteen. Two Indians came to our farmhouse in the middle of the night. Set it on fire. When Pa took me outside to get away, they...they killed him.” The last word came out on a sob, but Troy didn’t know hot tears streamed down his face, too, until James leaned in and kissed them away.

“The wolf came out.”

Troy nodded, too choked up to speak.

“They killed your father.”

“I...I could have...I could have...” Troy had a flash of that night, the terror and sense of loss that had filled him as he’d blindly run into the forest.

“You defended yourself,” James said it as if reading his mind, as if he’d been there. “Every man has a right to defend himself against bodily harm, against the threat of death.”

If that proved all there had been to that night, maybe Troy wouldn’t be having such a hard time dealing with what had happened. He could have kept running, though. He probably would have escaped. And, even if he hadn’t, he’d still had the option to try.

However, he'd brought the wolf out on purpose. He'd made the choice to stop and turned back with rage and revenge in his heart. He'd wanted to kill those Indians. He'd wanted to see them suffer for hurting his father.

"What happened to your mother?"

"She'd died a year before. Consumption."

James' grip on Troy's neck tightened ever so slightly. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago."

"Still doesn't make it hurt any less."

Questions of his own rested on Troy's tongue, questions about James' past, questions about *his* demons. He opened his mouth to ask about them right before Chris shifted between them, stretching his arms up and yawning.

"What's going on?"

Troy grinned and ran his hand down the kid's smooth chest then farther down his lean torso until he finally reached Chris' rising cock.

"What do you want to be going on?" He cupped the kid's testicles, lightly squeezed, and listened as Chris gasped.

"Boy don't like to miss out on nothing," James quipped.

"Have you two started something without me, then?"

"Smart aleck." James grinned and leaned in to kiss Chris' mouth, slipping his tongue past the kid's lips and into his mouth for a taste.

Chris moved beneath him, returning the kiss as Troy gently pumped his shaft until a pearl of liquid glistened from the tip.

Troy moved down the bed and bent his head for a taste himself. While James and Chris kissed, Troy sucked the kid's cock into his mouth. He sucked it deep, matching his mouth's rhythm with his hand, stroking the base of Chris' cock between index finger and thumb.

After several moments of this, Chris' shaft began to throb in Troy's mouth, signaling his approaching climax. Troy gave the kid's balls one last tweak while sucking his shaft deep inside his mouth.

Chris trembled and released in Troy's mouth on a rough grunt that James smothered with his eating kisses.

When James finally pulled away and let the kid up for air, Chris murmured, "Can I take off the blindfold, please?"

James glanced at Troy, and Troy glanced back.

He had moved back up to the head of the bed and had one hand buried in Chris' soft locks, massaging the kid's scalp. With his other hand, Troy caressed Chris' chest, circling the hard, swollen nipples with a finger.

"What do you think, wolf? Should we put him out of his misery?"

Troy grinned, liked the way James had taken to calling him *wolf*, using the word as both a nickname and a term of endearment. He nodded, reached for the blindfold, and paused at the intense look in James' eyes before he slid the blindfold down the kid's face to hang down around his neck like a kerchief.

Chris' gaze bounced between them several times before finally landing on Troy. He reached up a hand to cup Troy's face, and Troy shuddered at that penetrating knowing expression in Chris' eyes. The expression proved unexpected from the likes of someone so young and innocent.

"I think it's time you both stopped looking at me as a helpless little kid." Chris moved his glance from Troy to encompass James. "I'm not either."

"Been awake a while, then?" James asked.

"Long enough." Chris turned back to Troy. "I'm sorry about your parents."

Troy didn't say anything, just stared, heart filling with all the concern that Chris and James showed him. He hadn't had anyone who cared about him so much except maybe Josie and Josiah. Jack hadn't ever cared about him as a person, not really. He'd just been eager to groom a young'un in his image—that of a cold-blooded killer and thief. It proved an image Troy couldn't live with, not for very long.

And now Jack's brother, Cain, had him in his sights because of Troy's defection.

How long would it take before he added James and Chris to his sights too because they were close to Troy?

Troy put his hand over Chris' and closed his eyes, just reveling in the feel of the kid's warmth and affection.

"When we go back to town, I want you to stay here with Lucy and Caesar," James said in his commanding voice.

Troy opened his eyes to see Chris' expected reaction, the kid glaring at James.

"I want to go with you. Why do *I* have to stay behind?"

"Because I say so."

"It's safer that way," Troy put in, his tone as conciliatory as James' was not, but Chris didn't buy it anyhow.

"I'm *not* a kid you can boss around, and if Troy can go back with you, so can I."

"Troy's different."

"Why? Because he's a wolf and can take care of himself?"

"That's part of it. A bigger part is that he has a complete life there."

"You two can stop talking about me like I'm not sitting right here."

"Like you two were talking about me a little while ago, I reckon?" Chris jumped up from the bed to stand and began pacing the length of the bedroom. He shot visual daggers at both James and Troy as he paced.

The situation seemed so ridiculous the way they all insisted on protecting each other from their enemies that Troy fought laughing. Nonetheless, he agreed with James. He wanted Chris to stay here, away from the prying eyes of everyone in Wolf Creek and beyond. He wanted Chris to be safe the same way James did.

He knew he and James could take care of themselves.

"I know about the outlaw gang that's after you. I've heard the talk in town," Chris said.

"More reason for you to keep your distance," Troy said.

"What about James?"

"I'm a lawman."

"You're not indestructible."

Troy watched the two men staring each other down. He admired the way the kid stood up to James though they all knew in the end he had no chance of winning this argument—not with two against one since Troy just happened to agree with James on the issue.

Surprisingly, James conceded first. He stood, took a deep breath, and pulled the kid's stiff form into his body, holding him in a gentle but firm hug.

"I just want you safe, Chris."

"I know."

James pulled back to look at Chris, the love he felt for the boy plainly shining out of his brandy eyes. "So you'll stay here, then?"

Troy heard the appeal in James' voice. He knew how hard it was for him to make peace and soften his tone. He was a man of authority, used to men and women following his commands without question. That he deferred to the kid enough to consider his feelings and make a request said a powerful lot.

"I reckon," Chris murmured.

"It's settled, then." James gave Chris a squeeze, then reached over to grasp Troy's shoulder right before a knock sounded on the door.

"You boys awake in there? Breakfast is about ready."

"We'll be down directly," James called, and an answering snicker sounded through the door as Lucy retreated.

"I'm thinking Lucy wouldn't mind seeing you stay on until we get back," James said, and Troy laughed, knowing that the woman had instantly taken a motherly shine to the kid. He wondered why she and Caesar didn't have any kids of their own and remained curious to know their story.

“I’m thinking I wouldn’t mind staying on to help out around the ranch, do my part.” Chris smiled.

James took his face between both hands, drew him close, and gave him a deep and resounding kiss on the lips. “I’m thinking you do more than your share to help out around the ranch just keeping the owner happy.”

Troy’s heart stuttered in his chest when James included him with an intense, secret look that told Troy he had finally found a home here with James and Chris.

## Chapter 13

“What bee got in your drawers, chil’?”

Chris glanced up from grooming the horse Troy had loaned him and frowned. “Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. You’ve been moping around here since those other two left like you done lost your best friend.”

Chris shrugged and continued grooming the horse’s mane.

Lucy put a hand on his to stop him. “Any more grooming and you’ll brush the hair right offa this’un’s hide.”

“Sorry.”

“What’s vexing you, chil’?”

He didn’t want Lucy to think he didn’t appreciate her company. She and Caesar had been going out of their way to make him feel welcome, especially since James and Troy had left. After downing Lucy’s big, appetizing, multi-course breakfast, Chris had gone on a tour of the ranch with Caesar. Just as amiable as Lucy but not as talkative, Caesar took Chris riding with him, then let Chris help him tend the horses and other animals.

He knew that the couple tried to keep him busy so that his mind wouldn’t be on James and Troy. He appreciated their efforts and concern. He didn’t know how to answer Lucy without insulting her, though, or making her think that he’d rather be with James and Troy than her and Caesar, even if the latter proved true.

“You’re missing your friends.”

Chris nodded, but still didn’t say anything.

Lucy came to his side and put an arm around him.



Chris did his darnedest to keep up a brave front, refusing to cuddle close and act like the little kid that James and Troy insisted on treating him as.

“I bet they’re missing you just as much.”

“They didn’t act like it. They acted like they couldn’t wait to get rid of me.”

“What get rid of? Leaving you here in this grand home with trusted friends and caretakers is getting rid of you?”

Chris looked at her and chuckled. “You know what I mean. They wanted me to stay behind because they thought I’d be safer here than with them.”

“Can’t fault them for wanting to take care of you.”

“They treat me like a little kid.”

“Well now...” Lucy grinned and arched a brow without finishing. She ruffled his hair like she agreed with James and Troy’s assessment, and Chris laughed. He couldn’t help himself.

“How old are you anyways, chil’?”

“Twenty-one.”

“You ain’t nothing but a baby. Where your parents at?”

He hadn’t told anyone what had happened to his parents. No one had ever showed any interest, except for James and Troy, and whenever they tried to get any personal information out of him, he’d always shut down and shy away. The most he had revealed to anyone had been last night at dinner, and even then he’d only revealed where he’d come from, not anything more personal.

“They’re dead. Died in a cholera outbreak back in New York.”

“Oh, my poor baby! You’re all alone in the world.”

“Not anymore.” He said it with more confidence than he felt. Despite James and Troy’s assurances and Lucy currently gushing all over him, he felt like he *was* all alone in the world. Not to mention he feared what would happen to James and Troy on the road or when they got back to Wolf Creek. He feared that Cain outlaw getting a hold of them.

"I reckon you got a point there," Lucy agreed. "Those two do care a lot about you."

"How can you tell?" Chris asked, curious to know what she saw and heard that he didn't.

"Well, for one thing, I've never seen James so happy before, so free and laidback, and I've known him a good while to see the difference in him."

Chris just nodded, keeping his own counsel, waiting for her to go on because he knew she would, and Lucy didn't disappoint.

"And your other fella, I see the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching him, the way his eyes shine. And I hear how his voice changes when he talks to you, all husky and low. There's a lot of love there."

He liked the way she referred to James and Troy as *his*. Still, he didn't want to blind himself to the possibility that Lucy was wrong.

"Could just be plain hankering."

"Or indigestion."

Chris laughed out loud at Lucy's crack, and Lucy squeezed him close to her ample side and leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"You shouldn't doubt their feelings for you, especially since you're a right lovable little nipper."

"I am?"

Lucy nodded. "If James and Troy don't take care of you the way you should be taken care of, you just remember you've got a place with old Lucy and Caesar."

He wanted to believe her, but he wasn't so sure Caesar would feel the same way as her about what she was suggesting. "Why don't you and Caesar have any kids?" Chris blurted, and when he saw the gloomy look that came into Lucy's dark brown eyes, he immediately regretted letting his mouth run away with him.

"We've tried and tried over the years. Reckon it just ain't in the cards for us."

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. I’ve had a good life. We both have. And we’re happy together. It would have been nice to have a few nippers to spoil.”

Chris knew that she would have spoiled them rotten, too, and felt plumb bad for her. He loved her positive attitude, though, and hoped with a little luck that some of it would rub off on him the more he stuck around her, which he planned to do given the chance.

“I reckon I’ve had a good life, too, despite everything.”

“Well, like I said. You’ve got us now—me, Caesar, James, and Troy. You’ve got family, and family looks after each other.”

“So I’ve been adopted, then?”

“For certain.”

Chris wrapped his arm around Lucy and allowed himself to find the comfort he had denied himself earlier, sinking into her warm hug, inhaling her unique woman’s scent. She smelled like fresh-baked apple pie and cinnamon. She smelled like home.

“Anybody ever tell you you’d make a great mother?”

“James has mentioned it a time or two when I get on his hide about one thing or another I think he’s doing wrong or should or shouldn’t be doing.”

Chris laughed and could imagine Lucy mothering James and him allowing her to.

He’d gotten a taste of their relationship last night at dinner and this morning at breakfast, had seen the genuine affection that they had for each other—no judgment—and longed for that in his relationship with James. He longed for the marshal not to see him as a little kid but as a man who was in love with him and wanted to spend the rest of his life with him.

The thought of rejection put a mite anxiety in his heart, but if he listened to Lucy, and she proved right, then he had nothing to worry about.

The approach of a horse and wagon interrupted Chris’ quiet moment of reflection, and he looked at Lucy and raised a brow.

Lucy arched a brow in response and headed toward the barn door, Chris on her heels. They exited just as the horse and wagon with a woman at the helm pulled up several yards away from where they stood.

Recognizing Hannah made Chris' heart pound for no other reason than he thought she came with bad news of Troy and James. What other possible reason could there be for her to be out here? And when she hurriedly scrambled down from the seat and rushed toward him with an anxious and frightened look on her face, his stomach immediately lurched to know that his instincts might prove right.

"I'm so glad I found you! Troy gave me good directions, he did."

Chris approached the breathless girl, briefly eyeing her unaccustomed garb of trousers and flannel shirt that she wore. "What happened?"

"There was a shootout. Troy and that Negro marshal were bushwhacked by some gang come to Wolf Creek for Troy."

"Are they okay?" Chris and Lucy chorused.

"They wanted me to come get you and take you some place safe."

Lucy placed herself between Chris and Hannah as the young woman reached for his arm. "Well now, I don't think he's going to be going anywheres with you. You haven't answered our question. Besides, Troy and James know there's no safer place for this chil' than right where he's at. That's why they left him here in the first place."

"This ain't no concern a yours, you old heifer."

"Hannah!"

She didn't give Chris a chance to express his shock much further before she shoved Lucy out of the way and pulled a revolver from the back of her trousers to point at him. "You're coming with me now, understand?"

Chris glanced at the gun in disbelief but couldn't obey, not with Lucy sprawled in the dirt a few feet away. He moved to help her up, then froze when Hannah fired her gun in the air.

“The next one’s in her head. Makes no never mind to me whether she lives or dies, just that you...come...with...me!” Hannah grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the wagon.

Chris stumbled and caught the side of the seat to keep from landing in the dirt.

He hadn’t noticed how strong she was before now, how formidable. He had just been concerned with not hurting her feelings. This Hannah, though, was a far cry from the helpful saloon girl at Barrow’s. This Hannah was violent and far from vulnerable. And she was pointing her gun straight at Lucy’s head.

“No!” Caesar rushed out of the house at a sprint, and Hannah didn’t hesitate to turn the gun on him. He slid to a halt, arms in the air.

“I weren’t about to waste a bullet on your wench, but since you’re here, I could use an extra pair of hands.” Hannah went to the wagon and removed several lengths of rope. She tossed them at Caesar. “Tie bright eyes here to the buckboard behind the seat, and when you’re done, you can tie your woman to that tree.”

Chris watched Caesar’s jaw work as he gritted his teeth.

“I don’t want to waste any bullets, but if I have to, your woman will be the first one I drill one into, believe me.”

“No, don’t. I’ll do what you ask.” Caesar bent to pick up the rope and approached Chris with a rueful look on his face. “Sorry, boy.”

Caesar helped Chris up into the buckboard, then under Hannah’s instructions and watchful gaze, he made Chris sit with his back to the front seat and his wrists behind his back, then tied his wrists to the sturdy wood frame of the wagon seat.

Chris had flashes of Troy and James binding his wrists to the bed last night. He’d never felt safer or more protected then. Not like now. Now he feared for his life and those of his new friends Lucy and Caesar.

Hannah checked the ropes binding Chris’ wrists once Caesar completed his task, grunting with satisfaction. Chris could have saved her the trouble and told her there was absolutely no way he could get

out of his restraints, not that Hannah would have believed him, anyway.

At gunpoint, Caesar helped his wife over to the tall, nearby oak and proceeded to tie her to its trunk.

Chris watched them, felt tears in his own eyes as he watched tears roll down the older couple's faces. Each looked at the other with love and trust shining out of their eyes. It was as if they knew they would come out of this fine because they were together.

A ball of regret and fear tightened in his chest as he thought about dying alone, shot by Hannah without ever have the chance to tell Troy and James how he really felt about them. Shot dead before he could hear from them how they felt about him. Caesar had just finished tying Lucy to the tree when Hannah approached him from behind, raised her gun, and brought the butt down hard against the back of Caesar's skull.

"No!" Lucy struggled against her bindings, growling low in her throat.

There was such unaccustomed rage on her face, Chris thought had she been able to get out of her ropes she might have killed Hannah with her bare hands.

"You didn't have to hurt him like that."

"You should be grateful I didn't shoot him."

Lucy glanced up at Hannah with hatred in her eyes, but it didn't seem to affect the young woman, and Chris wondered why Hannah seemed so heartless. Wondered why she did this.

Hannah pulled a folded piece of paper from a pocket of her trousers and dropped it onto Lucy's lap. "That'll explain everything to your precious marshal and Troy when they get back. They'll know where to find me and their darling..." Hannah paused and turned to Chris, her lips curling in disgust as she said, "Boy."

"There's no need to hurt that chil'. Whatever beef you have with James and Troy you take that up with them."

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, you old biddy. Don’t make me change my mind about shooting you, or I’ll just take my chances and trust the marshal and Troy to find my note on your dead body.”

Chris struggled against his ropes and shouted, “Stop threatening her! She hasn’t done anything to you.”

Hannah circled the wagon until she stood next to the buckboard, glaring at him for a long moment before she walked away, out of his line of sight. She returned several moments later, wielding a kerchief and a burlap sack. He tensed as she approached, and she paused, a smile on her face.

“Give me a hard time and I’ll put you to sleep like I did your friend back there.”

Chris sat still as she closed the space between them, determined not to show her his fear.

He knew he needed to keep his wits about him. He needed to stay aware. Even if she did blindfold and gag him, he wouldn’t let himself panic or be totally helpless.

Hannah put the kerchief in his mouth and tied it tight behind his head, then slid the dark sack down over his head.

Chris had to force himself to stay calm despite feeling like he suffocated. He felt like he had when those hands had him bound and gagged in that barn ready to do unspeakable things to him. He felt ashamed and vulnerable, like what happened to him now remained all his fault.

He listened as Hannah climbed up into the wagon seat and clicked her tongue at the horse. The wagon shot forward with Hannah in control.

She wasn’t in control of Chris, though. He wouldn’t let her be.

Chris perked up his ears to listen to his surroundings as the buckboard bumped and jerked over the ground.

They rode for a long while before Chris heard the familiar ebb and flow of a stream.

The memorable aroma of the forest and sounds of a nearby waterfall overwhelmed him so much until he had no doubt where Hannah headed.

His stomach lurched at the idea that Troy's secret cove would be corrupted by whatever malicious plans she had for him, Troy, and James.

The wagon stopped without warning, and Chris listened as Hannah jumped down from the seat and walked around the wagon to him. She snatched off the burlap sack, then pulled the kerchief out of his mouth and left it down around his neck.

"Ain't nobody out here to hear you scream, and if there are, well, I'll just take care of them right and proper." She wielded the gun in front of his face as if to remind him that she remained the one giving orders and he remained just a slave to her will.

She leaned back on her heels to stare at him a moment as if trying to decide what to do with him, and Chris stared right back, refusing to be cowed.

He couldn't, however, stop his curiosity from getting the best of him and blurted, "What now?"

"Now we wait." She moved her hand so fast Chris didn't know what hit him. One minute he sat staring at her, and the next the back of his head exploded with exquisite pain until there remained nothing but silent darkness.



## **Chapter 14**

Something was wrong. Troy could feel it in his bones. He'd been feeling off since he and James had hit the road en route to Wolf Creek, and the feeling had only intensified the closer they got to town.

His feelings had not been mistaken.

Troy and James had been bushwhacked by Cain and his gang just after entering the town proper. If it hadn't been for Bart and several of the other town's men who'd come to their aid, the undertaker might just be sizing him and James for a pair of coffins now.

Neither Cain nor his men had gone down easily, however, and once James had him and his remaining men, who had only been injured and not killed, in custody and settled in the local jail, Troy had been able to breathe a little easier. He'd thought the misgivings he'd been experiencing since they'd left James' home were over, that he had no more reason to feel uneasy.

This thought proved wrong, however.

"What's troubling you, young'un?"

He still hadn't grown accustomed to James calling him young'un. He'd been on his own, taking care of himself and without anyone much to care whether he lived or died, besides maybe Josie and Josiah, that he didn't think of himself as anyone's young'un. Except when James looked at him with the concern and stern look that he looked at him with now, he felt like a teenager still missing his father, still needing guidance.

"I'm not sure, just that..." A sudden blinding flash of pain attacked the back of Troy's head. He felt almost as if he had been

shot. He closed his eyes against the pain and bent forward on his horse, gasping for breath.

“Troy, what’s the matter?”

He shook his head, unable to speak, unsure if, when he did, James would believe him. He pulled his horse to a stop, and felt James do the same beside him. He took several long moments to catch his breath, still reeling with pain and the vision he had witnessed.

He opened his eyes to see James’ anxious expression and shook his head. “It’s not over.”

“What’s not over?”

“Chris is in trouble.” He didn’t know how or why he knew, but he knew something had happened, was happening, to the kid as surely as he could shift to wolf. “We need to hurry.” Troy spurred his horse into a gallop.

Wordlessly, James followed suit. Troy could hear the hoof beats of James’ horse dogging Troy’s horse’s heels. He remained glad he didn’t have to waste time explaining any more than necessary when time proved of the utmost importance.

Troy saw the felled bodies behind the barn, and his heart tripped.

“Oh, Lord, no!” James saw them too and brought his horse to a stop before leaping off and running to Lucy and Caesar at the large oak.

Troy got off his horse before the animal fully stopped, running behind James and skidding to a stop just beside him. He watched as James bent to untie Lucy’s bindings.

Troy made himself useful tending to Caesar, who slowly came around at his prompting.

“Lordy, is he all right?” Lucy asked, ringing her hands.

Troy helped Caesar to his feet, and held on as the man steadied himself against the tree.

Lucy stood on the other side of him and wrapped an arm around her husband’s waist.

"I'll be all right. Don't worry about me none," Caesar assured them. "It's that boy you need to worry about."

"Chris? Where'd he get off to?" Troy asked. The heart in his throat clogged it so much he was surprised he could get the words out.

Lucy handed over a folded piece of paper, wiping tears from her eyes with her free hand as Troy took it.

He unfolded the paper and quickly read, the words running together as his vision blurred with apprehension.

"Some young lady came out here in a wagon, threatened us all with a gun, and had Caesar tie Chris to the buckboard. Strangest thing, Chris seemed to know her. He called her—"

"Hannah," Troy rasped when he got to the signature at the end of the note.

"The young dancehall girl from your saloon?" James asked.

Troy nodded, handing the note over to James. "She wants both of us to come out to the cove." He looked at James as James read the note, and when James looked up at him with the same confused look that Troy knew he wore, Troy said what was on both their minds.

"Why?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out." James turned to Lucy and Caesar, forehead creased with concern. "You two going to be all right?"

"We're right as rain," Lucy quickly assured him. "You two hurry on now and get that boy back. I don't trust that little hussy far as I can throw her not to hurt him. She was a mean little thing. Mean as a rattler."

The description seemed so far removed from the Hannah that Troy knew, so far removed from the young waif he had taken in and given a job to two years ago, that it made his head spin with disbelief.

Hannah couldn't have been much older than Chris.

What made her such a heartless criminal? What made a young thing like that resort to kidnapping and violence, and why strike against the three of them? Troy had been nothing but kind to her since

he'd met her, had only tried his best to help her because he knew what it was like to be alone in the world. What beef could she possibly have with him, Chris, or James?

Rather than dwell on the why, he concentrated on locating Chris, concentrated on connecting with the link that had been established at the point when Troy felt the pain in his head. He tried to home in on that link and found it non-existent. It was as if a light had been snuffed out.

He swallowed hard when he remembered how intense, how blinding the pain had been.

Christ, he hoped Hannah hadn't shot Chris or worse. Troy couldn't countenance a world without that kid in it. He didn't want to exist in one without Chris.

Except there remained James, and Troy did love both the younger and older man dearly.

He looked at James and saw his fear hovering just under the surface, but like Troy, he tried to keep it at bay—for Chris.

It still didn't stop James from rushing off to mount his horse as soon as he finished reading the note and pocketing it.

"Where are you going?"

"To find them."

"Not so fast." Troy approached James' horse and grabbed the reins with one hand as he pet the animal's head with his other. "We need to devise a plan before we run off half-cocked."

He watched James close his eyes and take a deep breath. Several moments later, he opened his eyes to look at Troy and nodded.

"You're right, so what do you suggest?"

Troy smiled, for the first time in a long while feeling in control, like he could finally contribute to something with his God-given scenting and tracking skills that didn't only involve killing and maiming another human.

He moved closer to James as James leaned forward. "Here's what we're going to do..."

\* \* \* \*

“Finally decided to rejoin the living, sleepy head?”

Sleepy head? He hadn't fallen asleep. He'd been knocked out cold thanks to Hannah.

Chris struggled to a sitting position, using the tree at his back for leverage. Once he got his bearings, he blinked to bring his kidnapper into focus, the glaring light from Hannah's campfire keeping his vision blurry.

“Didn't expect you to stay out so long.”

“You hit me pretty hard.”

“Sorry, don't know my own strength, I reckon.”

Chris grimaced at her sarcastic tone. “I reckon not.”

“Glad you woke up to join the party as I reckon your friends will be here directly.”

“How long was I out?”

“Couple of hours.”

He wondered what she had been doing all that time to occupy herself and felt suddenly dirty and defenseless despite the fact he was awake now. Two hours unconscious in the presence of someone who meant him no good left a body feeling decidedly exposed.

“Thirsty?” Hannah held a tin cup full of cool water to his lips, and Chris gratefully ducked his head and took his fill without even thinking about what might be in it besides water before he pulled back to glare at her.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

“I'm not being nice, just protecting my investment. For the time being, anyway. We wouldn't want James and Troy to think I've been mistreating you.”

“Do you really care what they think?”

“I care more than other people seem to.”

Chris frowned. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“What it means, my dear perverted boy, is that had you been paying attention to who and what you were getting mixed up with, maybe you wouldn’t be in the predicament you’re in.”

“Are you talking about my relationship with James and Troy?”

“Blasphemous is what it is, just plain against nature.”

“And I suppose what you’re doing is okay in God’s eyes?”

Hannah pulled a big, shiny hunting knife out of her boot, and Chris tensed, pressing himself back against the tree as if to become one with it and escape Hannah’s notice.

He really needed to cut back on the bravado when he was tied up and at the practical mercy of someone so obviously off her mental reservation.

Hannah stared at the ground intently, using the tip of her knife to gouge deep grooves in the dirt between her legs for several silent moments.

Chris waited for her to come at him and cut his throat for being such a smart aleck.

Instead, she raised her head to look him directly in the eyes, the fire beside her casting an unnatural glow across her face. Her hazel eyes glimmered like the fire and sent a chill down Chris’ spine. She raised her knife to point at him.

“I really don’t have anything against you, you know—not you or Troy. He’s been good to me. He has. Sometimes he even reminds me of my brothers the way he likes to take care of people and make sure they’re okay. Protective like, you know what I mean?”

Chris silently nodded. He knew exactly what she meant. He had been the recipient of Troy’s care and concern since he’d landed in Wolf Creek several days ago. He also knew the best thing for him to do was to keep Hannah talking about herself and her life. Maybe then she’d forget about him for a while and what she had planned for him, Troy, and James. Maybe, if he kept her talking long enough, he could find out what those plans were. He had to get her to reveal herself, because if he got out of this alive, he wanted to be able to give James

and Troy as much information about Hannah as possible, anything that would help them all make sense of this.

So if she didn't have anything against him and Troy that left...James?

She satisfied his curiosity with her next words. "It's that colored marshal, it is. He's the one I'm after. He's the one that really deserves to be punished."

Chris winced at the ugly way she said the word, wondered how James dealt with her sort of attitude and hatred every day of his life as Chris knew he had.

"You don't like me maligning your precious lawman, do you?"

"What has he ever done to you to deserve your judgment?"

"He took the best things in my life away from me!"

Chris flinched as she lunged forward, waving the knife right under his nose.

*Whoa, easy now, pardner.*

He waited in silence while Hannah settled back on her heels, simultaneously slipping the knife back in her boot. She took several deep breaths as if to get a hold of her emotions.

"I didn't mean to yell at you."

"It's okay."

"It's just that I get so all-fired angry when I think about that high-and-mighty lawman and what he's taken from me."

"What...what did he take from you?"

"My brothers, Connor and Court. He's got them rotting in some jail cell. Where they don't belong, I might add."

Oh, boy, he had to tread carefully with his next words. How did he ask what her brothers had done without sounding accusatory or making it seem that her brothers deserved whatever James had seen fit to do to them? He knew James would never have arrested anyone who didn't deserve it.

"What did James claim they did?"

“The *marshal* claims they’re outlaws. They ain’t hardly no such thing. They’re just family men trying to provide for the ones they care about is all. They did what they had to do, and the marshal arrested them for it.”

Just like he thought, the girl wouldn’t see the truth of things, too blinded by the idea of her noble brothers suffering at the hands of the law unjustly. It wouldn’t matter what Chris said to her now. She had her mind made up, and he remained sure her brothers were probably more than a little responsible for her determination.

He had to try to get to her, though.

“Your brothers older or younger?”

“They’re both older. They left home to make a way for me and our mama, make sure we had enough to live comfortable-like.”

Chris reckoned he knew how Connor and Court had *made a way* for their sister and mama. They’d probably done what so many other young men who didn’t follow the cowboy and mining paths did. They’d resorted to easy money, robbing and stealing. He’d seen it over and over since he’d come out West. Connor and Court’s kind was the exact kind—out for a quick fortune, no matter what they had to do to get it—who kept James and his kind in business.

He cleared his throat before saying, “I reckon you would miss them.”

“Something terrible. They’re my only family left now after my mama died. And it’s your marshal’s fault! She died of a broken heart, she did. Died grieving my brothers’ imprisonment.”

God, this was getting out of hand. Seemed no matter what he said or did, he set the girl off. Chris had to get out of the—

He caught movement from the corner of his eye, something in the shadows.

Hannah peered into the darkness beyond Chris’ right shoulder.

Had she caught it, too?

She quickly bounded to her feet and dusted off her trousers. “Enough dilly-dallying. We need to get ready for our guests.”



"I reckon you're right."

Chris released the breath he had been holding. He never thought he'd be so happy to hear anyone's voice in the whole world as he was right then when James stepped out of the darkness to his right with his hands raised.

That didn't explain the movement he'd caught on his left, however. He didn't think even James could move that fast.

*Troy!*

Chris' heart pounded as James slowly approached Hannah.

"That's far enough, marshal."

James stopped when Hannah moved to Chris' side and held her gun just under his chin.

God, she was fast, as fast with the gun as she seemed with the knife.

He knew her threatening him wouldn't stop James, though. He knew that James had more up his sleeve than met the eye. He had Troy lurking in the shadows, waiting for his chance to take Hannah down.

"Why don't you just put the gun down so we can talk about this?"

"You mean so you can arrest me like you arrested my brothers."

"Your brothers?"

"Connor and Court?" Hannah raised a brow and waved her gun at James with impatience. "Oh, come on now, marshal. I know you heard it all. You know why I've brought you here."

"And you know I was only doing my job. The job the people of this territory and Judge Parker hired me to do."

"You weren't hired to arrest God-fearing men and good providers like my brothers."

James nodded. "I'm sure they were only doing what they felt they needed to do."

"Damn right."

"As was I."

“Don’t think you and your fancy talk is going to get you and your boy out of this. It’s just your tough luck, I reckon, that you arrested the wrong two men. And I’m aiming to get my revenge.”

“Before you do that, why don’t you let the young’un go? He doesn’t have anything to do with this, now does he?”

“That’s for certain. It’s you I want.”

“And you’ve got me.” James spread his arms wide as if offering himself up for whatever retribution Hannah had planned for him.

Chris heard the growl before he saw Troy.

He gasped at the sight of the large gray wolf stalking toward them out of the forest.

Hannah whirled at the noise, gun raised in the wolf’s direction.

Troy prowled forward.

Hannah began squeezing the trigger.

“No!” Chris flung himself forward, his shoulder bumping into Hannah’s leg and knocking her off-balance.

As payback, Hannah managed to clip him on the side of the head with the butt of her gun when she went down on one knee.

Troy howled, the sound rumbling up from deep in his throat as Chris collapsed, dazed.

Hannah grabbed Chris around the scruff of the neck and pushed the barrel of her gun against his temple where she’d hit him.

“Let him go, Hannah. You don’t have to do this.”

Chris didn’t know how James remained so calm and realized when he looked into the marshal’s eyes, even through his blurred vision, that James wasn’t calm at all. In fact, he looked terrified, not like he had been when Hannah’s brother had held Nellie hostage the same way Hannah held Chris hostage.

“Well now, I reckon I do.” Hannah’s grip tightened around the collar of his shirt until she almost choked him. Troy growled again, and she dragged Chris with her toward the fire as James and Troy slowly flanked her.

“You two abominations need to keep your distance, or I promise you both I’m going to fill him full of lead.”

“I don’t think you will, honey. You would have done it by now,” James said, and Chris saw the slight tremor of his hands despite how steady his voice had sounded.

“I’m not your honey.” Hannah gritted her teeth and pressed the muzzle of her gun harder against Chris’ head. “Stay back.”

Chris winced, more from the thought of Hannah turning her gun on James or Troy and shooting them rather than from any physical pain the gun muzzle caused.

“I’m staying back.”

“And call your animal off.”

Chris knew Troy understood every word Hannah said and obviously chose not to listen, for when James glanced over Hannah’s shoulder, his eyes widened and he shook his head ever so slightly.

Hannah didn’t have time to react before Troy took a flying leap forward and clamped his teeth down on her wrist.

She screamed and dropped the gun, furiously beating against the wolf’s large head with her free hand.

Chris scrambled back on his hands and heels, gulping down air as James picked him up and carried him out of the line of fire.

Hannah went for the knife in her boot, raising it overhead and quickly plunging the blade into the back of Troy’s shoulder. Troy yelped but instantly clamped his jaws back down on Hannah’s wrist with renewed vigor and strength.

Hannah shrieked and raised the knife for another attack, but a shot rang out before she could thrust the knife again.

Troy released his hold the same second that Hannah flew back, a red splotch darkening and quickly spreading across shirtfront.

The wolf moved haltingly, lurching over to where Chris and James sat. He nudged the top of his head against James’ hand and whimpered.

“Lord, what did she do to you?” James ran his palm gently down the animal’s pelt.

Chris got up on his knees, removing the kerchief from around his neck. He found a tin cup of water that hadn’t been overturned and soaked the kerchief in it before coming back to tend to Troy’s wounded shoulder.

“She got him really good.”

“She did.”

Chris glanced up to catch James’ glance, and James’ hand froze in Troy’s fur. “I knew you’d come for me,” he whispered.

“Troy found you. Without him locking onto your scent, it would have been a mite harder for me to track you. It would have taken me longer alone, anyway.”

Chris nodded and bent his head to cradle a cheek against Troy’s pelt as the animal lay on his side as if exhausted. “He’s going to be all right, isn’t he?”

“Troy’s going to be all right. We all will be now.”

## **Epilogue**

### *Hayden Homestead - Oklahoma Territory – 1877*

Choctaw tribal healer, Miakoda, stood at the edge of the forest, waiting for his prophecy to come to pass.

When the wagon bearing his old friend Nayati at the helm burst out of the forest edging Nayati's property, Miakoda remained unsurprised.

Nayati pulled the wagon to a stop and jumped down from the front seat before the wagon had come to a complete stop.

"Miakoda!"

"I had a vision, Nayati."

"Lucy and Caesar...?"

"The woman and man who take care of your home and property are inside awaiting your arrival. I assured them that you would return soon and need the services of my healing skills. They are preparing a room for your friend as I requested."

Nayati nodded and ran around to the back of the wagon to help one of the white men down from the buckboard. "This is Troy Barrow, and he was injured out on a hunt."

"You do not need to explain. I have seen all I need to know."

Nayati and the other young white man held up Troy between them, then wordlessly followed Miakoda into the house and upstairs to the master bedroom where Miakoda's belongings awaited. Once Nayati and the young white man got Troy situated in bed, Miakoda banished them from the room and closed the door in their faces so that he could concentrate on their friend and begin his work.

\* \* \* \*

“He was so weak,” Chris whispered, his voice revealing all the hopelessness and fear that James fought to deny. He did not want to think what it would be like to lose one of the men he loved so soon after accepting his feelings.

“He called you Nayati. Why?”

“It’s a tribal name. Miakoda gave it to me when I lived with the Choctaw.”

“What does it mean?”

James just silently shook his head. It wasn’t important what it meant, not to him, not anymore, because he knew exactly what he wanted and had found it in Chris and Troy.

He looked at Chris pacing by the fireplace and noticed the dark circles beneath the manchild’s eyes and the welt on his temple. Regret choked his vocal chords that he, his job, had almost been the cause of Chris’ death.

“You should eat,” he blurted, sounding more like Lucy than himself.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Lucy’ll have my hide if I look like I’m not taking care of you.”

Chris only smiled.

“You need to keep up your strength. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

“I’ll feel better once I know that Troy’s okay.”

Despite the promise he’d made to Chris back at the cove, James found it increasingly difficult to believe that Troy would recover. He’d witnessed the wolf’s miraculous healing ability, had witnessed Troy healing his wound before they’d started their trek home. He’d insisted on changing to human form for the trip home, though, and the shift had taken a lot out of him. Maybe more than he could spare. James jerked his head up at the sound of a creak on the staircase.

Miakoda descended the last few steps and stood at the bottom of the landing with both hands folded in front of him. "It is done."

Chris came forward, his anxiety rolling off of him in waves. "He's all right?"

Miakoda looked at him for a long time before responding, and even then he didn't do it verbally. Rather, he reached out his hand to rest on Chris' shoulder and closed his eyes.

The silence proved deafening until Miakoda opened his eyes and smiled at Chris.

The sight proved so out of character that James almost gasped.

"The shifter waits for you."

Chris didn't waste time confirming what Miakoda had inferred with his reassuring actions. He simply ran up the stairs to see Troy.

Miakoda fixed James with a stare and stopped him with a hand when James made to follow. "You have changed, old friend."

"I no longer wrestle." James knew the truth of it as soon as he said it.

"You should go. Your men need you."

James silently nodded and followed Chris' path up the stairs to the master bedroom.

He opened the door to find Troy sitting up in bed, a gauze bandage wrapped around his upper torso from front to back, the whiteness clashing with the olive tint of his skin.

Chris sat on the bed beside him, clutching one of Troy's hands in a death grip and smiling. James crossed the floor to the bed, knowing the truth of Miakoda's words.

Troy and Chris were his men, and they did need him.

However, no one in the world could ever know how much he needed and loved the both of them—until now.

He smiled at both men before sitting on the bed beside Troy, opposite Chris, and taking Troy's free hand. In that moment, he realized he had found exactly who and what he had been searching for. He had found exactly who and what he needed in his life.

**THE END**





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