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Cara Covington

LOVE UNDER
TWO
LAWMEN

The
LOST
Collection



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MENAGE EVERLASTING



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LOVE UNDER TWO LAWMEN

CARA COVINGTON

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Chapter 1

One thing Amanda Dupree had learned in her twenty-two years of life was how to recognize trouble. As the train she rode pulled in to the station in Waco, Texas, she saw trouble, a double dose of it, standing on the platform.

Both men looked tall, dark, and dangerous. Her gaze took in the chiseled jaw and high cheekbones of one, and the softer, almost pretty countenance of the other. Their clothes appeared clean and a cut above what she envisioned Texas cowboys would wear. Then the taller and more muscular of the two moved slightly, and the sun glinted off the gold and silver badge pinned to his vest.

Amanda's back stiffened, her muscles tensed, and her stomach felt as if everything in it turned to bile. She kept her eyes on the lawman as the train came to a complete stop. His gun remained holstered, a good thing, and the expression on his face seemed relaxed.

Perhaps he wasn't waiting to arrest her.

Generally speaking, Amanda didn't go around judging people, another lesson she'd learned early on. Such had been her life that to do so would have made her, in her own opinion, a hypocrite.

Hypocrisy flourished well enough in the world without any help from her.

The man not wearing the polished metal leaned closer to the lawman and said something to him. The lawman laughed and that laughter transformed him. Amanda could only stare at the difference, at the sheer beauty of his smile. And then he turned his head and locked his gaze on hers.

Oh, God. Her bones melted and tiny flutters came to life all over her body. The sensations rocked her to her soul, and it seemed as if the entire world suddenly stopped. Amanda's chest felt tight. She realized she'd stopped breathing. Shaking her head, she drew in one deep draught of air, and then another.

He's only a man. How many men have you seen in your life? Enough to know they're nothing special. As Mamma would say, they're all the same under their clothes.

He *was* only a man, but he'd jostled her nerves and heated her blood where none ever had before. He wore a badge and was waiting just there, right where she would very shortly be standing. Maybe his presence had nothing to do with her, but she'd never believed in coincidence. This had to be a prime example of bad timing.

The urge to flee, to escape, flooded her, making her heart pound and her knees weak. But she couldn't run away, because she'd already done that, and here was where she'd landed. Here she would begin the next phase of her journey. She took one moment to think about that, to remember why she'd chosen Waco, and all that she hoped to accomplish beginning right here, right now.

If the lawman waiting there on the platform had come to arrest her, she'd find a way out, or around, or through whatever charges he laid. And if worse came to worse, she had the name of a lawyer in this frontier town, a friend of her best friend back home.

She'd hoped she'd outdistanced trouble. Jonathan Marley had made a fortune on the back of the recovery efforts not only in her own Richmond, but all across the south. He'd not only made money, he'd spent a fair penny buying up city officials, law officers, whoever could aid him in his cause.

In other words, Marley was a big fish that Amanda had helped to net, and he'd not been very happy about it. The last she heard, he'd fled capture, vowing to get her if it was the last thing he ever did. It could very well be he had a reach that extended to Texas. She inhaled deeply and reached down for her courage. She wouldn't let Marley win.

This lawman might manage to sidetrack her, but he wouldn't stop her from doing what she was meant to do.

Bolstered, she got to her feet and reached for her luggage.

"Please, allow me, ma'am."

Unused to the deference of strangers, Amanda stood back while the conductor lifted her valise. Truthfully, she was grateful for the courtesy. She'd packed as few clothes as she believed she could get away with, but the single piece of luggage still weighed a lot.

"Thank you." Her smile widened when the man blushed in response.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Dupree."

Her mother had advised her to assume the role of a widow while traveling. The suggestion had been a sound one. Single ladies did *not* travel across country alone. A widow, on the other hand, embarking on a journey to join family after the passing of her husband, would be able to travel not only without censure, but would also win the gallant assistance of whatever gentleman she encountered.

Amanda reminded herself there was no reason for the conductor, or anyone she encountered here in this unfamiliar place, *not* to treat her with respect. Richmond, Virginia, could have existed in another world for all the notice anyone here would have of the goings on there. At least, since the reverse was true, she hoped no one here had any close connection to her beloved home.

The only possible exception to that optimistic theory was Jonathan Marley. He had money, and life had taught her one additional lesson, and that was when a person had enough money, they could do anything they wanted, usually with impunity.

“You have kin meeting you here, ma’am?”

The conductor looked as if he would step in and fill the void if she answered in the negative. Amanda tried not to wince or make it apparent she was withdrawing from the well-meaning man. There was deference, and then there was interference.

Used to doing for herself, yet unwilling to offend, Amanda said, “Yes, I’m certain someone will come.”

Of course, that was an outright lie. She’d sent a letter ahead but hadn’t had time to see if her cousin replied or not. She’d needed to leave Richmond quickly, and so for all she knew, this cousin she’d neither met nor even heard of before a couple of months ago could have sent a refusal.

The conductor nodded and then proceeded to lead the way out of the rail car carrying her luggage. He moved quickly enough that he was able to set her valise down on the ground then turn to offer her a hand down the two steps from the train.

“Thank you so much for your kindnesses, sir.”

“Like I said, my pleasure, Mrs. Dupree.” The man nodded and tipped his cap.

Amanda kept her back to the trouble she’d spotted out the train window, watching the conductor as he made his way into the station building. She needed a few seconds to find her balance and school her features. She had traveled as a widow and she could see no need to change that persona now, either.

She heard their approach, their footsteps slow, deliberate, and in unison. In her peripheral vision, she saw the men stop a few feet behind her.

“Excuse me? Are you *Miss* Amanda Dupree?”

The Texan accent differed from the Virginian in that it seemed just a bit edgier, a little less of a drawl. Amanda fixed a look of confusion on her face and turned toward the men. They had her full name and knew she was unwed. That couldn’t be good.

They were so handsome up close, the two of them. They stole her breath and caused her brain to stop working.

It took her several seconds to realize she needed to say something.

“You want to know because?” The evasive challenge was the best she could come up with for the moment. Why didn’t her usually quick brain rush to her rescue instead of supplying her such unsophisticated words?

The late afternoon sun glinted off the lawman’s badge. He stood close enough she could clearly make out the words “Texas Rangers” etched top and bottom of a circle surrounding a star.

The Ranger tilted his head to the side, his expression thoughtful. Clearly he’d not appreciated her response. His companion chuckled.

“I could say we want to know because we’re nosy,” the Ranger said. “But the truth is we’ve been asked to meet you. Your cousin was unable to make the journey into town herself.”

“And so she sent a lawman to meet me?”

The lawman’s eyes twinkled at that, and his face split into a wide grin. “Oh, it’s worse than that. She sent you two. I’m Adam Kendall, Captain of the Waco division of the Texas Rangers. This is Warren Jessop, a lawyer here in town.”

“Terence’s friend!” Such relief filled Amanda she thought she might need to sit down for a moment until she regained the strength in her legs.

“He sent me a telegram to let me know your arrival was imminent,” Mr. Jessop said. “But we’d already promised Sarah we’d keep an eye out for you.”

“Oh.” Amanda shook her head, completely ashamed of her sudden inability to converse intelligently. “So you’re acquainted with Sarah Maddox?”

“Sarah Benedict, now,” the Ranger said.

“Benedict? Well, good for her. Terence said there’d been some nasty business involving that Maddox character a few months back.”

“There was, indeed. And we’re not only acquainted with Sarah, we consider her as close as if she were our kin. Which prompts me to ask, Miss Dupree, why my being a lawman makes you nervous?”

How was she supposed to answer that? Her plan had been to come here with a fresh history, as a lady of Virginian society. Something told her, though, that if she lied now, Captain Kendall would know it immediately. Both he and his lawyer friend seemed like they’d be quite capable of keeping her from meeting with her cousin, and she really needed to talk with her,

“Not all lawmen are honest.” Amanda kept her tone gentle while daring to hold Captain Kendall’s gaze. His eyes were the lightest blue she’d ever seen. Looking into them made her feel hot and fluttery. In a whimsical moment she wondered if he could see into her very soul.

“An unfortunate truth that doesn’t even begin to answer my question,” Kendall said.

It was some comfort to her that her assessment of the man’s ability to discern prevarication had just been proven, even if it did put her in a difficult spot.

No going back.

No, there could be no going back for her, not until she’d accomplished what she’d set out to do. She hadn’t exactly burned her bridges behind her, but unless and until the situation changed back home, she was stuck. She would tell him the truth, then.

“And some lawmen who aren’t honest might be open to bribes. Like those offered by a rich if crooked businessman bent on revenge.”

Captain Kendall searched her gaze as if he could read the truth of her words there. When the corner of his mouth tilted up in a small smile, Amanda had to tamp down the surprising urge to lean closer and taste that smile with her tongue.

She’d never entertained such a thought or urge in her life!

“Did you somehow bring yourself to the attention of such a man, Miss Dupree?”

An innocent enough question, but combined with the slight leer, it told her that he'd judged her and come up with only one label, the label she'd worn all her life, even if it was undeserved.

Arrogant bastard.

Maybe she was misreading that expression of his, but if she was right, he'd just managed to move himself into the same category as every other man she'd ever met. Men who took one look at her and decided she was no lady. Well, every man except for Terence.

"You could say that, Captain Kendall. I discovered that he and an associate, a banker, were stealing money from depositors and investors, and I ensured the authorities were made aware of that fact."

"Do I infer that the lawmen in that case were dishonest, then?" Mr. Jessop asked.

"On the contrary, sir. They were most honest and acted on the tip. They arrested the banker."

"But not the businessman?" Captain Kendall asked.

"No. He escaped capture. Right after he threatened to kill me."

"Quite an adventure for a young lady of society to find herself embroiled in," the Ranger said.

Amanda's attraction to the handsome lawman seemed to be burning off at lightning pace, replaced by irritation. Her mother constantly warned her about her red-haired temper. Unfortunately, when that temper got stirred, she tended to forget her mother's warnings.

"Yes, it would be, *if* I were a young lady of society."

She had the first clue she was being teased when she noticed the lawyer struggling to keep a straight face. The Ranger didn't bother to hide his mirth and instead laughed, and poked at her some more.

"Ah, so you're not a young lady...of society." Captain Kendall seemed to be having a fine time.

That's it. She just barely restrained herself from either slapping the man's face or stomping on his foot, even though she realized he was teasing her.

“No,” Amanda said, and took one step forward until she could breathe in his scent and feel the heat from his body. “I’m a private investigator.”

* * * *

Adam wanted to strip the red-haired beauty down to her skin and thoroughly explore her passion. No doubt about it, Miss Amanda Dupree had lots of passion.

Her green eyes snapped temper, and he swore she was actually vibrating as he teased her. He slid a sly glance toward Warren, not surprised to discover his lover looking at the woman with lust in his eyes. They both had, on occasion, enjoyed intimate encounters with attractive women.

Miss Amanda Dupree certainly filled that bill. She also seemed completely unaware of the nature of their interest and scrutiny. She was too busy trying to get in Adam’s face.

Sarah would have his hide if her cousin arrived at the ranch upset. Time, he guessed, to bring the situation under control.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re pitifully easy to tease?”

Amanda blinked at him as if he’d just spoken a foreign language and took one half step away from him. He missed feeling her heat and knew from the way she furrowed her brow she’d not realized she’d moved quite so close to him.

“Actually, I’m known for my calm demeanor.”

“No, you *used* to be known for your calm demeanor.” Warren tried not to laugh when he said that. Then he nodded toward her valise.

“Did you have just this one piece of luggage and your carpet bag?”

“What? Oh, yes.”

Warren hefted the valise and turned toward where they’d tied the horses and buckboard.

"It'll take us a couple of hours to get to the Benedict spread." Adam scooped the carpet bag and followed his lover. "They're going to hold dinner for us, so we should be heading out."

"A couple of hours? I thought Sarah lived in Waco."

Adam turned and gave her what he knew was a considering look. "A couple of hours *is* just right outside of town."

"Back home, a couple of hours' journey is clear into the next county."

"Things are different in Texas." Adam placed Amanda's carpet bag on the back of the wagon, beside her valise. Warren stepped up into the driver's seat, so Adam lifted Amanda onto the seat beside him, laughing when she squeaked.

Adam's horse, Houston, was tied beside the wagon. Warren had spent the night at the Benedict ranch the previous evening, as he'd needed to go over some ongoing legal matters with Sarah and Caleb and Joshua. Early this morning, he'd driven one of their two-horse buckboards into town in order to provide the easterner with a ride to the ranch.

"Ready?" Warren asked.

Amanda nodded, even though she still looked dazed. She took a moment to scan her surroundings. Then she turned in her seat to face Warren.

Adam mounted his horse and came alongside.

"I just told you I'm a private investigator, and neither of you batted an eye or made any kind of comment in response. Don't you believe me?"

"Of course we believe you," Warren said.

"And you're not going to tell me that a woman's place is in the home?"

"Why would either of us say something we don't necessarily believe?" Adam looked ahead, then back at Amanda.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Adam clicked, and his horse began to walk. Warren snapped the reins of the horses hitched

to the buckboard. The wheels creaked as the small wagon began to move.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he noted Amanda, sitting in the wagon, still looked confused. That was fine. They had two hours between here and the Benedict's ranch, plenty of time to explain things, and plenty of time to satisfy some of his curiosity.

The woman was a private investigator, and he'd bet she figured a few things out on her own before long.

Like the fact that both he and Warren were very attracted to her.

Chapter 2

Amanda had been born and raised in the city of Richmond, Virginia. While she had traveled outside the city with her mother from time to time and had even taken the train to New York City once, she couldn't say she'd ever encountered so much empty space as she had in this last week journeying west.

She was also getting very tired of traveling.

Autumn had arrived, and yet the heat of summer seemed to linger here. The grass, shorter and coarser looking than back home, was saved from being all brown by holding tenaciously to streaks of green.

The buckboard's movements were neither as smooth nor as gentle as the train, which hadn't been smooth or gentle at all. She wondered if her bottom would ever recover from the abuse it had suffered so far on this journey.

Mr. Jessop had made a little polite conversation while they were yet in Waco, but once they'd left the city behind, he'd fallen silent. Amanda had never minded silence overmuch. Today, however, she needed the sound of voices and the meat of conversation to help her get her mind off her sore body.

"You said Sarah was unable to meet me herself." Amanda was only just *now* remembering that, more than an hour into the journey to her cousin's ranch. Some investigator she was.

"We did," Warren turned to her, his smile gentle.

Amanda couldn't help but notice his smile made his eyes twinkle. "Is she ill?"

Captain Kendall answered her question. “No, she’s with child, and although she has a couple of months before she gives birth, her husbands didn’t want her traveling.” He rode beside her, his horse keeping pace with the wagon.

Amanda met his gaze and read the challenge there. “Did you say *husbands*? As in more than one?”

Kendall nodded. “I did. She has two husbands, Caleb and Joshua Benedict, and they are both very good friends of mine.”

She tilted her head as she considered him. She’d only known him an hour, but damn if she wasn’t beginning to understand him already. If anyone else had said that, she might have thought they were trying to provoke her. Amanda didn’t think that was the captain’s purpose at all. He obviously felt the need to test her, and it didn’t take a lot of intelligence to figure out why.

“Lucky woman.”

She could see she’d totally shocked him with her response. Beside her, Mr. Jessop inhaled sharply but said nothing.

After a moment, Captain Kendall said, “Interesting reaction.”

Amanda had never been good at the social games people played. She much preferred saying what needed to be said flat out, as opposed to couching her meaning amid disingenuous words and false flattery. “If you don’t want me to meet my cousin, then why did you volunteer to bring me to her?”

“It isn’t that at all.” Kendall said.

“Isn’t it?”

“Why don’t we take a break here?” Mr. Jessop stopped the wagon, then turned to meet Amanda’s gaze. “We’re protective of Sarah—”

“I get that. And I appreciate your concern. Just because I’ve never met this cousin doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. Do you mind if I get down and walk around for a moment? I feel as if I’ve been traveling for a year instead of a week.”

Captain Kendall quickly dismounted and lifted Amanda from the wagon. Her limbs had stiffened, and she nearly fell. If not for the

lawman's quick reflexes, she would have and that wouldn't have aided her self-image in the least. It was, she mused, hard to put her best foot forward when the foot in question didn't want to move. On the heels of her exhaustion and stiff muscles, the attraction she felt for both these men had her completely off balance.

"Please don't be offended by our concern. Sarah has been through a lot." Mr. Jessop seemed much softer spoken than Captain Kendall. "Her father arranged for her marriage to Tyrone Maddox without her knowledge or consent. Maddox, it turned out, planned the whole time to have her murdered for her inheritance. Now, just a few months later, here comes a cousin Sarah's never heard of before. Of course, *she's* excited and looking forward to meeting you. But the timing—"

"I only learned of Sarah's existence about a month ago, when my own father passed away."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Captain Kendall said the words without inflection, and while she didn't doubt his sincerity, she knew he held fast to his determination to protect his friends' wife regardless.

The man seemed entirely too self-assured and arrogant for her tastes. She'd seen his kind all her life. Young, handsome, sure of his place in the world, and determined to make his mark, no matter who he needed to step on to do so. Yes, she knew his kind well.

Why she was attracted to the man, why he heated her blood and made her belly flutter was a mystery beyond her abilities at the moment. She needed to find her starch.

It was time to shake the lawman up, just a little. She had already figured out who and what he was. It was time to turn the tables and offer a little candor of her own.

"Don't be. It really was no loss to me, since my father never acknowledged me publicly or privately, even though I was his only surviving child. In fact, the fact that he left me a small inheritance was quite a surprise, since I'm the bastard daughter of his mistress."

* * * *

Warren had to work to hold on to his laughter. He'd told Adam what information he had of Amanda Dupree. Through the years, Terence Parker had mentioned one friend, one person who'd always treated him kindly and with respect despite knowing *all* his secrets. He'd called her Mandy, and it didn't take great brains to figure out that "Mandy" was, in fact, Miss Amanda Dupree. Terence's mother had worked with Amanda's for a time until she'd died of consumption when Terence had been twelve. Old enough to work, he'd been making his way as best he could when a reverend and his wife had taken him in. The reverend had seen to Terence getting an education. Unable to bring himself to be a preacher, Terence had decided on the law as a career.

Warren had met the man when they'd both been young clerks in Philadelphia. Shortly after Warren had left that city for Texas, Terence had gone back to Virginia. They'd kept in touch by letter faithfully.

Warren brought his attention back to the scene unfolding before him. Amanda stood toe-to-toe with Adam. With her hands on her hips and her cheeks flushed with indignation, she was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He wouldn't mind sinking his teeth and his cock into her.

He was pretty certain Adam felt the same way, for he'd seen his lover look at her with a lust-filled gaze. Warren felt his cock stir as he considered the possibility that they both might nibble on the luscious Miss Dupree at the same time. He would have to discuss the possibility with Adam tonight.

"Are you trying to shock me, Miss Dupree?"

"I thought that was your tactic, Captain Kendall."

"Look, I just—"

"Yeah, yeah, you just don't want Sarah to get hurt. It occurs to me that any woman capable of satisfying and keeping peace between two husbands likely doesn't need protection from the likes of you."

“You said that as if the idea of one woman with two men didn’t bother you.”

“Bother me? It’s a refreshing change, seeing as a lot of men seem to harbor the deep, dark desire of having two women all to themselves.”

Adam’s brow went up, and Warren had to hand it to Amanda. She’d managed to make Adam sputter.

“We’re not your enemies, Mandy,” Warren said.

She jerked her head in his direction, her gaze meeting his. “Terence calls me Mandy.”

“I know.”

“Why are you here?” Adam asked.

“I...” Amanda turned away from Adam. When that man’s curious gaze turned to him, Warren could only shrug.

They both kept silent while Amanda took a few paces away from them. The day had turned hot. Dressed in dark clothing, what Warren guessed was Mandy’s version of widow’s weeds, she had to be sweltering.

“When my father died, he left me something. It was then I learned about Sarah. I’ve never had a sister, and I couldn’t help but wonder about her.”

“Why do I think there’s more to it than that?” Adam asked.

“Because there is. I was going to ask her for help, but *not* for money. There’s something I have to do, and I thought she could point me in the right direction.” Amanda laughed then, and Warren thought the sound rather sad. “I didn’t know about her second marriage or that she was with child. I actually thought she might like to come along with me as I look for...” Her voice trailed off then. As if she’d just realized all she’d said, she turned and looked at the both of them. Her gaze went to Adam, then back to him. She tilted her head to the side, and Warren felt his face begin to color.

She’s figured us out.

“Look, if Sarah’s husbands are even a half as protective as the two of you, then I imagine I’ll be explaining everything to them, too. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get there and freshen up first.”

Amanda focused her attention on his lover, instead of him, waiting for his answer. Adam looked over and cocked his right eyebrow, silently asking for Warren’s opinion.

“Sarah’s going to be angry if we don’t bring Miss Dupree to her,” Warren said.

Adam nodded. “I know.” He turned his gaze back to Amanda. “Your cousin insists on getting her way lately.”

“I like her already,” Amanda said.

That got a smile from Adam. Warren knew his lover was attracted to the woman and imagined he was fighting it, putting his concern for Sarah first.

“All right, Miss Dupree. Let’s resume our journey.”

“All things considered, I think you both ought to call me Amanda.”

“Mandy,” Warren corrected.

She smiled at him, then looked at Adam again. “I’m used to that,” she said. “That little exchange of meaningful looks you two just shared.”

Adam raised that eyebrow again, a sure sign to Warren he was confused. “Are you, now?”

“Yes.”

Adam lifted her back up onto the seat beside Warren.

“It’s a darn shame,” she said then. She looked from Adam, to him, then sighed. “All the best men are always already taken.”

“Not such a shame,” Adam shot back. “As Warren and I also enjoy women. And, we’re both very attracted to you—Mandy.”

* * * *

It would have been better if he’d killed the whore.

Colin Baker stared out the window of his room at the Lyon House Hotel in Springfield, Missouri, and knew the truth of that sentiment. He thought back to five days before, to his furtive visit to that small cottage on the outskirts of Richmond, Virginia.

He'd panicked. The harlot had screamed, and then came a heavy pounding on the door, and the shouts of an enraged man. Fearful of being caught, he'd heaved the woman against the wall, felt the bone-deep satisfaction of watching her eyes roll back in her head as she slid to the floor. Even as he'd levered himself out a back window, the front door of the small house had burst open. He'd looked back once and watched as the whore had slowly shaken her head and moaned.

He'd not had his hands around her throat long enough to kill her and that, he feared, might be a mistake that would come back to haunt him.

Fortunately, it would be unlikely the incident would have been reported to the authorities. The woman was just a whore, after all. He'd not finished rifling through her bureau when she'd discovered him, but he'd managed, despite the debacle the evening had turned into, to find what he'd been looking for.

He'd discovered where the whore's daughter had gone.

There'd been a copy of a newspaper advertisement for the B & O Railroad listing excursions departing Philadelphia for all points west. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out that paper, now slightly rumpled looking. On it, in flowery script, a notation at the side read, "Amanda Philadelphia to St. Louis to Springfield to Waco."

He had only one more city to reach.

Colin could think of no reason for a whore—for surely the daughter took after the mother—to travel to Texas unless it was to retrieve the treasure his stepfather had hidden.

The treasure that, by all rights, belonged to *him*.

Colin's mother had married William Gladstone when he'd been but five years old. The old man's only son, nearly a decade older than Colin, had gotten himself killed in the war. At least his mother hadn't

produced any whelps in her new marriage to the man. Thus, Colin remained as Gladstone's only *legitimate* heir.

He'd never particularly liked the old man. He thought the bastard tedious in the extreme, always insisting that Colin attend school, then actually learn a trade and earn his way.

Why should Colin work for a living like a common laborer? He'd had an inheritance from his own father, and Gladstone had been wealthy enough to provide whatever Colin needed.

When the old man tightened the purse strings last year, Colin looked for another way to get what he was entitled to. One night, when he was into his cups, he recalled Gladstone's journals.

As a young lad, he used to spend time on winter afternoons reading through his stepfather's accounts of his life before and during the war. William Gladstone was one of those sons of wealth and privilege who'd attended the military college at West Point. Then, when the War of Northern Aggression had broken out, he'd come home to Richmond, exchanging a blue uniform for a gray one. It seemed to Colin that when the man wasn't soldiering, he was writing.

Colin recalled one journal in particular, the final one written during those tumultuous years. As a boy of ten, he'd not understood *all* the finer details he'd read. But as he'd grown older, as he'd become an adult, he'd understood one adventure in particular Gladstone had chronicled.

While he'd not read that account for several years—Gladstone had hidden the damn books once he realized Colin had been reading them—he remembered the story and knew what it meant.

When money became tight, Colin decided that he would make his fortune the old-fashioned way. He would steal it. So he'd devised a plan, a rather ingenious plan, he'd thought. Gladstone had grown old and shown signs of ill health. It proved a simple matter to sneak into the man's room one night and place a pillow over his face until he'd stopped struggling.

Colin had worn mourner's black very well. He'd stood next to the bastard's casket, received the condolences. He'd sat in stoic silence during the reading of the will. No other family remained, save a maiden aunt nearing seventy. He'd received the bulk of Gladstone's estate, of course, except for a small bequest and a personal memento left to a young woman named Amanda Dupree. Miss Dupree hadn't been invited to the reading of the will, so Colin had thought nothing more of the matter until he'd discovered the final journal missing.

The lawyer had been unwilling, at first, to divulge any information to Colin about the mysterious young woman. Finally, though, the man had admitted that Miss Dupree was Gladstone's illegitimate daughter and had been left the sum of two thousand dollars and a worn-looking tome.

The lawyer swore he had no idea what the book contained, for he had promised his client to deliver the items to the woman *immediately* upon learning of his death without ever opening or reading the book. The lawyer had assumed he'd delivered nothing more than a family chronicle.

Colin had no choice but to search for Miss Dupree. He hadn't found her, of course, but he had located her mother—*also* a Miss Dupree.

Colin would never understand why his stepfather had left the journal to that chit, but since she'd lit out of Richmond and headed southwest, he had no doubt the old bastard had done just that and that the whore was going after the treasure.

The sun had set, and his belly grumbled, demanding food. The man at the hotel desk had assured him that fine fare could be had down the street at a restaurant called Murchison's. He'd go and eat, maybe stop off for a beer or two at the saloon on his way back.

He hated traveling, hated the frontier. But he figured when he caught up to the Dupree woman and retrieved his journal, all this discomfort would have proven to be worthwhile.

Especially when he followed the clues he recalled reading and recovered the very real treasure his stepfather had so painstakingly hidden.

Chapter 3

“I never had a sister, although I’d always wished for one. That’s why I decided I wanted to meet you,” Sarah said.

Amanda stood still for her cousin’s inspection. Sarah Carmichael Benedict didn’t quite match Amanda in height. She wore her blonde hair in a soft upsweep, and her brown eyes fairly shone with intelligence. Her own coloring differed in that Amanda had received the red hair and green eyes of their common grandfather, or so she’d been told. Otherwise, looking at Sarah was very nearly like looking in a mirror.

“My mother had red hair,” Sarah said softly. “She said it was a family trait.”

“You lost her when you were young,” Amanda said. “That’s hard. I’ve never had much in life, but I’ve always had my mother. We’re very close.”

“You’re lucky.”

“I know.”

“Why don’t we have tea out on the verandah? Dinner will be ready in a half hour or so. In the mean time, it’s nice out, and that seems to be the only place I’m permitted to be outside these walls *without* armed guards lately.”

The last bit Sarah said while slanting a sideways glance at her husbands.

Amanda wanted to laugh at the guilty looks worn by both Caleb and Joshua Benedict. Instead, she assumed a serious expression and lowered her voice as if sharing a confidence. “I’m not sure if you’ll be

allowed that privilege this time, as I'm here and I don't think any of the men trust me at all."

Sarah grinned. "Yet you don't seem very upset by that idea."

Amanda returned her smile. "I've learned not to care what other people think of me. Folks will believe the worst, and there's nothing you can do, usually, to change their minds."

"I predict that we're going to be good friends," Sarah said. She stepped forward and linked arms with Amanda. To the men she said, "Please have some tea brought out to us."

"Bossy." Caleb Benedict shook his head, then turned toward the kitchen, followed by Joshua and the two lawmen.

Amanda laughed and walked with Sarah outside to the verandah. From what she'd seen so far, her cousin's house resembled some of the fine plantation homes outside of Richmond. Amanda guessed she was going to have to revise her impression of the so-called rustic Western frontier. So far, nothing had been as expected.

She'd not had that chance to freshen up yet, either, but just then she thought that could wait. She hadn't returned her cousin's sentiment, but she thought they were going to be good friends, too.

"What do you think of Adam and Warren?" Sarah asked once they were seated on identical rockers.

Amanda met Sarah's gaze. "I'm not sure if my thoughts on that pair can be summed up in such short order. I like them both, I think."

"I only asked because I saw the way they both were looking at you."

Amanda could tell, just by Sarah's expression, that she wanted to say more. Since she understood the nuances, she said, "You mean they were looking at me the way they only usually look at each other?"

Sarah sighed, then nodded. "Caleb and Joshua have assured me that both men have kept company with women. I know this sounds funny under the circumstances, but I find this entire relationship thing

awfully confusing. Everyone just ought to be able to love who they want, with it being nobody else's never mind and that be that."

Amanda decided that such a bold opinion earned honesty. "My mother worked as a courtesan before she had me. For the last few months before I was conceived, she kept herself exclusive to one man. My father—that would be your Uncle William—never doubted that he'd gotten her with child, though he never claimed me as his daughter. He agreed to buy her a small house and provide her with an income until I came of age. She didn't want me to be raised in a brothel, you see. Once I was born, my father never came back, so she resumed making her living in the way she knew how, able, because of my father's generosity to be selective with regard to her clientele. So because of who she is and who she knows, I've grown up with what the rest of society would consider unusual attitudes."

"And Uncle William never acknowledged you as his daughter?"

Amanda could see the outrage on Sarah's face. "That's normal, Sarah. Once I became old enough to understand the circumstances of my birth, I never would have expected him to. After he died, I discovered he left me a legacy and a letter in which he called me daughter."

"None of it seems fair. Grandfather turned his back on my mother just because she followed her heart." Sarah frowned. "What is it about some men that make them think that women are things and not people?"

"It's just the way it's always been. Maybe, to a certain extent, things are as they are because we've let them be that way."

"I guess it's silly talking about what we can't change."

"Well, we can't change the world. But we can live our own lives on our own terms. That's something which you've done. And so have I, in a way."

"You don't have two husbands, too, do you?" Sarah asked.

Amanda laughed. Her cousin had a quick wit and an obvious love of teasing. “No, I have something nearly as unusual. I have a business. I’m a private investigator.”

“That sounds exciting.” Sarah opened her mouth to say more but snapped it shut when Joshua came out bearing a tray with a pot and a couple of cups.

“Rita said she can delay dinner a while if you want her to.” He set the tray down and poured a cup of tea for each of them.

“Tell her no thanks. I’m hungry,” Sarah said.

Joshua bent low and gave Sarah a fast, thorough kiss. “You have twenty minutes, then.” He straightened, winked at Amanda, and went back into the house.

Sarah blushed. “If there has been a negative aspect to this life I live, it’s that I’ve been unable to talk or share my feelings or my situation with another woman,” she confessed quietly. “Don’t get me wrong. Caleb and Joshua are not only my husbands, they’re my best friends, too. We can talk about anything and everything and do.” She took a sip from her cup, then set it gently on the saucer.

“But it’s not the same as having another woman to talk to,” Amanda finished for her.

“No, it’s not.”

“Well, I’ll be happy to oblige your need—and mine—for female conversation for as long as I’m here.”

“For as long as you’re here? I kind of hoped you’d stay for a nice long visit!”

Amanda could read the disappointment on Sarah’s face and hear it in her tone. “Oh, I’ll visit for a long time once I get back. But there’s something I need to do first. It’s really the main reason I came.”

“Perhaps that topic would make excellent dinner conversation.”

Amanda looked up into Adam Kendall’s eyes. She hadn’t heard the man come out onto the verandah.

He moves like a wraith.

She'd file that away for future reference. For now, she simply smiled and said, "I can guarantee it will be an interesting discussion."

* * * *

Adam loved watching people. He'd been accused of having some Shaman sixth sense in him, supposedly passed down from an ancestor. He didn't know if he could dispute the claim or not. The less eerie truth was that people often revealed themselves—their thoughts and intentions—in small ways. All one had to do was learn how to read them.

Sarah was completely taken with her newfound cousin, and her happiness found its way into Caleb and Joshua. Neither of those men were pushovers. If there'd been something off about Amanda Dupree, they'd have picked up on it. Adam would bet on that.

He trusted the Benedict brothers' instincts as much as he trusted his own, which in this case was a good thing. The only thing he'd picked up on where Amanda was concerned was that he wanted to fuck her. Very, *very* badly.

He saw Warren look at her with lust in his eyes and he knew his lover felt the same way. While they'd each, from time to time, been known to enjoy carnal pleasures with a woman, they'd never shared one.

The idea had never occurred to either of them until Caleb and Joshua Benedict had taken on Sarah. Of course, in the case of himself and Warren, any potential third in their relationship would have to be amenable to not only taking two men into her body, but accepting the fact those men loved and made love with each other, too.

He'd never considered whether or not there could be such a woman on the face of this earth until recently. He thought now that there was and maybe that woman was Amanda Dupree.

"You have to tell me about being a private investigator," Sarah said now. "However did you come by such a choice?"

Amanda sat back from having finished her soup. Rita, the Benedict's cook, made quick work of removing the bowls.

"You have to understand that from the time I was able to perceive such things, I understood my prospects in life would be limited. Being the daughter of a kept woman has its drawbacks. Many in society consider me no better than a light-skirt, and the fact of my..." Amanda trailed off as she seemed to just now realize there were four men around the table listening avidly to her speak. Adam noticed not only the pink that colored her cheeks, but the fine tremor in her hand as she reached for her wine glass and took a delicate sip. "The fact of my lack of experience in that area has no influence on their opinion at all. I was already the object of gossip and speculation. I thought I might as well be doing something to deserve all the attention."

"I imagine you'd want to provide for yourself as well," Joshua said.

"That was my prime motive, of course. There aren't many opportunities for women, as you know. None of the ordinary avenues open to me interested me in the slightest. So I made a path of my own."

Adam sat back as Rita brought in a tray piled with plates of food. He took his attention off the succulent roast beef and put it back on Amanda.

"I imagine you found a ready supply of clients through your mother?" He noted the confused look Sarah gave him. To her, he said, "Gentlemen who would appreciate discretion and be guaranteed it by using Amanda to look into delicate matters on their behalf."

"You're absolutely right," Amanda agreed. She smiled at him as if her prize pupil had just exceeded her expectations. "And not all delicate matters concerned, shall we say, affairs of the heart."

"Likely any mess a man got himself into he'd be embarrassed to admit," Warren said. "We're strange creatures. We don't like to admit we've been taken advantage of or cheated."

"I'll let you in on a secret, Warren. Women don't like to, either." Sarah nodded as she said that, then turned back to Amanda. "Is it dangerous, what you do?"

"I would have said no a month ago. But the last case I handled has proven to be different. One of my mother's more socially prominent clients had invested in a business opportunity, and then he had second thoughts. He asked me to look in to the matter and the principals. I discovered he had reason to worry. Once I had all the facts in hand, I alerted the police. One culprit was apprehended, but the other escaped."

"And threatened to kill you, you said." Adam helped himself to some roast beef and potatoes, passing the platters in turn. "I can understand your need for independence, but your chosen line of work *can* be dangerous, as you now know."

"My mother knew I'd have to take care of myself in this life, Captain Kendall. She saw to it I knew how to do that."

"Someone threatened to kill you? Something has to be done!" Sarah shot an accusing glare at Adam, and he had to resist the urge to squirm under her stare.

Sighing, he nodded. "If Miss Dupree will furnish me with the name of the culprit, I'll look into the matter. Officially."

"I thought you were going to call me Amanda," the woman said. Damn if she didn't look amused that Sarah frowned at him.

"No, I was pretty certain we agreed to call you Mandy," Warren said. "And since we're all friends here, let's all dispense with formal address."

Soft-spoken, Warren could make his points when he needed to.

"Now, it isn't only the desire to get away from a threat or the urge to connect with family that brings you here. Is it, Mandy?" Adam didn't feel the least bit guilty putting the woman on the spot. In his estimation, she could more than handle herself.

In response to his goading, she sat back, folded her hands in her lap, and locked her gaze with his. He felt her on his skin, an almost

physical presence. He'd never had this connection with a woman before. It seemed to him as if the others in the room, even Warren, faded into the background as she took his measure.

I'd like her to take my measure in a more personal way.

It was unlike Adam to let thoughts of sex interfere with his job. Right now, at this dining table, despite the fact he felt a strong attraction and desire for Amanda Dupree, he considered himself very much on the job. He'd wait until he had all the facts about her, before deciding if she could be trusted, or not.

He saw the moment she came to a decision and wondered then if, she wasn't truly the most vulnerable among them.

"All right. I was contacted by the solicitor who represented my late father and informed that he'd left me a legacy. Aside from the sum of two thousand dollars, I was given a journal and a letter. I didn't know why he'd give me such a thing until I read it. And then I knew he'd actually left me much, much more. I have that journal and that letter with me. And I have every intention of going after his real legacy, something I'd believed to be only a myth."

"What are you talking about, El Dorado?" Adam asked. He'd known many men who'd come to Texas on their way to Mexico, looking for the El Dorado gold mine. As far as Adam was concerned, if such a thing existed it would have been found by now.

"Close," Amanda said. "My father left me the location of the lost Confederate gold."

Chapter 4

“William Gladstone...*Lieutenant Colonel* William Gladstone. My God, I didn’t put it together until now!”

Amanda looked at Caleb Benedict, that man’s utterance bringing the table conversation to a standstill.

Adam sat forward and pinned her with his stare. “Your father was *that* William Gladstone?”

Amanda lifted her hands, palms up. “All I know is what I read in the journal I received. My father was a Confederate officer, and the last thing he was ordered to do by President Davis was to intercept a shipment of gold and hide it.”

“Adam, Joshua, and I were in the same unit at the end of the war,” Caleb explained. “We were ordered to intercept a shipment of gold. But when we got to the farm where it was to have been, the Confederate troops there reported it stolen. We discovered that a Lieutenant Colonel Gladstone had been seen in the area with a small cadre of men, but by the time we were able to mount a chase, the trail had gone cold.”

“Amanda, may we see the journal?” Joshua Benedict didn’t appear to be as interested as his brother or his friend. But when she looked in his eyes, the glitter of excitement was unmistakable.

“Gentlemen, let’s allow the woman to finish her meal first.” Sarah shot each of the men a stern look. “Amanda isn’t going anywhere. We can see this journal after dinner.”

Amanda held back her laughter. In her experience, the fact that four men could be controlled so easily by one fairly dainty woman qualified as extraordinary.

She supposed one aspect of growing up in a female-only household run by a mother who lived outside of social convention was that she never had the image of a man as lord and master put in front of her. Not until she was a young lady of twelve and had occasion to venture out into the world with her mother or Millie, their housekeeper. She recalled how shocked she'd been one time, when she'd been shopping. She'd observed a man and woman together with the man ordering the woman to return home. His tone had dripped with condescension and abuse. Her shock had doubled when she learned the woman was the man's *wife* and not his servant.

Her mother told her that while in some instances wives were not treated any better than servants, some men did treat their wives with respect—just not necessarily as equals.

"Sweetheart," Caleb cajoled, "do you know the story of the lost Confederate gold?"

"Until today, I'd never even *heard* of it."

He sat back, and Amanda thought him the sort who loved to tell stories. He proved her right.

"In the spring of 1865, we were young soldiers, temporarily assigned in Georgia under the command of General Wild. The order came down to intercept a shipment of gold remnants of the Confederate army was attempting to hide. We were a day behind the shipment. When we got to the Chennault plantation, where our informants had said the gold would be, it was to find the wagons had been stolen."

"About the same time, another order had come down with regard to a list of Confederate officers as yet unaccounted for—men who had been known to be in our area and who had not officially surrendered," Joshua said.

"That's right," Adam recalled, "we were ordered to search for those officers. At the top of that list were Lieutenant Colonel William Gladstone, and a Major Robert Montgomery."

“My mother’s best friend, before she married my father, was a young woman named Melissa Montgomery,” Sarah said. “I recall that because my momma used to talk about life when she was a girl. Before everything changed.”

“It could very well be the Major Montgomery on our list was related to your mother’s friend,” Adam said.

“How much gold was in the shipment?” Warren asked.

“The official report put the estimate at about a quarter of a million dollars,” Adam said.

“A quarter of a million dollars?” Amanda shook her head slowly. “According to my father, it was a great deal more than that.”

All gazes turned to Sarah. Clearly, everyone wanted to carry on with the discussion. Everyone’s interest had been captured. Amanda wouldn’t mind getting on with her revelations, either, and waited to see what her cousin would say.

“My goodness you men are like children eager to tear into their gifts on Christmas morning.” Sarah rolled her eyes, then looked at Amanda. “It would appear these men will not rest until you share your legacy,” she said.

“The book is in my carpet bag,” Amanda said. “I’ll go get it.”

* * * *

Warren loved seeing Adam excited.

He didn’t have the same connection to the gold as the others did. He’d been a clerk in the War Department and hadn’t faced the same dangers as his lover and their friends. But their excitement infected him. No longer content to just sit on the sidelines, he got up from his chair to stand behind Adam and read over his shoulder.

Adam wanted to begin at the start of the journal, of course, and read chronologically.

“Here, listen to this.” He looked up at Warren for a moment before casting his gaze back to the yellowed page before him.

"I knew as soon as I saw him that Jeff was deeply troubled. He said nothing as he poured two glasses of whisky. He offered me one, then gestured to the chair, impatience on his face.

'We were friends before I came into this accursed office, Bill,' he said. 'Now I am about to leave it, and the broth of failure is a bitter brew indeed.'

'We stood nobly against the forces of Northern aggression,' I assured him. 'We did our best. There should be no shame in that.'

'But there is, and nothing more I can do on that front. I've called you here for a specific reason. I've arranged for the rest of our monetary reserves to be gathered together, and I will leave Richmond in accompaniment of the shipment. We gave our word to the French we would repay their loan, win or lose. If our struggle, our suffering, is to stand for anything, then our word must be honored.'

'Of course.' There was no question of this in my mind whatsoever. Apparently, though, there had been great discussion amongst members of the cabinet. They felt the gold should be kept here, some desiring to use it to rebuild after the devastation of war, others to set aside against a future day when we could resume our crusade. And others wanted the money for themselves. It was this last group Jeff feared would have their way, for they had already departed for Savannah, even now conspiring to liberate the shipment before it reached the docks. Clearly, action needed to be taken.

"I understood what Jeff was asking of me. I would need help, and of course there was only one man I would consider having by my side and at my back. So I took my good friend Robert into my confidence and told him of this one final duty to our country and our president."

"That has to be Robert Montgomery," Joshua said.

Amanda nodded. "Yes, it was." When all gazes looked at her, she shrugged. "Sorry. I have read the journal several times. I almost have it memorized."

"Well, hush," Adam said.

Warren smiled, even as he noted that Sarah looked nearly aghast. Amanda, though, just chuckled. Her cheeks took on a bit of pink, and he was reminded how appealing she was when his cock stirred to life.

Thank God he was standing behind Adam so no one would notice.

Adam continued to read.

“Robert and I chose but a few men, men who’d served with us faithfully. The President acted upon my suggestion and placed Captain Billy Parker, one of our best naval officers, in charge of the expedition that was to escort the gold. We waited until dusk, and then the ten of us, dressed as plain, common farmers, stole into the campsite and surrounded the officers. As I had hoped, Billy recognized me. He immediately ordered his men to stand down and to lower their eyes.

“From the moment we made ourselves known until we were leading the wagons away, not even a half hour had passed.”

Adam stopped and looked over at Caleb. “You questioned Captain Parker, didn’t you?”

“I did. He swore that the bandits got the drop on him, ordered him to tell his men—they were not much more than boys, if memory serves—to stand down and avert their eyes.”

Adam nodded slowly. “Legend has it the gold is still in the South, buried somewhere in Georgia or South Carolina.”

“It’s not,” Amanda said softly.

“Does he tell us where, exactly?”

“No. His entry soon turns cryptic. But there’s a reason for that.”

Warren said, “Because his friend tried to turn on him?”

“How did you guess?” Amanda wanted to know.

“Because I know men,” Warren said. “We’ve all known some that would do almost anything for money.”

Warren would never forget what that bastard Tyrone Maddox had done to him and had planned to do to Sarah. Judging by the looks exchanged between them, he suspected that neither of the Benedicts ever would forget it.

“He only makes one entry during the trip,” Amanda said.

Adam returned to the journal. He found that entry and read it aloud.

“We knew they’d search for us, and for our cargo. So instead of heading south, we went West. Robert left the route up to me, and I fell back on my early days, one of my first postings, before I convinced Father to send me to West Point. It seemed an appropriate choice, poetic justice, if you will. And so we who were, in a way, exiled, walked in the steps of those we ourselves exiled, and our tears, though shed inwardly, were just as real as theirs. Bell’s route seemed the best. And I knew that our precious cargo, that which had been entrusted to us, would be safe amid the ruins of an ancient people.”

“That is cryptic,” Sarah said.

“I have to admit that part confused me completely at first. But I’m good at figuring out puzzles.”

“So what does it mean?” Warren asked.

“Well, I had to do some investigating. I looked into Colonel Gladstone’s military record, and then I had to do some digging into some events of the last few decades. And when I did that, I figured it out.” She paused, and Warren could see her excitement. She fairly vibrated with it.

“Bell was John Bell, who led a smaller group of the Cherokee Indians from Georgia to the Indian Territory on a march that has become known as—”

“The Trail of Tears,” Sarah said softly.

“Yes,” Amanda confirmed. “The group had a military escort, and a member of that escort was young William Gladstone. According to the information I was able to uncover, while the military escort left them at the border to the Indian Territory, they understood the Indians would continue on until they got to the heart of the new Cherokee Nation.”

“Tahlequah,” Adam said, nodding. “It makes perfect sense. But that is one hell of a big area to search.”

“Seems to me there are a lot of places—caves, trails, blinds—a man could get lost in that area if he wasn’t careful,” Caleb said.

“There’s more. You have to read the rest of it. The last page.” Amanda said that quietly. Warren knew whatever was coming next wouldn’t be pleasant.

“I don’t know how or why I awakened in the middle of the night. I only know that doing so saved my life. I awakened on my side, blinking my eyes until I could discern the shapes in the night. I recognized my old friend by his profile. Robert Montgomery moved stealthily, and at first I didn’t understand what he was doing as he crouched beside each man in turn. But then I did, and anger such as I have never felt surged through me, giving me almost superhuman control. He meant to see us all dead and to take unto himself that which was given us in trust.

“I had adopted the habit of falling asleep with my long Bowie knife close to hand after being startled awake by a rattlesnake earlier on the trail. Now I would use it on another kind of snake, just as vile, just as treacherous as that one encountered by Eve in the Garden of Eden.

“Afterward, I had no shovel with which to dig the graves. It took me two days to place all the bodies of my men in the cave, to tuck them under the overhang with the hidden bullion. Robert’s body I left to the wild creatures, loath to place a murderer with his victims. I set the rest of the horses to running wildly on their own, their empty wagons clattering behind them, and I turned my wagon for home.”

“Oh, my God,” Sarah said softly. “That’s horrible.” She dashed a tear off her cheek.

“It is horrible,” Warren said. “And very sad. Because of the nature of the mission, he wouldn’t have been able to tell those men’s loved ones of their deaths.” Warren understood that women who were carrying sometimes became emotional, but he wanted to let Sarah know she wasn’t alone in those feelings in this instance.

“The last thing I’ll show you is the letter that accompanied the journal.” Amanda’s face colored again as she handed the paper to Adam. After meeting her gaze for a moment, he opened it and read.

“It is the curse of men that wisdom comes not when it would be of most benefit, but rather at the end of a life, when its epiphany brings only regrets.

“I have learned, in these last few years, that I have devoted myself to a cause to which, among my peers, I alone seem to have remained loyal. I portrayed myself a servant of a genteel and honorable society, and I have discovered all that I believed in, in that regard, to have been proven false. For those who have garnered public respect are in fact the most perfidious of creatures, while those reviled openly are complete innocents.

“I regret, daughter, my failure to claim you as my own when it would have made a difference in your life. Despite the report of the gossipmongers, I know of your virtue and your pursuit of learning and your achievements. I know that you consider yourself a seeker of truth, and although I have no right to claim it, I am proud of you.

“These words and this gesture may not atone for my sins, but I pray that they will prove a source of solace and fortune. When we took possession of the gold bullion, its true estimated value was in excess of one million dollars. Today, its very existence is doubted by many and claimed to be hidden by yet others. Since the cause for which it was amassed and concealed no longer exists, I see no reason it cannot belong to whomever manages to find it and claim it. Consider it your legacy. Your father, William Everett Gladstone.”

When Adam set the letter aside, Amanda said, “And that is why I am here. I had hoped that you’d be able to come with me on this treasure hunt.”

Sarah smiled. “I don’t think that’s possible. But Caleb and Joshua...”

“As much as a part of me would love to set off, the rest of me has no intention of leaving you for even a day,” Caleb said.

“I feel the same way,” Joshua said.

“We’ll go.”

Adam’s declaration didn’t surprise Warren in the least. Adam looked up at him and he nodded. Then Adam turned back to Amanda.

“Warren and I will go with you in return for half of the treasure.”

Chapter 5

“You’re a Ranger. Don’t you have to...do Ranger things or something?” Amanda’s thoughts whirled at a dizzying speed. “How can you just drop everything and come with me?” In truth, the idea of spending time alone with these two men made her insides flutter. Just thinking about them, just being near them made her skin tingle and her breath catch.

Amanda possessed a little more knowledge than the average virgin about the intimate goings-on between men and women. Her mother had always been very frank and honest with her, describing not only the actions, but the feelings of attraction and sexual interest. Not being a hypocrite, her mother had never demanded that she stay away from men. In fact, the chances of Amanda making a decent marriage were slim. People had judged her to be exactly like her mother, and that was just how things had always been.

Amanda had promised herself she would remain a virgin unless and until she met a man who could make her feel those delicious sensations her mother had described to her. Up until this afternoon when she’d arrived in Waco, Texas, no man ever had.

It didn’t escape her sense of irony, either, that not just one, but *two* men had accomplished that feat. Two men who were already in love with each other.

“Amanda has a point,” Caleb said. “Can you just...go?”

Adam exhaled and fixed his gaze on Warren. When that man nodded, Adam shrugged. “I got a letter a couple of days ago from headquarters. I’ve been given a promotion to Major and transferred to

Austin. They've given me a month to get my affairs here wound up." He paused and looked from Warren to the Benedicts.

"Everyone I care about is here. I don't want to go to Austin."

"Adam and I have been talking for some time about getting a place of our own, farther from town. I'm not much of a rancher, but I could learn. Or maybe I could offer legal services—sort of like a traveling lawyer—to folks not near a city."

"How many times have I told you that we'll gladly sell you some of our land? We have more than we need—" Sarah sounded frustrated, and Amanda could tell this was an old argument.

"And we would gladly accept your offer *if* you charged us a fair price for that land and if we had the money to buy it."

"Stubborn."

"Yes, ma'am," Adam said.

Amanda was impressed with the gentleness with which Adam answered her cousin. He shook his head, then looked at Amanda.

"Maybe we won't find that gold. But maybe we will. I have no doubt as to the authenticity of Gladstone's account. I know the general area where he hid the bullion. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, the three of us, on horseback, should be able to make the round trip in a bit more than a couple of months."

Amanda stared at Adam. "A couple of *months*? *On horseback*?"

"Don't tell me you can't ride."

"Yes, I can ride. My mother arranged for me to learn to ride, and in fact, I've done so nearly every week for the past couple of years. But even *I* know that is a far cry from spending day after day in the saddle."

"Well, if you can't do it—"

"I never said I couldn't do it! I can do it!" She narrowed her eyes at Adam. At this moment, the wonderful physical feelings this man caused in her didn't match the degree to which he could fire her temper and get her mad.

"We'd need supplies. Did you plan for that?"

Oh, this man really did know how to stir her temper to epic proportions. “The journal wasn’t the only thing William Gladstone left me, I’ll remind you.” She nodded her head. In fact, she’d expected to have to hire guides as well as pay for supplies. “I brought one thousand dollars with me.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“What?”

“You traveled *alone*, all the way from Richmond, carrying a thousand dollars? Are you *crazy*?”

Amanda opened her mouth and then shut it again. Sometime in the last couple of minutes, she’d gotten to her feet and now stood toe-to-toe with the Texas Ranger. It suddenly occurred to her that everyone else in the room was watching this exchange between her and Adam with all the attention of spectators at the opera. Or a bull fight. Warren wore a big smile, but the other three just looked intrigued.

“I am not crazy,” she said between clenched teeth.

“No? What would you have done if some yahoo had come up to you and threatened to rob you? Crowded close like I am now and demanded your money...and your virtue?”

“I’d have shown him this.”

The movement was smooth and swift from practice, because despite what the infuriating, gorgeous man in front of her thought, she did know to be careful and she did know how to take care of herself.

That was just one more thing her mother had seen to.

She bent slightly, lifted her right boot, and pulled out her knife, whipping it to within an inch of Adam Kendall’s face.

Adam’s eyes widened as he took a step back. She had to admit it felt good to surprise him.

Caleb whistled. “That is some Arkansas toothpick you have there, Miss Dupree.”

“Thank you, Mr. Benedict. I’m rather fond of Pocahontas, myself.”

“You named your knife after an Indian princess?” Warren asked.

“Well,” Amanda smiled at his tone of incredulity, “we are both Virginian women, are we not? And surely a good poke is this one’s specialty.”

“I hope you know how to use that thing.” Adam had recovered his aplomb, and Amanda knew that she was coming to really like the man, despite his talent for riling her.

“Yes. My mother arranged for me to take lessons from an expert. I can take care of myself, Adam.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“You gentlemen are staying over, aren’t you? Caleb said it looked like rain, and you’ve already traveled a great deal today.” Sarah turned her attention to Amanda and smiled. “That’s one of the good things about having such a big house with lots of bedrooms. I can always offer to put friends up.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Adam answered her. “I think we’re both too tired to travel any more tonight.”

Amanda looked to her hostess. “Speaking of tired, I hate to be a boring guest, but I’m exhausted.”

“Of course you must be. And there’s certainly no need to apologize. If I had been a proper hostess I’d have sent you to rest soon after you arrived.” Sarah got to her feet. “So I’ll show you to your room now.”

Amanda needed some sleep before she tried to engage any further in a battle of wits with the appealing Captain Kendall. And if Warren Jessop continued to look at her with that sweet expression...well, sleep was just an excellent idea all the way around. No way could she get into trouble if she went to her room and straight to sleep.

“We’ll begin to plan our expedition in the morning,” Adam said as she neared the door to the dining room.

“Yes, I’ll see you in the morning.”

* * * *

“Do you think I’m a coward because I’m still nervous when we’re together like this?”

Adam looked up at Warren, reading the expression of self-doubt on his face.

“No, of course I don’t. You’re not a coward. Far from it. And you’re not nearly as nervous as you used to be, either.” He spoke nothing but the truth. In the five months since he’d played his part in bringing down Tyrone Maddox, Warren had displayed not only a greater sense of adventure in the bedroom, but a greater level of self-confidence outside of it.

They’d stayed over as guests of the Benedicts from time to time. Warren had even recently sold his land and moved in to Adam’s house. It galled Adam that subterfuge was still needed, but they were both realists. They had to live in the society of man, such as it was. Being lovers of the same sex was against the law, and there really wasn’t much they could do about that.

Sarah, Caleb, and Joshua had stepped in and quietly let it be known that Adam and Warren were kin—a fact that was true in their own eyes—and that made a difference in the eyes of the citizens of Waco. Since the move happened just after Warren had been shot by Maddox, most assumed that Adam, as the older of the two, had taken his younger cousin under his wing.

It was late, and everyone in the household had retired for the night. Rita Mendez and her husband, José, had a small adobe cottage away from the house, on the other side of the barn. Only residents and guests would bed down under the Benedicts’ roof.

Warren had just returned from the bedroom next door. He’d spent a few minutes there so that in the morning it would appear he’d spent the night in that room. He trusted Sarah and her husbands, but not the staff, and so he was bound to feel nervous.

Adam set away his thoughts and went to his lover. He reached out and gently stroked a finger down Warren's cheek. "I love you. Be naked with me."

Adam had never loved like this, and despite the danger, and the need for secrecy, this love had not only flourished but grown stronger every day. Now he took the time to undress Warren, lingering over patches of flesh newly bared, brushing kisses and using his tongue to taste and his teeth to nip.

Warren shivered under his touch. Knowing he aroused him made Adam's cock stiffen with need. When Warren stroked his shirtfront and began to unfasten the buttons, Adam held still for the caresses his lover lavished upon him.

The drapes had been drawn, and the bedroom door locked. When they stood naked together, Adam leaned in, his lips brushing back and forth across Warren's. Then they settled, and Adam kissed him. With long, slow sips Adam relished the taste of his lover, and the freedom, at this time and in this place, to drink his fill. His tongue swirled in Warren's mouth, tasting every bit of him, loving the flavor, loving *him*. He wrapped his arms around him, drew him closer, and shivered when their cocks rubbed against each other. Everywhere Adam touched Warren felt hot with passion. Everywhere Warren touched him quivered with delight.

Adam's hands trailed down his back, then back up. He caressed the taut, bare buttocks, smiling when Warren clenched those muscles. Their breathing hitched, and Warren's hands trembled as he caressed Adam, as he reached down and fisted him.

His lover's hot hand surrounding his cock always filled Adam with such need. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

Stepping back, Adam took Warren's hand and led him toward the bed. He'd already turned the blankets down. He reached out to turn off the light that burned softly on the bedside table.

"No." Warren's hand stopped his. "I want you to leave it on."

"Are you sure? I don't mind putting it out."

“I’m sure. I want to see you. I want you to see me.”

“Sweetheart.” He whispered the endearment, his voice, like his knees, weakened by this unexpected yet treasured gift from his lover.

He laid down, drawing Warren down with him.

Hands roamed and swept, caressed and grasped. Tongues met and swirled, lips met flesh with loving, tender touches.

Adam wrapped his hand around Warren’s hard, hot cock at the same moment he felt his own stroked and held. Arousal spiked, and Adam knew he needed to taste Warren’s erection, needed to feel his own stiff flesh fuck Warren’s mouth.

Moving quickly, he turned himself around on the bed, then inched closer, then closer still, until the heat from Warren’s body soothed his, until the musky scent of his sex filled Adam with a hunger to taste, a thirst to drink. He nuzzled his lover’s prick, licked and tasted his scrotum, inhaled deeply near the hair that nested his shaft. Then he opened his mouth and drew Warren’s cock inside and nearly groaned when he felt his own surrounded by the moist cavern of Warren’s mouth.

He loved the flavor of him, the salty and savory taste that Adam knew he would recognize anywhere. His tongue stroked while his mouth sucked, and the sound of Warren’s groan thrilled him as much as the sensation of it around his engorged dick did.

Adam’s heart pounded in his chest as his excitement grew. He tried to be gentle as his hips pumped forward, but the arousal climbed until all that mattered was the sweet, searing promise of release.

They reached it together, and Adam swallowed the pungent offering his lover gave him even as he felt his own seed drawn up and out of his body.

Later, lying under the blankets, light extinguished, Adam stroked Warren’s back and reveled in the closeness, the freedom to lavish affection.

“I want Amanda,” Warren said softly. “I want to feel her catch fire between us.”

“Good. That’s what I want, too.”

“She’s as attracted to us as we are to her. Earlier, as you and she were going at each other, I swear I could smell her pussy.”

Adam chuckled. “I had the damndest time keeping my cock from standing at attention then. I think she’ll be a very passionate lover.”

“If she’ll have us.”

“I never would have imagined a woman who would. Until I met her today. I’m pretty sure she’ll have us. Sooner, rather than later.

“Adam?”

“Yes?”

“You do know we could reach Tahlequah much sooner and mostly by train. Right?”

“Well, of course. But that would mean passing up the opportunity to be alone with Amanda, just the three of us, under a magnificent Texas sky. Alone, out on the trail, with no other people to interfere with our pleasures, is a much nicer prospect than a days-long train ride.”

“You have a point.”

Adam thought Warren drifted to sleep. But then he said, “I would follow you to Austin. I would follow you into hell.”

“I know. But I want to stay with you, and close to friends who accept us. This is our home.”

“You’re *my* home. But I’m glad we’re staying.”

As sleep claimed him, Adam’s mind drifted to thoughts of gold and a red-haired beauty who engaged his mind and fired his blood, and he wondered what the next few weeks would bring.

Chapter 6

Amanda groaned in pleasure as the bed seemed to wrap her in loving arms and pull her down into luxurious comfort. The mattress, made of lush feathers, was the most comfortable one she'd ever laid upon. The last week had been taxing, traveling by day, trying to sleep each night in beds that seemed hard, lumpy, or smelled of body odor. Surrounded in soft freshness and as tired as she was, sleep should have captured her instantly.

"Our room is right there, in the corner. This one across the hall from yours is the one Adam and Warren usually use when they're here."

Sarah had conducted the tour in her soft, no-nonsense tone, but just those innocuous words started Amanda's imagination working.

Amanda understood the mechanics of sex and had from the time she'd turned twelve and gotten her monthlies. Her mother had told her, long before she met Terence, that some men preferred men, and some women other women. To Amanda, that was just the way things were, and although she knew such pairings were considered taboo by society, she had never considered them so herself.

Neither had she ever lain alone in a big bed and imagined two men making love to each other. Not until tonight, not until an image of Adam and Warren formed in her mind. The sensations she'd felt earlier, standing close to Adam, looking into Warren's soft eyes, came back to her now tenfold.

She could imagine them lying together, hands and lips moving subtly over sensitive flesh. They'd made no secret of the fact they were both attracted to her, that they would welcome her into their bed.

What would it be like to feel their hands on her skin, their mouths on hers? Closing her eyes, she let the image seduce her until it filled her mind and tingled her belly. Her hands stroked across her breasts, her nipples poking against her chemise, reaching out for the stroke of her own fingers. Amanda sighed as the whisper-light touch of her hand became, in her mind, the gentle caress of another as she imagined the sensation of a hot male body on either side of her.

She'd never wanted a man, never felt the tug of hunger deep inside her. She did now, and as that hunger began to burn, she thought she could understand how a woman would do almost anything to feed it.

She'd touched herself before, of course she had. Doing so felt pleasant enough, but there'd been no urge to continue on or to repeat the exercise. Tonight, the stroke of her fingers over her sensitive body went beyond pleasant. Arousal began to swirl through her, and her sigh turned to a soft moan of need. Her hips moved, a subtle back and forth rhythm they seemed to know instinctively. Parting her legs and bringing her knees up slightly, Amanda felt the soft material of her chemise brush against her cunny.

Oh, that feels good!

Daring to claim more of the delicious sensations, she moved her hand down until she reached her hot folds. Back and forth, she petted herself, and with each stroke the need for more increased. She knew what was happening to her, knew there was a release just beyond her reach, and for the first time in her life, she chased it.

Moving her hips against her right hand, she used her left to pull the material out of the way so that she could touch hot, naked skin. Faster and faster, her hips flexed, the sensations beginning to grow and change from good to better, to *more*. Urgency filled her, and heat built inside her and out as the lips of her pussy swelled and grew hot. Her fingers brushed against one particular spot at the top of her slit, and the urge to cry out came so fast she forced the back of her left hand across her mouth to stifle it. She circled that spot, rubbing

quickly back and forth over the tiny nub that swelled and stretched, and then, from somewhere deep inside, a burst of pleasure so intense shot out. Her body bowed off the bed, every muscle clenching tight as the waves of shivering ecstasy washed over her. A tiny gush of moisture coated her cunny, and as the height of the release ebbed, she touched that moisture with her finger, then brought that finger to her lips.

Oh, God. She'd never believed it would feel so good. She had no doubt in her mind that the two men she'd met today—only today—lay at the root of her body's awakening hunger.

If I leave with them to search for the gold, we're going to become lovers.

Amanda drifted toward sleep knowing she not only wanted them but had already decided to have them.

* * * *

"The trail we're going to set out on is nearly four hundred miles one way." Adam spread a map out on the dining room table. "We'll take the shortest route, which would be straight through here to Denison. That's just this side of the border with Indian Territory."

Amanda had difficulty focusing on the man's words when he stood so close to her. She'd gotten the best night's sleep she'd had since leaving home. She thought when she awoke that whatever effect the two lawmen had on her the day before would have dissipated.

It pulsed stronger than ever.

"Is there a problem traveling through Indian Territory? Call me ignorant, but I had heard hostilities existed between some of the tribes and the whites." She looked at each of the people standing around the table. Her cousin's husbands were once more standing on either side of Sarah, again with a hand each upon her. Amanda thought it likely the men weren't even aware they stroked her almost constantly.

Warren stood on her left, not as close to her as Joshua did to Sarah, but close enough for Amanda to feel his heat. Adam had moved subtly closer on her right, and she could not only feel the warmth from his body, but she could smell him—a musky, male aroma that shouted *man* to all her female parts. She blinked, bringing her focus back to the business at hand.

“We won’t have any trouble.” Adam gave her a look that said he realized her mind had wandered and that he had a pretty good idea where it had gone. “Mainly because we’re not carpetbaggers trying to steal Indian land. Plus, I have a good friend, Peter Smith, whose father is a chief of the Cherokee Nation. I know some of the Choctaw, too.”

“A chief of the Cherokee Nation is named Smith?” Amanda was unashamed to admit she knew nothing at all about the Indians who occupied the middle of the country. The only knowledge she did have had been garnered recently when she’d done her digging into her father’s military background. What she had read, though, had sickened her.

How could we have forced those people to leave everything behind and then make such a long, arduous journey?

What she had learned just served to reinforce her resentment toward organized society. There had to be something wrong with a system that shunned women like her mother, who had made a living the only way she could, and then turned around and treated others, innocents, so savagely.

“Most of Indian Territory is occupied by what’s known as the Five Civilized Tribes. That would be the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Creek, and the Seminole. They have their traditions, their history, and their languages. But for the most part, they have adopted our ways. They farm, or ranch, or live in towns, just like we do. And they’ve taken what can be considered white names, as well.”

Amanda decided she would take Adam’s word for it. “You said you thought you knew where the gold had been hidden?”

He pointed to an area on the map just outside of Tahlequah. “There are old creek beds here, not far from the town. The land on either side of them tends to be rocky, and in some places, quite elevated. There are a number of small caves throughout this entire area.” He looked up and locked his gaze on hers. “We’re going to have to be awfully damn lucky to find the right cave.”

“Don’t you believe in luck, Adam?”

Too late she realized there were many different ways a man might answer that question, some of them quite risqué.

“Maybe one of Peter’s people would be able to help you,” Sarah said. “He and his father were very kind to us when we traveled through their land—after they scared me witless, that is.”

Amanda noticed that the Benedict brothers looked as if they were trying very hard not to laugh. Sarah noticed, too, of course.

To Amanda she said, “They both still think it’s funny. What they won’t likely admit is that until those warriors drew close enough so we could see their faces, *they* were scared, too.”

Adam looked up from his map. “You didn’t tell me that part,” he teased Caleb.

“It was a moment,” Caleb admitted. “We looked up to find a line of warriors almost as far as the eye could see coming toward us. They wore full battle paint.” He paused in the memory and then said, “I don’t know if Peter or his father can help you. I don’t know if any of the elders of their tribe were among the Cherokee party led by Bell or not.”

“I believe Gladstone wanted me to find the gold,” Amanda said. “Do you think there might be a clue in this journal that I missed? Something to make the task less formidable?”

“We can certainly read through the account again. Maybe we can all have a turn with it.”

“That’s a good idea,” Amanda readily agreed. “Perhaps something will stand out to one of you that I missed.”

Adam looked up, his gaze meeting hers. “Maybe I’m just being pessimistic. He doesn’t say how many wagons, but he mentioned a ten men. Two men per wagon gives us five wagons.”

“So?”

“I’m trying to get a picture in my mind of how much gold, and therefore how much space would be needed to hide it.”

“And the men,” Amanda said quietly. Adam had a point. “He said he dragged them all into the cave, so it has to be big enough for them, too. Oh, and he said it had an overhang.”

“That’s right, he did. So it’s a pretty good sized cave, then. That makes our search a bit easier since in part of the area there isn’t enough rock for anything more than a crawl space.”

Adam looked up from the map and seared her with his gaze. “Do I need to detail to you all the things I think we’ll need to get by way of supplies, or will you trust me to go and buy them?”

Clearly, to her mind, he expected her to kick up some kind of fuss. Amanda smiled as she realized she had a new favorite pastime, and that was keeping Adam Kendall off balance.

She reached into her carpetbag and pulled out the envelope of money and handed it to him. “Here. You know what to buy. I haven’t a clue.”

Adam shook his head. “I’m amazed you made it all the way across the country in one piece,” he said.

“Traveling as a widow on her way home to kin, I found few real problems. Most folks wanted only to help me, and I have to tell you it sure was nice being treated with respect for a change.”

Adam’s gaze darkened. “You deserve to be treated with respect all the time.”

Amanda shook her head. “We both know how society works.”

“It’s so damned unfair,” Sarah said.

Amanda blinked. It seemed strange, her delicate and genteel cousin speaking profanities.

“We have a gentle mount Amanda can use,” Joshua said. “No need to buy an extra horse.”

“And don’t be thinking you’re going to pay for it,” Sarah added on quickly. Amanda laughed because that was exactly what she’d been about to suggest.

“You’re kin,” Sarah said, “and that is the end of it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Amanda chuckled.

Caleb slanted a look at Sarah. “Well, you’ve been true to your word, that’s for sure. The first moment you set foot in this house you told us that speaking your mind and having your way were going to be two of your most notable traits.”

“Damn right,” Sarah said.

Amanda thought she could endorse a personal policy like that.

An hour later, she stood out on the verandah as Adam and Warren brought their horses around from the barn. They were going into Waco and would return the next day with the necessary supplies. The plan was to leave early the day after that.

While Amanda could and would pull her own weight, she didn’t mind leaving this part to the men. Plus, it would give her the opportunity to get well rested before their trip.

When both men crowded their horses close to her, she didn’t back up. Holding her ground, she looked up and into two sets of eyes that seemed to burn with hunger. Sarah had gone upstairs to lie down for a bit, and the Benedict brothers had headed out to chores. She stood alone with no one to overhear or to interfere.

“We’re about to leave, so this is your last chance to back out of going on your treasure hunt.”

Though Adam had spoken, Amanda sensed he spoke for Warren, too.

“Why would I want to back out?”

He let his gaze travel down the length of her body, and she swore in that moment he branded her.

“Because when we get out on the trail, just the three of us, we’re going to have you every way two men can have a woman.”

Oh, yes. Did she feel threatened by that pronouncement? Not in the least. She felt her nipples tighten beneath the fabric of her dress. She licked suddenly dry lips.

“You do understand that I am a virgin?”

Adam’s smile made her belly flutter. “You won’t be much longer. What do you have to say about that, Miss Dupree?”

She looked from his feral expression to Warren’s hungry one. Did she tell them they already had her seduced when they’d not even laid a hand on her? Probably not a good idea. Amanda feared she didn’t know how to play coy or even how to perform the delicate waltz between men and women also known as foreplay.

What did she have to say about being had by these two lawmen? She felt her smile turn hot and sultry and could only think of one word to say.

“Good.”

Chapter 7

Adam figured it was by mutual consent he and Warren spent the time on the way to town talking about everything under the sun except Amanda.

That was only self preservation. It was hell riding with a hard-on.

As they neared their destination, the reality of the upcoming trek needed to be addressed, at least a little.

“I can’t remember the last time I was this anxious to get away from civilization,” Warren said.

Adam chuckled. “I think we’re both looking forward to this particular trail ride.”

“I’m glad we’re not taking the train. This’ll give us lots of time to get to know Amanda.”

“So I was thinking,” Adam grinned.

“I want to check in with my partner. I’ll tell him I’m going to accompany a client out of town.”

Adam looked over at Warren. “Is he going to be pissed with you?”

Warren shrugged. “If we’re successful, it won’t matter, will it? Besides, he had to travel clear to El Paso a few months back, if you’ll recall.” Warren shrugged. “It’s the nature of our work, sometimes.”

“I suppose it is.” Since they would both be heading out again before long, they didn’t bother to take their horses to the livery, as they normally would. Instead, both hitched their mounts outside the ranger headquarters.

Warren’s office was in the courthouse just across the square. A prime location, Adam knew it cost him dearly. Warren claimed it was

worth it, not only to be inside the town square which was good for business, but on a personal level, to be close to Adam.

"I don't expect it will take me long here," Adam said. "Then I'll head over to the livery, and then Pete's place for the rest of the supplies."

"I'll likely meet you there, then."

Just as Warren turned to leave, a sharp whistle had both of them looking in the direction of the Old Ranch Saloon.

"Well, son of a bitch," Adam said as he recognized the man approaching. "Wyatt Earp, what the hell are you doing here? Last I heard you were headed back to Arizona." He stepped toward the tall, lanky man, hand extended.

"Just passing through on my way to Austin." Earp rocked back on his heels. "Couldn't visit your town without stopping in to say hello."

"Lucky you caught me. Warren and I are headed out of town for a couple of months." Adam introduced Warren to the sometime lawman, sometime gambler.

"Oh yeah? Where you headed? Maybe we can ride together." Earp asked.

Wyatt Earp wasn't just known for his prowess with a gun and a deck of cards. He had quite the reputation with the ladies. Adam thought of Amanda, and was glad he could truthfully say they were headed in the opposite direction.

"That's too bad. Maybe we'll re-connect on my return trip. I've got business that'll likely take more than a few weeks to wind up, there. I figure I still owe you after the way you helped me out back in San Angelo. I would appreciate the chance to settle up." Earp turned to Warren. "Masterson and I were playing poker with some friends in the Concho Saloon. Kendall, here, had stopped in to have a drink. Some yahoo—hell, I can't even remember his name—"

"Thomas Farmer," Adam said.

"Right, Farmer. Anyway, he was sitting at a table over in the corner. He'd been drinking all afternoon. I'd seen him there, of

course, but had figured him harmless. Well, apparently, he'd been watching us, had found out who we were. Damned if he didn't all of a sudden jump up, gun drawn, intent on doing to me what that bastard McCall had done to poor old Hickok up in Deadwood some years back. I tell you, I never saw Kendall here draw his gun, he was that fast. Shot the Colt right out of Farmer's hand." He turned his attention back to Kendall. "I figure I owe you plenty as you likely saved my life that day."

Adam smiled. "Nah, I figure I saved Farmer's life. He was too drunk to do too much damage, but once he fired that gun of his, either you or Masterson would have killed him for sure."

"You've got that right."

"Hell of a life you lead sometimes, Ranger," Warren said.

Adam read the teasing in his tone and smiled. "Goes with the badge," he said.

Warren took his leave, headed toward his office. Adam turned to Earp.

"Come on in. I can offer you some coffee that's likely only a few hours old."

Earp laughed. "Best offer I've had all day."

It didn't take Adam long to remember why he liked the man so much. Wyatt Earp had a way of putting people at ease, as he did the two rangers who happened to be in the office.

Adam had just finished briefing Fred Saunders, who would be the Ranger in charge while he was gone when a woman came in, fear etched on her face. Adam recognized her immediately. Elizabeth Porter owned the dress shop over on Baker Street.

"Captain Kendall, there's something not right over at Virgil's bank. I just looked in the window and I thought I saw folks in there with their hands in the air."

Adam bolted out the door. As Virgil's bank was only a couple of blocks away, he headed there on foot. As soon as he turned the corner onto Baker Street, he had the front door of the bank in sight.

“Back way?” Earp, who’d come with him, asked.

“No, no time.” He figured the bandits must have realized something was up, had likely been alerted when Liz left her store, running for the Ranger’s station. The door to the bank opened, and a group of men slowly emerged. He didn’t recognize the three outlaws, but he knew the young bank teller they had in front of them, a six shooter pressed to the young man’s head.

No way can this situation come out good. Adam was thankful the street had cleared. He just hoped to God it stayed that way.

He took a few more steps toward the bank, and away from Earp.

“Just hold it right there, Ranger. One step closer and I’m going to put a hole in this boy’s head.”

Adam could see the young teller shaking from where he stood. Instead of addressing the thieves, he gave the hostage a steady look. “Hold on, Ethan. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“What the hell you boys figure you’re going to do?” Earp asked.

His drawl sounded nonchalant. Adam knew the man was anything but.

“You have to know if you don’t throw down your weapons right now, you’ll be meeting your maker today,” Earp said.

“We got us this here hostage, mister. There’s no way you and the Ranger can clear leather before I kill him, so back off.”

“This is my town,” Adam said. “You might as well try and kill me here and now because there is no Goddamned way I’m letting you hurt that young man, or escape justice.”

“Henry’s gonna get on his horse and then he’ll have his gun on our hostage, while I get us on my horse, and then we’s gonna ride. I’ll drop the boy off a mile or so out.”

“I’ve got Henry,” Earp said in a soft voice.

Adam nodded, then turned his attention back to Ethan. He stared hard at the young man, hoping like hell the boy wouldn’t panic in the next couple of minutes.

“On three,” Adam said quietly. He knew Earp would recognize the code. It wouldn’t be a count of three, but of two.

“One. Two.”

The man holding Ethan turned his eyes to Earp when that man shifted slightly, and that was when Adam made his move.

Swift as lightning he drew his gun and pulled the trigger. The report echoed loud in the hot summer air almost simultaneously with Earp’s shot, which caught Henry in the chest and drove him back against the wall of the building. Ethan had thrown himself to the ground and covered his head with both hands. His captor stared unseeing, before falling to the ground, dead.

The third bandit threw away his gun as if it would bite him. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” he yelled, his hands high in the air.

“Hell of a shot, Kendall,” Earp said, staring at the hole in the would-be kidnapper’s forehead.

Adam nodded to Henry, who’d been hit where he’d stood, between the horse and the lone surviving bandit. “Not bad shooting yourself.”

He walked over and crouched down where Ethan still lay in the dirt, shaking. “It’s all over now, Ethan. You’re safe.”

The young man pulled his hands away from his head and looked around. When he spotted the dead man lying right beside him, he turned a sickly shade of green.

“Look away and walk away, son,” Wyatt Earp said. “It’s the only way.”

“Y...Yes, sir.” Ethan scrambled to his feet and ran off probably, Adam thought, to puke his guts out.

He turned and caught the smile on Earp’s face. “Well, I’d say that makes us about even.”

“Nah,” the man said as he holstered his gun. “That was just because bullies piss me off.”

* * * * *

Adam didn't trust himself to turn around and look at her. If he did, he knew he'd stop their progress and have her right then and there in the middle of the day on the hard, unforgiving ground.

So he rode on ahead of Warren and Amanda, listening to their light conversation and working like hell to put his arousal away.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd felt this horny or this eager.

Thank God Warren understood him and quite happily kept Amanda's mind engaged.

Of course, not looking at her didn't mean he wasn't thinking about her. Adam shook his head. He ordered his thoughts out of carnal territory and instead reviewed what he'd learned of her just from spending time with her. He used his lawman's analytical mind to think about the woman herself.

Amanda Dupree was way too trusting. She hadn't even asked him for an accounting of the money he and Warren had spent. How she'd made it this far in life unscathed was a mystery completely beyond him. She seemed generous and warm, and he couldn't wait to experience her warmth for himself.

Think of something else.

Preparing for their expedition had been an exercise in logistics. Normally, he'd take more than a week to hone his plans. He hadn't been able to do that. So he and Warren had bought bedrolls and beans, rope and coffee, and just enough extra food—they'd hunt game or fish on the trail—to get them as far as Denison. There, they could resupply.

He'd sent his letter of resignation to Austin. Once his superiors acknowledged it, he'd turn in his badge and move on to the next phase of his life.

Autumn in Texas stayed mild until well into December during the days, but that didn't mean there couldn't be cold temperatures at night along the trail. They had flint for starting fires, blankets to sleep on,

and even a couple more to keep them warm when they finally fell asleep each night.

Adam expected the heat of loving to keep them all nice, toasty, and warm in the interim.

He looked over his shoulder to judge how Amanda was managing the ride. She'd found her rhythm on the horse, and although the loping pace didn't eat up ground very quickly, it was a faster pace than he'd been afraid they would have to travel given she wasn't used to putting in hours on end in the saddle.

That line of thought brought him around to thinking about Amanda's inexperience in other areas, and he started to get hard. That was *not* the best shape to be in while riding on the back of a horse. Adam forced his mind back to the present. He was still staring at Amanda and noticed she'd broken off talking to Warren and returned his stare with an undecipherable look.

"You making out all right back there?" Adam asked.

"Yes."

He flicked his glance to Warren. His lover smirked. Adam didn't particularly care if Amanda was miffed with him for putting some distance between them. He needed the space.

A couple of hours later, he called a halt beside a slow-moving, shallow stream. The going had been easy so far, but it wouldn't hurt to take a break, stretch their legs. They weren't in any rush, after all. The only thing he felt anxious about had nothing to do with progress to be made along the trail.

Adam swung easily from the saddle, dropping the reins to the ground. Houston, his gelding, had been trained well enough. He knew the horse wouldn't be going anywhere.

One look at Amanda's face, and his conscience kicked him, hard. He hadn't meant to ignore her to the point of hurting her feelings. He took the few steps necessary to bring him to her and reached up and lifted her from the saddle.

The moment he got his hands on her and lowered her in front of him, he realized it wasn't pique she'd been feeling but raw, pushed-to-the-limit hunger.

Despite his best efforts, he realized they were all in the same state of banked arousal. "Oh, what the hell."

He brought her forward until he could feel the mounds of her breasts pressing against his chest. Then he wrapped his arms around her, put his mouth on hers, and plundered.

His lips slid and smoothed and sucked, his tongue plunged as he tasted every bit of her mouth. She tasted better than he'd imagined, and he had imagined plenty. The force of his desire shocked him, and he figured he should ease back, begin to wean his lips gently from hers.

Until the moment when she surrendered to him completely.

She gave herself to him, winding her arms around his neck, her mouth opening, her tongue stroking and mating with his with absolute abandon. She rolled her hips against his, and he very nearly pulled her to the ground. His cock hardened and instinct had him rocking back against her with a thrust of his hips that spoke vividly of his intentions.

He sensed Warren's approach, and when that man tucked himself against Adam's side and reached out, the stroke of Warren's hand down his back thrilled him even as it grounded him. He didn't have to gorge himself now. He could devour slowly, relish each bite. They would have night after night to love.

Adam found his gentleness and eased his lips from Amanda's. He needed to change the pace, and so he turned rabid hunger into soft sips and light tastes. He wooed her, as she deserved to be wooed, and when she moaned, when he felt her shiver in his arms, he drew her back, just a little, so he could look into her eyes.

The fire-glaze of passion she wore told him she burned as hotly, wanted as desperately, as he. The press of Warren's body gave him the singular pleasure of feeling his lover's erection pressed against his

hip. Turning his head to the right brought his face within inches of Warren's. Just another tiny move in that direction allowed Adam to brush his lips over his.

He looked out the corner of his eye, gauging Amanda's reaction to their male kiss. Her eyes widened, her nostrils flared, and her breathing hitched.

Well, now, that's just about perfect.

Warren had obviously become aroused just from watching Adam kiss Amanda, and Amanda had demonstrated a similar reaction in turn.

Warren stepped closer and slid his right arm around Amanda as he leaned forward and kissed Adam back. When his lover then turned his head in Amanda's direction, Adam stepped a few inches to the side and watched as Warren laid his lips on hers.

Warren only allowed himself a small taste, restraining himself likely for the same reason Adam had. When he eased away from her, Adam noted they were all three breathing hard. A quick glance down the front of his lover's body treated him to the sight of the impressive protrusion ridging his trousers.

"Let's water the horses and ourselves. We haven't come very far yet, and I'd like to put a few more hours in the saddle before we make camp. Amanda, are you doing all right?"

"With regard to what?" Her voice held a dazed quality.

Adam laughed, then swooped in and planted a noisy, quick kiss on her lips. "With regard to riding."

"I'm fine. A bit stiff and sore, but I'll ride as long as you need me to."

"We promise to get rid of the stiffness and soreness tonight," Warren said.

"I'll hold you to that promise."

"Of course, you might end up trading one kind of discomfort for another," Adam said.

"I'll hold you to that one, too."

Adam grinned. By damn, he was really coming to like this unique, gutsy woman.

* * * *

The sun burned hotly and her muscles ached from the long ride, but neither of those two facts mattered much. Amanda's body hummed with arousal, the words Adam had said to her before he'd left for town the day before echoing in her mind.

Each step the horse took rocked her body in the saddle, rubbed her against the stiff leather. Petticoat and pantaloons didn't protect her tender flesh from feeling the slight friction. Hot gazes and those spectacular kisses worked with that sensation to keep her body in a constant state of arousal and readiness.

She felt the moisture between her thighs as the day wore on and her anticipation built. The flavor of their kisses stayed on her lips regardless of the sips of water she took to bathe her parched throat.

If passion had a color, it wouldn't be red, or orange. It would be the deep chestnut brown of Adam's hair, or the sparkling chocolate of Warren's eyes. Or maybe it would be a red, the deepening red of the setting sun, as the day waned and evening drew near.

Amanda let her eyes rest on Adam. Warren had told her a little of what had happened the day before in Waco. That Adam Kendall would put himself on the line to save another came as no surprise. What had amazed her was the level of anxiety she'd felt, the deep belly-wrenching fear that had slid through her when she thought how close he'd come to getting killed. Adam's courage and his strength awed her. She already knew he would protect and care for those around him as naturally as he breathed.

Turning her head, she looked at Warren. He wasn't what she'd consider a brooder, but Warren Jessop was a thinker. He also seemed very much aware of Adam, sensitive to his moods and his emotions. She'd watched the two of them together and marvelled at how attuned

they were to each other. Warren had chatted with her most of the day, off and on, but even then she could see how he'd keep part of his attention focused on Adam, and on her, too. He turned just then, his gaze gentle, his smile slight.

That look heated her blood and created a flutter in her belly. His smile deepened, and she realized he understood the effect he'd just had on her.

Both Warren and Adam aroused her when she'd almost convinced herself she couldn't be aroused. That was another thing her mother had told her. Some people, women and men, too, had no sexual desire inside them. Until she'd come to Waco and met these two men, Amanda had almost convinced herself she was one of them.

She felt her lips slide into a smile. After those kisses earlier, she certainly had no worries in that area. Just thinking about the way Adam and Warren tasted, the way their tongues had moved in her mouth and their hands stroked down her body made her yearn for more.

Just ahead, greener grass and a copse of trees promised shade and at least a stream. Adam looked over his shoulder. His gaze locked with hers.

The heat in Adam's gaze was unmistakable. He focused on her breasts, and she could actually feel her nipples tighten in response. *My God, if I react this way with just a look, what will it be like when he actually touches me?* As if he could hear that thought, Adam licked his lips, and smiled.

"We'll make camp just ahead," Adam said.

"About time," Warren said. He, too, gave her a look that assured her his thoughts were on the carnal pleasures ahead of them.

"I know." Adam laughed. "But we needed to get as many miles behind us as possible. We've gone slightly more than twenty today, and that's a good start. And I wanted to stop where there'd be water, and softer grass."

It only took them another few minutes to reach the trees. Not a stream, but a river flowed placidly. Adam found a place where the bank sloped gently, and he chose that area to make camp.

The men dismounted easily. Warren immediately turned to the pack horse tied to his own and began to unload the things they'd need for the night. Before she could manage to swing herself down from the saddle, Adam was there, his arms lifted in invitation. Since her legs felt a bit numb, she appreciated the courtesy.

Her gasp of pain escaped involuntarily, and she nearly fell when her feet touched the ground. She collapsed heavily against Adam, and he wrapped his arms around her to hold her up.

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"You're sorry because I pushed you too hard the first day?" Adam asked. He gathered her close, and she leaned on him, very grateful for the support. This was the second time she felt his arms around her and she liked it a lot.

"You didn't push me too hard. I knew it would take me a few days to get used to this." The impulse came over her and she stretched up and brushed a quick kiss against his lips. She took a step back, testing her ability to stand on her own two feet.

"All right?" Adam looked ready to catch her if she faltered.

"Yes. What can I do to help with camp?"

"There should be some sticks and branches lying about, what with all these trees. Do you think you can gather some?"

"Of course. I must confess, though, that I've never cooked over an open fire."

"That's all right, sweetheart. We have." Adam bent down and returned her chaste kiss before moving off.

Amanda's movements were stilted at first, but after a few minutes, walking became easier. As she gathered firewood, she scouted out the best place to get into the river. She knew the water likely would be cold, but she thought she might like to freshen up after dinner.

She gathered several armfuls of wood, pleased the fuel seemed not only plentiful but dry. Soon, the aroma of brewing coffee seduced her. She returned with one last load of wood just as Warren poured the beverage. He had another pot, supported by three rods, suspended over the fire. Drawing closer, Amanda looked inside it to see beans heating, beginning to simmer. Adam had watered the animals and hobbled them where they could eat the lush grass.

He'd also spread out the bedrolls, making one large sleeping pallet.

The sight of the bedrolls combined that way made her belly clutch and moisture gather between her legs. It put her in mind of the enormous bed her cousin shared with her husbands. *Oh, God.* She placed a hand on her belly because that fluttering had begun again. Amanda didn't know if it was excitement or nervousness she felt the most.

She felt the heat of gazes and looked up to find both men staring at her, their expressions what she could only call ravenous.

She didn't think that condition had been inspired by the aroma of their cooking dinner.

"Are you hungry?" Warren asked.

The twinkle in his eye added to the excitement building within her. This was the sort of flirting she'd once derided, but the allure of it, the fun of it, drew her in.

"Yes, I am. Very hungry."

"Then come over here," Adam said. "Sit down between us, and we'll see what we can do about taking care of that appetite."

Chapter 8

Colin Baker stood just outside the Old Ranch Saloon. The smell of whisky, smoke, and body odor hit him hard, made him blink.

Waco, Texas, turned out to be a bigger town than he'd imagined it would be, which made his task that much more difficult than he'd hoped. He'd arrived in town earlier and checked into the hotel closest to the rail station.

The manager had been happy to answer his questions, claiming that no lone female had checked into his establishment in the last month, let alone the past few days. There were two other hotels in Waco, as well as a boarding house. He'd just come from the last one. Amanda Dupree had not registered or stayed at any of them. He'd stopped off at the train station and asked the station master if he'd seen the woman. Colin knew she'd come to Waco. He'd been a couple of days behind her on every stop along the way. She'd gotten on the train in St. Louis, Missouri, as the station master there definitely remembered her.

The Waco station master didn't, but one of the conductors recalled "the widow Dupree." The man had been adamant when he'd insisted the lady had family in the area, though Colin was beginning to get the impression that the term "area" in Texas had a broader meaning than it did in Richmond.

"Are you sure about that, Clayton?" the station master asked the man.

"Sure as I'm standing here. Why, Captain Kendall and his cousin, that lawyer fellow, were waiting here for her when she stepped off the train. She rode off with them, too."

Thankfully, neither of the railroad men thought to ask him the reason for his interest. It had only just occurred to him that he couldn't very well just go openly hunting for the woman without having a damn good reason for doing so.

"I'll say I have news of her mother," he muttered. He nearly laughed out loud at his own joke. If he thought he could use it, those words would be the best opening and would encourage strangers to help him. But a smart lawman might ask him *how* he had news of her mother. That could be a problem.

He stepped into the saloon, letting the double doors close behind him, and made his way over to the bar. It wouldn't hurt to have a couple of drinks while he figured out what to do next. Then he could head over to his room, get a good night's sleep, and be ready to carry on with his plan in the morning.

When he'd asked, he'd been told that Captain Kendall was the commander of the Texas Ranger division here in Waco. Colin wondered why a lawman had been waiting for the whore and where he could have taken her. He didn't feel he could just march over to the Rangers' office, at least not before he knew for certain she was there and he got his story straight.

If she'd been arrested, he could be honest and say he'd followed her to recover stolen property. Gladstone really had no business leaving anything to that blow-by so as far as Colin was concerned.

Colin didn't regret his decision to come after the Dupree woman. He had thought the matter would have been easily handled. The longer this played out, the more satisfaction he'd have when he finally held his property in his hands. As for the woman, the more effort he had to spend getting back what belonged to him just racked up the amount she owed him. And he knew just how he was going to collect.

He leaned against the bar, the noise and odors more tolerable now he'd been in them for a while. His belly wanted food, but he didn't think he'd find much good to eat here. He'd get that back at his hotel, too.

“Howdy there, mister. What can I get for you?” The bartender, a burly looking man with lots of hair, wiped the wood before him with a damp, less-than-clean cloth.

“Whiskey.” Colin dropped a few coins on the bar. In short order, he had a glass in front of him. He scanned the patrons, feeling a little out of his element. This was hardly the gentlemen’s club back home. These were hard looking men, likely ranchers and drifters, possibly gunslingers and desperados. As he stood sipping his drink, the sound of individual voices seemed to separate from the general din and assault his ears.

“Don’t reckon old Pennington can whip his weight in wild cats anymore.”

“No, but his missus sure can.”

Colin smiled despite himself, then tilted his head in a slightly different direction.

“Jay-sus, Bodine. That must have damn near rotted your guts all to hell.”

“Son of a bitch throws me into prison, the least the bastard could do is be here when I get out. Ira, how the hell am I supposed to call out that bastard Kendall if he’s not even *here*, for God’s sake?”

It sounded as if those men were sitting at a table behind and to the right of him. Because the one named Bodine had said the ranger’s name, Colin thought it prudent to listen in.

“Kendall left?” A third voice asked. A chair scrapped as the newcomer joined the other two.

Maybe I can learn something more about this Kendall.

Colin lifted his glass, sipped slowly, and continued to eavesdrop.

“Richards saw him ride out, him and some fancy dude,” Bodine said.

Colin heard a hack and a spit.

“That’d be his cousin, the lawyer,” Ira said. “Feller got hisself shot a couple months back. Since then Kendall’s stuck right close to him.”

“Cousin, huh? I reckon it makes sense a bastard lawman would have a bastard lawyer as kin.” Bodine said.

“Point is, Bodine, they ride out a lot. Out to that place Maddox used to own. I heard that Kendall is in tight with that dude Maddox’s widow married.”

“Damn, a man goes away for a couple of years and the whole God damn world changes. Maddox got hisself married and dead. Poor bastard on both counts. But, no, Richards said Kendall had a pack horse loaded down with supplies. And he said he heard the two were riding off with some fancy lady came in from back East a few days back who was staying out there at the Maddox spread. Had no idea what they were going after. Like as not, Kendall was escorting her somewhere—Richards thought El Paso, but then Richards thinks El Paso is the only place anyone ever goes.”

Colin picked up his glass and then slowly turned to face the men he’d been listening to. An idea had come to him, and he knew how he was going to catch that woman and retrieve his property.

He stepped up to the table. “Can you track them?” he asked.

These men looked rougher than most of the men he’d seen since coming west. Rough was exactly what he needed to get the job done.

“Why would you want to know that, stranger? And why the hell would we care?”

Colin had been right in guessing Bodine was some sort of leader among these ruffians. Displaying a brass he didn’t really feel, he picked up the last remaining chair, turned it around, and straddled it. He knocked back the whiskey in his glass and set the empty down.

“Because that woman is my wife and she stole something from me. And I’ve got five hundred dollars for the man who can lead me to her.”

* * * *

Amanda's emotions had stretched to the breaking point. Never had she been so excited, so anxious, and so nervous all at the same time. She knew, albeit in the most academic terms, how this evening was going to end. Yet she'd never experienced anything like what was about to happen. Neither had she ever experienced anything like the sensations already running hot through her body.

The sun had burned beyond the horizon, and the night air turned cool. Somehow she hadn't made it down to the river to bathe, though she had meant to. Instead, she'd relaxed here beside the fire, enjoyed the simple meal Warren had prepared, and fully engaged in conversation with these two fascinating men. That conversation now tapered off. Both men looked at her, their gazes seeking and holding hers, their expressions heated.

Their handsome faces had captured her attention, no question. What she knew of them so far had begun to soften her heart.

She'd never been kissed the way these two men had kissed her. Her body came alive earlier and had been waiting for more ever since.

Waiting for this moment.

Adam got to his feet and walked out of the halo of the firelight in the direction of the horses. She heard the soft nicker of the animals and a little rustling and knew he had opened one of the saddle bags.

Warren said nothing, his expression lacking curiosity, so whatever Adam did was no mystery to him. When the other man appeared, he held a towel and a bar of soap.

He came to her and held out his hand. Part offer, part command, the gesture was impossible to ignore.

He led her to the water, and at the edge of the bank, he set down the small bundle.

"One good thing about waiting until now to get into the water, it won't seem quite as cold to you."

"I don't think I could feel cold at the moment."

Warren stepped close behind her, and the heat from his body seared her. “No,” he said softly, “I think we’re all pretty hot right about now.”

“We want you,” Adam said. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. The touch felt light, nearly reverent, and she felt a part of herself simply melt. “Will you let us have you?”

“I promised myself I would only ever give myself to a man who made my insides flutter and my toes curl. My mama told me that’s how it should feel, you see, when it was the right man. I had come to believe I would never feel that, because I never did. But I do, now. I have from the first moment I saw you both.” She looked over her shoulder so Warren would know she included him equally. “You both make me feel that way. So yes. Yes, please. I want you to have me. I want to have you both.”

Adam inhaled sharply. In what light existed, she could see the glitter in his eyes. His gaze went to Warren and then back to her.

“Amanda.”

Together, as if they’d done it all their lives, the men undressed her. As the weight of her clothes left her, so, too, did the weight of her shyness. They would be the only men to ever see her naked. If they decided someday in the future they’d had their fill, she knew there would be no others for her.

She, who had always doubted the existence of love, found she was in love with these two men already. She could never choose between them, and she would never choose anyone else.

Adam murmured and she lifted her arms for him. He slid her chemise up and off. Cool air puckered her nipples while male heat warmed her inside and out.

“You are so beautiful.” Adam bent and placed a light kiss on her right breast. “We’re going to feast on you.”

“I’ll do some feasting of my own,” she promised.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Warren leaned forward and placed a kiss on her left shoulder.

The men made quick work of dropping their clothes, revealing themselves to her without coyness. Warren moved to press against her back, and she felt the unmistakable ridge of his erect cock against the crack of her ass.

In front of her, Adam emerged from his clothing like a Greek god revealing himself to a lusty maiden. His body radiated strength and power. She reached out and placed her open palm on his chest. He felt incredibly hot. The feel of his chest hair under her hand was all silk and heat, and she longed to explore, to touch and taste with equal abandon.

“Come on.” Adam took her hand in his and kissed it.

They led her into the water, and while it felt cool, it lacked the iciness she’d expected. The sensation of sand and pebbles underfoot tickled slightly. The current gently lapped against her knees, and then her thighs.

She sucked in air when the cool liquid climbed to tease her pussy.

“This is deep enough,” Adam said.

Both men scooped water onto her, front and back. The fragrance of roses teased her nostrils as first Warren, and then Adam, lathered their hands.

“Here, darling, hold this.”

Amanda took the soap from Adam and then moaned when he placed both hands on her breasts. Warren’s hands caressed both shoulders, moving down her back to her waist, and then around to her belly.

Together they washed her, their palms and fingers stroking, swirling, making her skin tingle and her knees weak. Adam leaned forward, his mouth opening over hers. His warm, moist lips caressed and sucked, and when his tongue stroked her bottom lip, she opened to him. Thoroughly seduced, she still sought to woo in equal measure. She sucked his tongue, stroked it with her own. She tasted him as thoroughly as she knew he tasted her.

She braced one hand on his neck, and when he lifted his lips from hers, she turned her head, arched back and sought Warren's kiss.

Their flavors differed, yet complimented so that she couldn't imagine one without the other. Warren kissed her with the leashed passion she felt vibrating in him, his restraint, she knew, for her.

Knowledge she had possessed for years, but experience only now blossomed. Adam cupped water over her breasts, rinsing the soap from her skin. And then he bent over her and began to suckle her breast.

"*Oh, God.*" No imagining came close to the reality of this. The heat, the excitement that coursed through her quickened her breath and sped her heart. Despite standing in cool water, she felt a liquid heat begin to gather between her legs as her pussy prepared to receive their cocks. She shivered and then her hips rolled forward, an instinctive motion she wouldn't have stopped if she could.

"Here, sweetheart." Adam's words whispered against the mouth-moistened flesh of her nipple. He smoothed a hand down her belly, his fingers combing through the hair at the apex of her thighs, traveling until they petted her nether lips. Back and forth, he caressed until she moaned and rolled her hips again.

Warren took the soap from her, tossed it to the bank. Then he bracketed her waist, holding her secure at the same instant Adam speared his finger into her.

"Oh!" Amanda cried out as ecstasy washed over her, as shiver after shiver coursed through her body, outward from her womb to her fingers and toes. As the strength left her knees, Warren supported her. Moisture gushed inside her, running down to coat the fingers that continued to move in and out in a steady, provocative rhythm.

Adam flicked his thumb just above where his fingers entered her, and her release resurged, the intensity wringing a keening mew from her throat.

"Mmm, yes. Just like that. Let it take you." His words made no sense because her mind shut off, the wonderful sensations soaring

through her becoming all and everything. As the excitement tapered, Adam scooped her into his arms.

They stood her on the bank and rubbed the drying cloth over her, their actions fast and jerky. Then she left the ground again as Adam carried her. The light of the fire bathed her as he laid her on the pallet and came down beside her on her right. Warren stretched out on her left side, his hand stroking up and down her body, his fingers brushing through her lower curls. He cupped her, and she felt her own heat in his hand.

“Are you ready for us, Amanda?” Warren penetrated her with his finger, just a light touch, and then his hand moved to her leg, pulling it gently toward him, opening her.

She knew there would be more, the breeching of her maidenhead, but she didn’t care, she wanted more. Was she ready? She’d experienced a wonderful release with these men, and she wanted to go there again. “Yes, oh, yes. Please.”

“Hmm, let’s see if we can get you even more ready for us.” Adam’s words caressed her face, and she turned to him. His lips covered hers, wooing and tasting even as his tongue claimed her, took her. She let him have what he would, taking his flavor into herself, drinking him. He eased his lips from hers and began to kiss and lick her neck. She turned her head and sought Warren’s mouth, needing his kiss, the exotic flavor feeding the fire that burned within her.

Hands stroked her breasts, caressed her belly, and petted her pussy. With touches light and fleeting, deep and lingering, they explored her until she lifted her hips and cried out to be filled.

“Adam’s going to have you first. I love him, and I want him to be your first.” Warren whispered against her ear.

Amanda’s vision was filled as Adam rose above her, his legs spreading hers even wider. She felt a hand on her and knew Warren caressed her cunny. She turned to look at him, and the love she saw in his eyes as he gazed at Adam’s face filled her heart with warmth.

Then his gaze met hers as he brought Adam's cock to her, as he nestled it between the lips of her pussy. When he returned his gaze to Adam, so did she.

"Ours. From this moment on, you're ours." Adam's oath lingered in the air between them as he flexed his hips and pushed his cock all the way into her.

Chapter 9

Ben Bodine took a moment to study the stranger who'd butted in to their private conversation. He'd spent a life time living on the edge, doing what he pleased, and he'd had to learn to size a man up fast.

More than once that skill had saved his ass.

He didn't much care for the look of the dandy who'd just invited himself to sit at his table, but five hundred dollars was more money than Bodine had seen in a long time. Besides, one thing he'd learned in life was where there was five hundred, there'd be more.

"Your missus ran away from you? Maybe you're not man enough to keep her." Bodine tossed that out and waited to see how the stranger reacted to that.

"My daddy always said the best way to deal with a woman was a stiff cock and a stiffer belt," Ira said.

Bodine snickered at that. "So he did, Ira. So he did."

"I heard you say you wanted to call out that Texas Ranger, but I guess you were just spewing a line of bullshit for your friends here."

Bodine sat forward, slowly. "You're either the bravest man I've ever met or the stupidest."

"Maybe I'm just desperate to get back my property. Two hundred fifty right here and now. The rest when we've caught up to them. You can do what you want with the lawman and anyone else in the party. I just want my wife."

"She might be used goods by the time we catch them." Bodine knew he was yanking the man's chain.

“Let me rephrase that, then. I want the book she took from me. Her, I don’t care about. Hell, you can even use her yourself. When we catch her.”

“Well, I do want to get my hands on Kendall.” Bodine made a decision. He didn’t have any irons in the fire at the moment. Plus, he’d already decided to go after the bastard. This way, he got to do what he wanted and got paid for it. “Two fifty now, two fifty when we catch them. And you pay for our supplies.”

“*Our* supplies?”

“This here is Ira, and the skinny one is Porter. I’m Bodine. They call me Big Ben Bodine, because I am. We’re a team. Look at it this way. You get three men for the price of one.”

The stranger nodded. “Colin Baker.” He held out his hand and Bodine shook it.

Damn Easterner.

“We’ll head out tomorrow,” Bodine said. “We’ve got horses, so I reckon you’ll have to get one for yourself. The livery will have what you need. Then some chow, coffee. You staying at the George Hotel, over by the train station?”

“I am.” Baker sat straighter, his eyes darting around the room. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out his billfold. He counted the bills out, handling the wallet in such a way Bodine couldn’t see into it.

Bodine figured the Old Ranch was likely far different to any place Baker had ever been before. The man might be irritating as shit, but he seemed to have his wits about him. Bodine pocketed the money.

“Porter will come fetch you first thing. He knows what you’ll need to buy to supply us for a few days. Since we don’t know for sure where Kendall was headed, we don’t know how long we’ll have to be out on the trail. Just get what Porter tells you.”

Baker got to his feet. “All right. The food at that hotel any good?”

“Yeah, not bad. Mary’s Place across the street has the best breakfast. You best eat well tonight and in the morning.”

"I will." Baker nodded, then left the saloon. Bodine poured himself another drink from the bottle of whiskey Porter had set on the table.

"Well, looks like we've scored us a wad of cash." He looked at Ira, then Porter, and then snickered.

"We were gonna go after Kendall anyway," Ira agreed. "Now we get paid for it. Good thinking, Bodine."

"I don't like him." Porter grabbed the bottle and refilled his glass.

"Don't gotta like the man to take his money," Bodine said. Then he lowered his voice. "Don't worry. If he irritates us too badly, well then, he'll just have himself an accident. Dandy like that, full of himself, wanders off on his own in the middle of Texas. Who would figure he wouldn't get dead?"

"Now that's why you're the boss," Ira said. "Because you're always thinking."

* * * *

Amanda didn't shy away from the sharp spasm of pain. Instead, she'd anticipated it, embraced it.

This moment is when everything changes.

She couldn't stop the tiny cry that escaped her throat any more than she could prevent the few tears leaking from her eyes.

The apology on Adam's face touched her heart. The strain on his face as he held himself still inside her brought a smile to her lips.

"I'm sorry."

She'd expected the words. She already knew him well enough to understand he had to say them. "I'm not." She had chosen this, and she would have no regrets.

"Amanda." The soft whisper of her name brushed her lips a heartbeat before his mouth took hers. Gently wooing, he kissed her deeply, slowly, seeming content with this mating of mouths, this dance of tongues. Amanda reached up and twined her arms around his

neck. He more than kissed her, he *cherished* her. She, who had never particularly believed in romance, felt thoroughly romanced. Inside her, the girth of her lover felt huge. The sensation of being filled, stretched, brought a new kind of pleasure. She felt all of him in her, and when his cock convulsed, one slow ripple of movement, she tilted her hips just a little to feel him better.

Beside her, Warren edged closer. He nuzzled her ear, stroked a hand down Adam's back, inhaled deeply and sighed.

"I can smell you both," he whispered. He placed a kiss on her neck, then ran his hand down the side of her body. "The musk of your joining is a heady scent. I've never felt this aroused before."

Adam's kiss tapered to soft, teasing flutters. He thrust his hips forward, once, then raised his left eyebrow.

Amanda wanted to laugh. That imperious gesture was so like him. She knew in that moment—hell, she'd probably known since her first sight of him—that he would be a dominating man.

There were worse fates in life than being dominated by a man with the capacity for caring Adam had already displayed. But he waited for her to let him know the pain had ebbed.

She said, simply, "More."

He pulled back and thrust into her again, and then again. The friction of his cock caressing her cunny sent new, delicious shivers down her spine. She felt one spot in particular tingle as his cock stroked inside her.

"That feels so good!" Needing more, knowing somehow there had to be more, she wrapped her legs around him and pressed herself closer.

"Oh, God." Adam closed his eyes, his body rigid, the tendons on his neck corded, as if he strained at the very limit of his control. It occurred to her then she needed to make him lose that control. Giving in to an urge she didn't understand, she tightened her inner muscles at the same time she pressed her body up and closer to his.

“Christ!” Adam began to move, a fast, deep plundering of her body that excited her beyond anything she’d even imagined. His cock moved in and out of her so fast, so deep, she could do nothing but receive him, receive him and relish the motion, the glide and the slide and the reaching, reaching.

“Adam!” Her release overwhelmed her, sucking every bit of thought from her brain, so that only the rapture, wave after wave of glorious rapture, filled her completely. She held tight to the man thrusting in her, held him even as he cursed again and then stiffened. Deep inside, in that special place his cock claimed, she felt a flood of hot liquid as he gave her his seed.

His chest rested on her, and sweat, both his and hers, pooled. She heard her own breathing, shallow and raspy, echo against his. Her heart raced, and she felt his pounding against her, too.

Adam had collapsed on top of her. She bore his full weight and here was yet another kind of pleasure, one that touched not so much her body as her heart.

Amanda didn’t fool herself. This was no wedding night. She’d never counted on having one of those. She *had* hoped to one day know what it felt like to cradle the body of a man between her thighs. That moment had arrived and she was going to thoroughly enjoy every minute. She would indulge herself and these men to the best of her ability, and she would save every experience in her memory. One day, when she’d returned to Richmond, she’d be able to take those memories out and embrace each one.

“Did I hurt you, sweetheart?” Adam kissed those words against her ear, then took his weight off her just a little, raising his chest up so he could look in her eyes.

“No. I knew the first moment would sting, but after that it was just wonderful. You felt wonderful.” Amanda smiled because he flexed inside her. If she wasn’t mistaken, his cock was returning to life. “Perhaps I should say *feel* wonderful.”

“Damn, you’re special.” He eased himself away from her and then looked at Warren.

Because he did, Amanda turned her head to the left. Warren was lying on his side, tucked in close and facing her. The glitter in his eyes and the way he looked at her made her breath catch.

“Are you too sore for me?”

“Never.”

Warren smiled and then leaned over and gave her a too-short kiss. “My sweet Amanda, I think you would say that even if your pussy felt like it was on fire.”

Lying here naked between two men who were also naked filled her with a sense of confidence she’d rarely felt. Though she knew she thought boldly, she rarely spoke boldly. She did so now. “I want you.”

“Oh, you’re going to have me. Because I very much want you, too.”

“Kiss me, please, Warren.”

As if he was waiting only for her to ask, he leaned over, cupped her face with his hand, and laid his lips on hers. His tongue swept her bottom lip, and when she opened to him, his tongue surged into her mouth, caressing, commanding. Languid and lush, his kiss soothed and aroused at the same time. His flavor differed from Adam’s, but tasted no less delicious. His lips brushed and his tongue danced with hers over and over, slow and sweet, wet and wonderful.

Just when she thought he would come over her, he scooped her up and rolled onto his back, bringing her with him so that she lay upon him. She parted her legs, and his hard cock nestled between her wet feminine folds.

“This way you can set the pace,” he whispered. “Take my cock into that wonderful little cunny, sweetheart. Fuck me.”

Amanda’s eyes widened because his words and what he asked her to do inflamed her. She wasn’t certain how to maneuver at first, but

then she just did what felt good. When his hot shaft slipped inside her, she let out a groan of pure pleasure.

Longer where Adam had been thick, she took as much of Warren's cock as she could. He hit something inside of her, something that gave a twinge of protest. And then her arousal surged, and whatever had blocked him opened and allowed just that last little bit of him in.

"Oh, yes. I knew you'd be hot and tight around me."

"She has an amazing pussy," Adam said.

He scooted close to them, on Warren's right. He stretched up and kissed her, a sweet, questing kiss. And then he turned his head and kissed Warren.

It thrilled Amanda, this display of love between these two men. She could only imagine how witnessing and participating in other intimacies would affect her.

"Here, sweetheart." Adam helped her to straighten her body so that she knelt, straddling Warren. A gasp escaped her when that change sat him even deeper inside her. It hurt, yet on the heels of the pain came a wave of arousal that was almost as fierce as her release had been.

"Now we can play with your breasts—your very pretty breasts."

Suiting actions to words, both men caressed and petted, pinched and pulled. Adam got on his knees beside her and showed her how to ride Warren, slow and gentle movements that thrilled her.

"Like I'm riding a horse," she whispered.

"Thanks, darling, but my cock's not quite that big."

Amanda laughed, partly due to Warren's wit, but mostly because of the joy that filled her heart.

Adam turned her face to him, his kiss instantly carnal. When he weaned his lips from hers, he bent to her nipple, sucking it into his mouth, strong and deep. Low in her belly, Amanda felt a tug, and that tug made her arousal climb even higher.

“This is incredibly arousing, watching my lovers fuck. Soon, we’ll both be inside you at the same time, Amanda.”

“Oh, God. Is that even possible?”

“Oh, yeah,” Warren answered her. His hand reached up and caressed her right breast, tweaking the nipple.

Amanda shivered, the smooth, gentle up and down movements of her body on Warren’s cock becoming shorter, jerkier.

“I want to watch you both come at the same time,” Adam said. Then he laid his lips on hers and slid his hand down her body to where she and Warren were joined.

His fingers caressed a spot on her that sent a jolt through her. He chuckled low and did it again, and then again.

Warren grunted, grasping her hips, taking over the motion, driving his cock into her in fast, deep thrusts. Amanda screamed as her release soared out of her, as everything inside her tingled and sparkled with excitement. She bowed her back and closed her eyes and could have sworn a dozen shooting stars exploded all around her.

Drained, she let herself go, trusting these two men to keep her from falling, to keep her safe. Adam took her weight, his hand still spread between her pussy and Warren’s cock.

“Mandy.”

Warren’s endearment stroked her, settling deep in her heart. Adam eased her down gently, tucking her in the midst of them while he murmured sounds her inner self seemed to recognize and understand.

As sleep began to claim her, she thought of that first moment, when Adam had entered her. He’d said she was theirs.

“You’re mine, too.” Her thoughts emerged as a whisper. On her side, she felt the light kiss of one lover, the soft caress of the other.

“Yes, sweetheart. We’re yours, too.” Adam said.

The words sank with her into sleep.

Chapter 10

Adam kept his eye on Amanda throughout the day, carefully watching for signs of discomfort. They'd gotten a later start than would be ideal because he and Warren had wanted her to get as much sleep as possible.

The sun had just started to descend when he saw Amanda wince. He didn't look away when she caught him staring. She blushed and he fought the urge to laugh.

"We've gone far enough today." He stopped his horse, turned him slightly so that he faced her, expecting her protest. She didn't disappoint him.

"It's only afternoon. There's a lot of daylight left."

"You're uncomfortable." Warren reined in on her other side, also turning his animal to face her. Adam wasn't surprised Warren had noticed. He was a sensitive, caring man. That was one of the things Adam loved about him.

"We probably should have spent the day back there," Warren said. "Except I doubt we would have been able to keep our hands off you if we had, so you wouldn't have gotten much time to heal, anyway."

Amanda blushed again, and this time Adam allowed himself a small chuckle. "Don't be embarrassed, sweetheart. It's our fault you're sore."

"I know it's silly for me to be embarrassed. Hopefully, I'll get over it. How long until we get to Denison?"

"It'll be another four days, at least, I'm afraid. Then we'll get us a room at the hotel and a real bed. For now, let's make camp. There's a stream not too far ahead. I'll head over there and get—"

“How far ahead?”

Adam shook his head. “Likely another hour, at least.”

“I want to camp by a stream.” Amanda shifted her seat on the saddle, wincing again as she did. “I want to sit in cool water. Please? I can manage another hour, and I think cool water will really help.”

Adam looked at Warren. “I’m fine with that,” he said, “but I don’t like seeing Mandy suffer.”

“All right,” Adam said to Amanda, “but only on one condition. You ride with me. I can cradle you, give your bottom a rest.”

He expected further protest, and by the look of surprise on Warren’s face when Amanda nodded and dismounted, so did he.

Adam dismounted so he could tie her horse’s reins to his saddle, then got back on. Warren also got off his horse, and once Adam was back in the saddle, lifted Amanda to him.

“Your poor horse,” she said as he settled her in his arms.

“Don’t worry about Houston. He can easily carry several hundred pounds, sweetheart. You don’t weigh much. Besides, we aren’t going far.” He didn’t tell her that at the slower pace it would be more than an hour to get to that stream. They didn’t allow her that much sleep the night before, and on top of the week’s worth of traveling she’d done getting to Waco he figured she had to be beyond exhausted.

“Comfortable?” he asked her once she snuggled into him.

“Yes. Thank you. I really was getting sore.”

“I know. Why not close your eyes for a bit and rest?”

“I’m not going to fall asleep.”

“Of course not. But why not rest? Then you can help us set up camp when we get to the stream.”

“Okay.”

Adam held her easily with her head tucked against his shoulder and her legs across his saddle, dangling on his right. Houston didn’t seem to mind the extra load, and Adam wondered if the horse understood the situation because it seemed to him the animal’s gait

gentled. Within moments and despite her declared intention to the contrary, Amanda dropped off to sleep.

"It's both good and bad she doesn't like to complain," Warren said.

"I know. Nice not to have to listen to any whining, but that means we have to keep a good eye on her."

Warren grinned. "That's not a hardship."

"It really isn't," Adam agreed.

It took them just over an hour to reach the stream he'd told Amanda about. The water wasn't much more than a trickle. Adam knew of a better place not far from where they were, but it lay to the northwest. Adam looked from the stream, to Amanda, who still dozed.

"Let's go to that lake we saw a couple years ago," Warren said. "That's not far from here, is it?"

"You read my mind," Adam said.

It took almost another hour to reach the lake. Adam sighed in pleasure. This was much better.

Amanda began to stir just as the water came in sight. Adam helped her to sit up.

She blinked, taking in the landscape. "That stream looks like a lake."

Warren laughed. "It is."

"Oh."

"I think our woman needs time to wake up before she's coherent," Adam said.

"That's not a hardship, either," Warren said.

Warren lifted her down, and Adam dismounted. Carrying Amanda for the better part of two hours had gotten his juices flowing. He'd have to see to it they didn't ravage her two nights in a row. He began to have fond thoughts of the Katy Hotel in Denison. Amanda deserved better than the unforgiving ground under her when they made love.

* * * *

Amanda looked left and right as they rode into the town of Denison. Here she saw the frontier town of her imagination. Wooden buildings, dusty streets, people scurrying about, Denison looked like a town growing before her very eyes.

“Why don’t you wait for us in the lobby of the hotel? We’ll get the horses settled and then –”

“I’ll go with you to the livery and then carry my own saddle bag,” Amanda said. These two men had been pampering her for the last couple of days and while she loved it, she really did like to do her share.

Adam shook his head. “Stubborn.” He said.

“Yes, I am.”

It didn’t take long for them to see the horses boarded and walk back to the Katy Hotel.

Amanda hung back with Warren while Adam got them registered,

“While you two get settled in the room, I’ll drop in and say hello to Red.” Adam stepped back from the registration desk, handing one room key to Warren and keeping one for himself.

“Who’s Red?” Amanda asked. She was proud of the patience she was showing. After sleeping on the ground for the last several nights, she was definitely looking forward to having a real bed under her.

She hadn’t blinked when she heard Adam register them as a family—she apparently had become Warren’s wife, and he, Adam, their cousin.

Sarah had told Amanda the story of her time in this frontier town. After nights spent under these two lawmen, Amanda was all for any ruse that would put them in a real bed together.

“Red Hill,” Adam answered her. “He’s the sheriff of Denison. Used to be a Ranger, and I worked with him some.”

"I guess it's a common courtesy for you to stop in and see him when you're in his town," Amanda said. Then she turned to Warren. "Any lawyers you have to stop in and pay your respects to?"

"Hell, no," Warren answered. "There're enough lawyers in Waco."

Adam chuckled. "So I've always said." Then he looked down at Amanda, and she could see he really wanted to kiss her.

She'd been looking forward to town, to a bed and a hot bath. Now she thought she could forgo those luxuries if the price of having them meant no spontaneous kisses from either of her lovers.

In little more than a week, these two lawmen had turned her into a shameless hussy.

"I'll be back before your bath water arrives." Adam's voice was just loud enough for Warren and her to hear.

"Don't expect the tub will be as big as the one my cousin has," she said just as softly. When Sarah had shown her the appliance, Amanda's eyes had widened. She ventured that it must take a long time to fill, being so big. Sarah had just blushed. Now Amanda understood why it was so big—so it could accommodate her cousin and both her husbands at the same time.

"Vixen," Adam said. "That's a fine image to put in my head. Unfortunately, you're right, it won't be. Warren and I will just have to be content to settle ourselves on either side of the tub and play lady's maid."

"Adam?"

"Yes, Amanda?"

Oh, she liked the way his eyes twinkled. She guessed he was proud of the way he'd turned her own teasing right back on her. She'd meant to titillate him just a little, to get him thinking about the three of them, naked and hungry. And now he'd instilled a similar hunger in her.

"Hurry back."

"Don't worry, I will."

Warren had remained quiet during their exchange, but she knew he'd listened attentively, and one glance in his direction proved he had to work at restraining his laughter. He was a quieter man than Adam and also more reserved. He didn't have the need to be in charge and seemed very content to leave that role up to Adam.

From her observations so far on the trail, the two men suited each other perfectly—and so far, they both suited her the same way.

Adam headed off down the street in the direction of the sheriff's office. Warren hefted two saddle bags and would have relieved Amanda of her own, but she shook her head. "I can manage."

They had a room on the second floor, one of the ones that looked out over the main street. "Do you think this is the same room Sarah had when they stayed here?"

"Seems likely. I was surprised the hotel is open again, but I guess the fire a few months back wasn't as bad as it could have been."

"I can't believe what she went through. That a man would marry her just to murder her for her money."

"Maddox was a real bastard." Warren's face colored.

Amanda went over and kissed him lightly. "That's for being brave enough to face that bastard on behalf of my cousin." Then she wrapped her arms around him. "This kiss is all just from me."

She kissed him, her body pressed close to him, her tongue boldly sweeping into his mouth, eager to taste and tease. His arms came around her, and he lifted her off her feet, holding her easily as he took over the kiss.

Warren proved he could be forceful when he wanted to be, for in the next instant he laid her on the bed and had his hand under her skirt, caressing the cotton of her undergarment right over her pussy.

The heat of him, the power of his effect on her shot her arousal impossibly high. She surged her hips in response to his love play, seeking more of his touch and cursing the material that came between them.

“When Adam gets back, we’re going to try something new. Is that all right with you?” he asked.

She loved the look in his eyes, the way he focused on her as if she were the most important person in the world. She’d seen him look at Adam the same way and wondered if his feelings for her could ever be as strong as they were for the other man.

Reaching out, she gently caressed his face. “Yes. I want to try every single thing you two can come up with.”

It was nothing more than the truth.

* * * *

“Just between you and me, I’m glad Joshua killed that sorry son of a bitch. The man needed killing. Marrying a young lady just to kill her and make off with her inheritance is about as low as a man can go, in my estimation.”

Adam didn’t even blink at the sentiment shared with him by Denison’s sheriff. He’d known Red Hill for many of years. He knew the man to be a firm believer in law and order and letting the judge decide about innocence or guilt. But he was also a man, and as a man, he could become incensed over the most heinous of crimes, especially those perpetrated against the most vulnerable of victims.

“I guess none of us will ever understand why Maddox drew his weapon,” Adam said. “But that shot Joshua took was provoked. The bastard fired first, wounding a friend of mine.” He would forever remember rushing into Maddox’s study, certain that Warren had been hurt. Thank God for Joshua Benedict’s fast reflexes.

“Ask me,” Red said, “it was likely the hand of God at work.” He sat forward, the action bringing the front two legs of his chair to the floor with a thump. “So where are you headed?”

“Into Indian Territory. We’re looking for the grave of a man reported killed some years back. Doing a favor for a friend.” It was the story they’d come up with because they couldn’t really go around

telling everyone what they were really looking for. The grave search had been Warren's idea. Adam embellished it some. "My cousin's a lawyer, and he's been asked to look into this matter." Even though Amanda was at the center of not only their travel but their lives at the moment, there was no need to mention her.

"Imagine it would be tough having a loved one die and being buried far from home. But hearing you're going into Indian Territory," Red paused and shook his head, "you keep your wits about you, Adam. We've gotten reports of a band of renegade Cherokee—five or six young bucks, by all accounts. They've been raiding and stealing from some of the settlers this side of the border and have already waylaid one party of travelers headed overland to Missouri."

"Have they been violent?" Adam asked.

"They're not after killing so much as they are stealing, mostly horses and any gold or other valuables you might leave on your horse overnight. They've been reported as being between here and Durant. You can bet your ass the sheriff of Durant wants a word with them. He's stepped up search parties, and so have a couple of the Cherokee chiefs, but so far they haven't caught them."

Durant was a town within the Choctaw Nation. Adam had some friends there, including the sheriff. He could well imagine the man would want to get his hands on the raiders.

"Anyone think to contact the Cherokee Council?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, I've sent a couple of messages that way. Damn telegraph. Sometimes you just don't know if your message has gotten across. Much better seeing a body face-to-face, you know?"

"I might have occasion to seek out one of the tribal chiefs while we're there. If I do, I'll be sure to pass on the message. I can't imagine any of the Cherokee tribes would be happy with some of their own causing trouble. From what I hear, they're having enough trouble with confrontations with the carpetbaggers."

"Yeah, I had a conversation with Major Mackenzie out of Fort Gibson a few months back. He and his men made a sweep looking for

squatters and came into town for supplies before heading back. He and I both agree that it's only a matter of time before things get out of hand if something isn't done soon about the situation." Red shook his head. "But that's none of my never mind. You just watch your back while you're out there."

"You can be sure I will."

"You heading over to Bobby's for dinner tonight?" Red got to his feet, and Adam had forgotten how tall and imposing the sheriff of Denison was. Likely one of the reasons he'd been able to get—and keep—the rowdies in line.

"Yeah. We're a bit sick of our own cooking on the trail."

"A man can eat only so many meals of beans and jerky before he has to have steak."

Adam laughed. "That is surely the truth. Thanks again for the warning about those renegades."

"It's been a month or more since they've struck. But still."

Adam appreciated the warning. He and Warren were both crack shots. He felt pretty confident that they could take care of themselves and their woman. Still, it wouldn't hurt to see how well Amanda could fire the rifle she had strapped to the back of her horse.

Adam bit back his smile. Teaching her the finer points of handling a rifle was just one of several things he and Warren planned to school her in.

He thought of her naked skin and warm bath water and headed back to the hotel.

Chapter 11

Her bath had arrived and Amanda wasted no time getting in to it. Stretched out like some water nymph from Greek mythology, she sighed in obvious pleasure. Her eyes closed, her gloriously naked body lay in full view in the large wooden tub. It seemed a damn shame to keep his clothes on under the circumstances, so he didn't. Warren stripped quickly, eager to get his hands on her. He glanced up at Adam and took in his look of pleased surprise.

"What?" He asked that, although he had a pretty good idea what had his lover smiling.

"You. You're getting very comfortable in your skin, Lawyer Jessop. That pleases me more than I can say."

Warren looked down at Amanda, naked and wet and clearly enjoying the tub, and met her gaze. He knew she couldn't understand the significance of Adam's statement or know that he himself had undergone a change. But she seemed to sense it, because her silence and the sweet expression in her eyes and on her face reassured him somehow.

He shrugged. "I'm still nervous. I have reason to be. We both do. Hell. We all do, come to that. That's just reality. But if a man spends his life living in fear—well, he's not really alive, is he? And he's not much of a man, either."

"*Sweetheart.*" Adam leaned over and kissed him, a slow, tender mating of mouths. Adam's flavor, as always, stirred him. But in this kiss, Warren sensed a deeper emotion than he'd ever felt before. Their tongues met, danced, but lightly, with the hunger leashed.

When Adam pulled back, Warren said, “You need to get naked, lover. We promised this beautiful woman two bath attendants.”

“I’ll just lay back and pretend I’m a queen and the two of you my slaves,” Amanda said.

Warren couldn’t help but steal glances at Adam as he shucked his clothes. His body aroused him so much.

When Warren thought back to the man he’d been when he landed in Waco—scared, alone, and desperately lonely—he didn’t have to look too far to know the reason he was a different man today.

Adam had changed his life and filled almost all the empty spaces inside him. He tilted his head and admired the naked woman waiting for his touch. He had the very strong feeling this woman could fill the rest of them.

“Well, now, your majesty, what part of your delectable body would you like us to wash first?” Warren asked.

“Mmm...I don’t really care as long as your luscious, wet hands get on my skin soon.”

“It would seem our queen is an easy woman to please,” he said. Smiling at Adam, he picked up Amanda’s left hand and began to wash it.

Adam chuckled, following suit with her right.

“Lawyers. Everything has to be set out for them in exacting detail.” Amanda’s tone teased more than it complained.

“You will find I’m *very* good at details,” Warren countered.

He’d enjoyed women before, of course he had. Until he’d met Adam, his relationships had been mostly with women, and mostly with ones he’d had to pay for the privilege. Oh, there’d been the occasional widow, and even one or two divorcées. When he would find a man to feed that secret craving that seemed to go as deep as his soul, the encounters had inevitably been furtive and brief.

Then Adam came into his life, and he’d not been as interested in looking as often for female companionship.

Not until he'd met Amanda had he actually desired a particular woman. Something about her—not just her physical beauty, but her heart, her grit—hell, everything about her suited him completely. She was smart and sassy with a quick wit. As it was for him with Adam, he knew with Amanda he would never be bored.

Warren thought of his friends, the Benedicts, and the lives they led. That same living arrangement, applied to himself and Adam and Amanda, held enormous appeal for him.

"Why don't you show me how you handle some of those details, Lawyer Jessop?"

Amanda's sultry demand drew him back to the present. His cock hardened even more, and his blood heated. Warren picked up the soap, worked lather into his hands, and then set those hands on Amanda's breasts.

"I love the feel of your skin under my hands," he told her. He used his fingers to tug and pinch her nipples. "You're so responsive to both of us, Mandy. Knowing I can make your heart race thrills me."

"We want to try something different," Adam said. "We want to take you at the same time."

Because Warren had been watching, he saw the flicker of excited curiosity sparkle in her eyes. While his one hand continued to caress her front, now alternating between her beautiful breasts, he worked his other hand down and under her bottom.

"I need to prepare you for that," Warren said "If you want us that way—and I'm really praying you do—I need to begin to help your skin stretch." As he spoke, he ran his finger up and down the crack of her ass, pressing in slightly each time he felt the tiny rosette of her anus.

Amanda inhaled deeply, her moan as well as the way she pressed against his finger telling him what she thought of the idea.

"We don't want to damage you, darling," Adam said. "And this will reduce the pain of the first time."

“I trust you,” Amanda said. She met Adam’s gaze and then Warren’s. “I trust you both.”

Her words filled his heart with such joy. Warren leaned over the tub and kissed her, his lips gentle, his tongue sneaking out to caress her lips. Just a quick salute to let her know how she’d moved him.

“Relax for me, Mandy. I’m just going to give you a little.” Warren lifted her left leg over the side of the tub as Adam did the same with her right. Splayed open for them, her pussy glistened in the water, the reddish curls at the top of her sex now dark from being wet.

Adam’s hands took over petting her breasts while Warren lifted her bottom, tilting her so he could easily access her anus. He resumed stroking her, but with each pass pressed his finger a bit more firmly against her rosette.

When she began to pant, Adam trailed one hand down her body to stroke and tease her clit. The instant Warren heard her breath hitch, he pushed his finger against her tiny opening, a long, steady push until the muscle gave way and he was inside her.

* * * *

Amanda gripped the edges of the tub as her entire body flooded with shivers of sensation. Bliss consumed her, inside and out, with the most incredible pleasure. This was more than she’d felt before, more than even the last best time. She bore down, her bottom pressing against Warren’s finger as Adam continued to rub her clit.

“*Oh, God.*” The words escaped on a strangled sob before she bit down on her lip, hard, to keep from making any more noise. They weren’t alone on the trail any longer, where she could scream with her release.

When the rapture ebbed, Warren leaned over the tub and kissed her, his tongue demanding entrance. She released the tub and cupped the back of his head with her hand, holding him close. The instant he ended the kiss, she turned her head, sought out Adam.

Adam's mouth moved on hers, forceful and demanding. Then she lay back against the tub as Adam and Warren's lips touched, mated. Heat filled her as she watched them kiss.

Embolden by their display and their free use of her body, she reached out a hand toward each and wrapped her fingers around their erect cocks.

"I want to feel your mouth on me," Adam said.

"Oh, God, yes," Warren echoed.

They leaned over the tub, forehead resting against forehead, arching over her. Eager to please, needing to take as much freedom with them as they had with her, she scooted forward. First left, then right, she used her tongue to taste throbbing, male flesh. She needed to be a part of them, to feel a part of the magic they made when they were together. Raw emotion etched their faces when they gazed at each other, and that emotion made her ache with need and longing.

She'd never aspired to be a wife, to be part of a couple, to be in a relationship. But she thought she might give nearly anything to be a part of their relationship, if only for a little while.

Back and forth, she tasted and teased, swirling her tongue over the tiny eye that graced the top of each cock. She felt them shivering from her light attention. A quiet kind of pleasure filled her as each man rested a hand on her back, stroked down, and combed fingers through her hair. She knew she thrilled them, and that was a very sweet thing to know.

"Enough," Adam sighed, pulling himself out of reach. "Let's dry you off so we can have a quick bath. Then I want all of us on that bed, together."

The hotel had been generous in providing drying cloths, and soon Amanda sat on the bed and watched as the men quickly cleaned themselves. She wondered if her cousin would let them use her bath tub when they returned to Waco. She thought she'd really enjoy sharing water with these two men. It would be her turn to be their bath attendant.

Their movements quick and economical, the men washed, rinsed and dried themselves in record time. When they advanced on her, Amanda scooted back to make room for them.

“Come here.” Adam didn’t give her a moment to respond. He simply wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer.

He kissed her, his mouth hot and moist, his tongue demanding as it dipped and swirled, stealing her essence and leaving arousal in its wake. Amanda wound her arms around his neck, returning his kiss, reveling in the feel of his naked chest pressing against her breasts.

A touch along her back, a gentle sweep of hand, and she lifted her lips from Adam’s, turning and melting into Warren’s embrace, opening her mouth to his, rubbing her breasts against his chest.

She pulled back just slightly and caressed his face. “Will you let me watch the two of you make love?”

She didn’t ask because she needed the measure of trust. She asked because imagining them together, making love, excited her. She didn’t need to be told this would be a huge step for Warren. She’d known almost from that first moment that Warren didn’t trust easily or often.

He swooped in, placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Why?”

“Because I know you want him, and I want to be a part of it.”

He gave her a sly look then turned his gaze on Adam, who waited on the other side of Amanda and watched quietly.

“It’s been a while since I’ve touched you the way I love to touch you,” Warren said.

“I know.” Adam turned his head so he met Amanda’s gaze. “We intended to have each other, but we wanted you to get used to the idea first.”

“You won’t shock or offend me. You *will* arouse me. I might just dive in to the middle of you.”

“Now that would be wonderful.” Warren’s voice emerged as little more than a whisper as he crawled up the bed toward Adam.

He brushed his lips across Adam's chest, tiny licks and kisses she could see aroused them both. Warren wove a trail of passion up Adam's chest until he reached his face. There he kissed him full on the mouth, and Amanda could see both men spread lips so that tongues could slide and touch. On and on the kiss went, with tiny sounds of pleasure emerging, whimpers and moans and groans that pebbled Amanda's nipples.

Adam combed his fingers through Warren's hair, and she could tell he was urging him down. Warren accommodated him instantly, retracing the trail already blazed until he settled down and took Adam's cock into his mouth.

Amanda cupped her breast, finger and thumb working together to pinch and pull an already erect nipple, the resulting arousal shooting to her womb. Adam groaned and flexed his hips, pleasure etched on his face.

Unable to just lay there and watch, Amanda moved, her need to share in the tasting an all-consuming one. Warren rose to his knees, making room for her. Lying down, her back against the mattress, she slid into the small space between Warren and the bed, her mouth hungry for his cock.

Hot and salty, his taste enthralled her, made her burn for more. Having just watched him pleasure Adam, she knew what to do. Opening her mouth wide, she sucked Warren's cock in, her tongue stroking, her mouth drawing on him, drawing him deep.

He groaned, cursed, then drew back from Adam and watched her suck his cock for a moment.

"Adam, let me have you."

"God, yes."

Adam moved, and Warren gently slid his cock out of her mouth. "Taste Adam now, Mandy."

She didn't fully realize what he intended until Adam got on his knees, presenting his ass to Warren. As she watched, Warren dipped

his head, ran his tongue along the crack of Adam's ass. Then he moved forward and placed his cock against the tight opening.

Amanda wasted no more time, the sight of Warren's cock sinking into Adam's ass so arousing she had to have more of them. Sliding beneath them and angling herself just so, she wrapped her hand around Adam's cock and brought it to her mouth.

"Oh, yes. Oh, God...so good." Adam's voice, deep and racked with emotion, stirred Amanda's heart.

"You always feel so damn good around my cock," Warren said.

Above her, Warren pulled back, then pressed forward again. She began to shiver inside, the emotion and the sensations twining together within her. Adam's cock tasted as good as Warren's, and she wondered if she could pleasure him enough so that he would give her his seed this way.

"Can't leave you out," Adam said.

Amanda didn't understand what he meant. Leave her out? She felt as if she were in the very center of this nirvana, as if Warren's slowly thrusting cock was inside of *her*.

Adam changed his position just slightly, his chest and head lowering even closer to the bed and, Amanda soon realized, closer to her. Warm, wet, Adam's tongue found her woman flesh, his lips open and questing over her slit.

Her hips rolled, and in the next instant, her arousal exploded as rapture burned her, inside and out. Warren shouted, and Adam grunted, his hips thrusting his cock deeper into her mouth as it began to quiver and pulse. Stream after stream of hot, pungent cream hit the back of her throat, and she swallowed even as her own convulsions went on and on and she lost all sense of time and space.

Weakened, shaking, Amanda huddled between the two men when they gathered her close, their heat sustaining her. The inferno of passion had branded each of them, and Amanda knew she would never be the same again.

Chapter 12

Colin hated everything about the frontier. He hated the open spaces, the rough trails, and the endless sunshine. He hated the chill of the night, the smell of campfire, and the fact that he slept each night on the hard ground with just two thin blankets for a bed.

He especially hated his traveling companions.

Bodine and his two minions likely hadn't even heard of soap and water, let alone ever used them. They chewed tobacco and spit and talked of nothing but stealing and drinking and fucking.

Colin didn't consider himself a soft man. Yes, he knew that's how Bodine and his men saw him. They were willing to take him where he needed to go with the promise of gold at the end of the journey. He couldn't trust them, and if the trail they were on actually led to the Confederate gold, he figured he'd have to kill them on the spot once they found it because they sure as hell would try to kill him.

"Here. It's ready. You want to eat some?"

The crackle of the fire, orange light dancing about seemed a fitting backdrop for the skinny little Ira. Colin thought perhaps the man was Satan incarnate. Especially at this moment as he extended a stick toward him, a hunk of charred rattlesnake smoking at the end of it.

"Best take it. That's good eatin'. When we get to Denison, you can buy yourself a fancy steak. Here on the trail, we eat what we catch." Bodine said that around a mouthful of snake.

Colin hesitated one more moment, then reached for the meat. His first instinct was to refuse. But he saw the others eating and he knew

it was going to be another day before they reached civilization again—or what passed for civilization in Texas.

The meat felt crunchy in his mouth, and his stomach settled the instant he realized it didn't taste as vile as he'd been afraid it would.

"Tastes like chicken," Bodine said.

Colin made a note not to eat any Texas chicken.

The only good thing about this entire journey so far was the coffee Porter brewed over the fire. Pouring himself a cup of that coffee now, the strong smoky flavor of it washed down the rest of the snake.

"We'll be in Denison by tomorrow. Near as I can figure, we're maybe a day behind them. They're not riding all that fast, likely on account of the woman. Never did meet pussy that could ride, horse or man, worth a good God damn."

"Always a mistake to bring a female out on the trail," Ira said. "Can't keep up. Course, if you're fucking her, I guess that's something. Likely Kendall and that lawyer cousin of his been taking turns fucking your missus, there, Baker."

"You're just jealous, Ira. It's been so long since you fucked a woman, I bet your prick is all shriveled up from lack of use," Porter said.

Bodine laughed at this, sliding a sly look Colin's way.

Bastards are trying to get me all riled up.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I told you I don't care about her. You can do what you want with the whore when we catch up with them."

"Likely be tomorrow. Can't imagine a fancy Eastern lady will have been happy spending a week out on the trail to begin with. If they've a mind to ride further, Kendall will probably have to carry her away from the luxuries of that there Katy Hotel."

"They got them a nice bordello in Denison," Porter said. "If your dick isn't all shriveled up, Ira, you and me can go get us some pussy tomorrow night."

"Where do you figure they're headed after Denison?" Colin asked. He might be able to leave Bodine and his men to their drinking

and whore mongering and find another guide. If Bodine thought their quarry were going to hop the train to another city, hell Colin could follow them there himself.

He *hated* these God-cursed heathens.

“Charley didn’t say. He just overheard Kendall and that lawyer discussing buying enough to get to Denison and then resupplying there. We’ll ask around. Somebody who sold ’em something there will likely know.”

Porter and Ira fed more wood onto the fire. Colin grabbed his blanket, wrapped it around himself. The other one he’d folded into a square to pad the ground beneath him. Hunkering down, he got as comfortable as possible. He’d fill his thoughts with the life he would lead once that gold was in his hands. He’d done some reading and asking about. Estimates put the value of that shipment upwards of a half a million dollars.

A man could spend the rest of his life living like a king on that kind of money. His companions broke off their teasing and talking once they saw he’d settled down for the night, ignoring them. Before long, the raucous sound of snores filled the air.

Colin decided he’d buy the best feather mattress known to man and build a house large enough he’d never hear anyone snore again.

And maybe he’d give that whore a taste of his fists for making him go through this hell just to claim what was his by rights.

* * * *

“That was wonderful.” Amanda couldn’t recall the last time she’d eaten so much at a single meal. The food in this restaurant had been delicious, but likely her recent physical activities could account for her having such a huge appetite.

She’d had a brief nap after the bath and love making earlier and had awakened famished. Night had fallen, although she couldn’t see that many stars. She wondered if the sky had clouded or not.

“Rain coming,” Adam said.

She could smell it in the air as well. “Good thing, then, that we’ll have a roof over our heads tonight,” Amanda said. She fought her grin as she slid a look first to Adam and then to Warren.

“Yep. Good thing.” Warren’s agreement sounded suspiciously restrained, as if he was fighting laughter.

“I’ve been thinking.” They’d just passed a store that advertised work clothes for men, and Amanda stopped walking to look in the window.

“You do that a lot, and I, for one, highly approve,” Adam said.

“Yes, thank God you’re not an empty-headed debutante,” Warren agreed.

“Thank you, I think,” Amanda said. Since she’d taken up with these two lawmen, she was doing a lot of smiling. “Anyway, I was thinking that if I had a pair of trousers to wear, riding my horse would be easier.”

When neither man said anything, she turned to face them. She thought she might have shocked them, but that’s not what she saw on their faces.

“How far would we get, looking at your sweet ass in tight trousers, before we had to have you? We might never get where we’re going.”

Adam had spoken quietly, his words meant only for her and Warren.

“I trust your ability to focus on the task at hand, Captain.”

Adam winced, and Amanda immediately regretted the reference to his position with the Texas Rangers. She had an inkling that being a lawman, specifically a Ranger, meant a great deal to him. He was the kind of man who would devote himself to his duty as much as he devoted himself to those he cared about.

She recalled his announcement at the dinner table last week at the Benedicts. He may have tendered his resignation, but that action had wounded him.

Warren stepped into the conversational void. "I think trousers would be a good idea. You can get into mine tonight so we have an idea of the size, and we'll get you a pair tomorrow morning when we get supplies." Warren gave her a leering smile, and she giggled.

Amanda turned to continue walking to the hotel and nearly bumped right into another woman.

"Oh, excuse me!" Amanda said.

"Not at all—Amanda? Amanda Dupree? My God, it *is* you!"

Amanda looked closely at the woman she'd nearly bowled over. Her blond hair was piled up on top of her head, curls hanging down. The dress she wore, as much as her lack of a hat and somewhat bold demeanor, gave Amanda an idea of what the woman did for a living. Then her memory supplied her with a name.

"Janine! Mother said you'd come West." What her mother had told her was the young woman had married one of the homesteaders who'd visited the brothel in Richmond and left with him, determined to have a better life.

Janine shrugged. "Cletus up and died on me, can you imagine? Not ten miles outside of Denison. "

"I'm so sorry!"

"Yeah, me, too. He was old, but he treated me fine." Janine shrugged her shoulders. "Sometimes, you just gotta live what you're given, you know? My mamma used to say it was a sin to try and rise above your station. Turns out Mamma was right."

Amanda hadn't known Janine well when she lived in Richmond. She really didn't know anyone well except for her mother and Millie, their housekeeper.

A part of Amanda wanted to shake Janine and tell her there was nothing wrong with "rising above your station". That was what this country had been founded on. The only thing that held Amanda back from doing that was the certain knowledge her insights and instructions wouldn't be welcome.

People would believe and live as they chose. Still, she couldn't help but feel pity for the girl.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out for you, Janine."

"What about you? Did you just arrive in town? I could bring you over and introduce you to Cora. She's always looking for new girls, although I am surprised. I was sure I heard you didn't..."

As if just now realizing Amanda wasn't alone, Janine closed her mouth. She looked first at Adam, then Warren. As Amanda watched, Janine gave her shoulders a shake, smoothed down her dress, and took a half a step forward. "Why, hello there. I didn't notice you fine gentlemen. I was so surprised and delighted to see my good friend, Amanda."

Warren moved subtly closer to Amanda while Adam nodded politely.

For some reason, Amanda wasn't feeling sorry for Janine any longer.

"No, thank you, Janine. We're only here for a layover. We'll be leaving town tomorrow."

"You heading back home, then?"

"No, actually. We're going to Indian Territory."

"On *purpose*?"

"Amanda consented to accompany us on a brief sojourn," Warren said. He placed his hand against her back, and smiled down at her.

"Yes, and as we have an early start, we need to get back to the hotel. It was good to see you, Janine. Take care of yourself."

Janine took a step back and dropped her business smile.

"Please give your mother, and Millie, my regards," the young woman said.

Amanda didn't take offence at the speed with which Janine left them. The sun had gone down, and she likely had to get to work.

"Pretty little thing," Warren said when they resumed walking toward the hotel. "I feel sorry for her."

Now that Janine was on her way back to work, Amanda supposed she could return to feeling sorry for her, too.

“So do I. But you know, what she’s doing now really is her choice.”

“Isn’t that a little hard?” Adam asked.

“No. I’m not judging her for the way she’s living her life,” Amanda said.

“Only for acting as if she’s powerless?” Adam asked.

“Yes. Because I believe a body—man or woman—is only powerless if that is what they choose to be.”

Amanda noticed Warren and Adam exchanging a glance.

“Like I said, you think a lot, and I highly approve.” Adam brushed his hand down her back, the touch feeling like affection and comfort all in one.

“Now I’ll say thank you and mean it.”

“Good. Because the fact that you have a good brain and aren’t afraid to use it is one of the things I love about you.”

Adam had said the words so casually, Amanda nearly missed them. Then she nearly missed the step up into the Katy Hotel.

“What did you say?” She turned so she could see Adam’s face. His bland expression was betrayed by the way his lips twitched as he fought his grin.

“He said he loves you. So do I.” Warren’s pronouncement was less casual, but had the same effect on her. Her stomach felt as if a thousand butterflies were fluttering around inside it.

“I think we should go to our room now,” Amanda said.

She felt herself shaking inside as she followed Adam up the stairs to the second floor. It felt an like eternity, waiting for him to unlock the door. Finally it opened, and he stood back, allowed her to enter first. She came to a stop midway to the bed.

Amanda didn’t want to turn around to face them just yet. She felt the dampness of tears but didn’t care.

"I was raised to take care of myself, and as I understood why, as I came to know how society looked on me, I embraced the concept of self-sufficiency. I never thought to ever hear those words from any man."

"Mandy? Turn around and face us, please." Warren said.

"Oh, damn." She did, her hand furiously wiping away the moisture that had leaked out of her eyes.

They came to her then. Warren took her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. Adam reached into his pocket and produced a pristine handkerchief and mopped up her tears.

"I love you. I've only ever said that to one other person, and he's standing right here beside us," Adam said.

"You're the final piece of us," Warren said softly. "I love you."

"God help me, I love you both, too. And I have no idea where this is going to take us or what I'm going to do about you."

"Well," Adam smiled, tucked away his hankie and reached for the buttons of Amanda's jacket, "why don't we let it take us to bed for now? I'm pretty sure that, once there, you'll figure out what you can do about us. We'll figure the rest of it out later."

Amanda stayed his hand, but only so she could stretch up and lean closer and brush his lips with hers. She did the same to Warren, then stepped back and began to undress herself.

She'd said nothing but the truth. She had no idea what the future held, but for now she loved these two men, and she wanted nothing more at that moment than to show them just how much.

Chapter 13

Adam hadn't meant to ride so far ahead. He'd been focused on his surroundings, the warning Sheriff Hall had given him yesterday never far from his thoughts.

Soon, he knew, the land would gently slope upwards. There were more rivers, streams, and lakes from here to Tahlequah than there had been from Waco to Denison. Water, at least, wouldn't be a problem.

He'd ventured into Indian Territory several times in the past few years, always without incident. The papers and dime novels from back East liked to play up the tensions between the whites and the Indians. Their covers always depicted bloody battles of one sort or another. He supposed the novel writers were entitled to sell their stories.

Truth was most of the Indians he'd met were peaceful people just wanting to make a life, raise their children, and give those children a heritage of which they could be proud. There were good and bad in every race, no matter the color of a man's skin. If Adam had learned anything in his life it was that the human soul held a great capacity for both good and evil.

Adam had been aware of the increasing tensions between the Five Civilized Tribes and the ever-growing number of settlers hungry for western land—Indian land. He wished he could believe things would calm down, that the American government, on whose authority these people had been forced from their homes in Georgia and North Carolina in the first place, would step in and be firm with the trespassers and squatters.

Unfortunately, he very much feared that wouldn't be the case.

“Something wrong?” Warren was always so aware of his moods. He knew better than to lie to the man or try to hide his concerns. Once in a while, he might get away with it, but mostly not.

“Just keeping an eye out. Didn’t mean to get so far ahead of you.”

“Do you expect trouble?” Warren immediately began to scan the area.

“Expect it? No. Watching out for it? Always.” He took the opportunity to take another good look at Amanda. That morning before leaving Denison, Warren had gone into the dry goods store and purchased a pair of trousers and a shirt for their woman. He’d come out, teasing her because he’d had to buy “boys” sizes.

Once they were out of sight of town, Amanda had changed into her new clothes. When he and Warren got their first look at her, all thoughts of teasing fled. She sure as hell didn’t look like any boy they’d ever seen.

In fact, she looked so damn appealing he wanted to strip her bare and simply have her right then and there.

“Never happen,” he said now as both Warren and Amanda pulled their horses even with his.

“What will never happen?” Amanda adjusted her hat so she could meet his gaze. Even though he’d been thinking lascivious thoughts, he didn’t think they’d show on his face, but apparently he was wrong.

He thought it amazing that she could blush after everything they’d done together. Amanda might have possessed more knowledge about the various sexual practices people indulged in, but she had been more virginal in her thoughts and attitudes than he’d bet she’d even known.

“Women wearing men’s clothing. It will never happen en masse, because no man would be able to focus on anything except the enticing curves of sweet female asses around him, and no female would escape without being thoroughly ravished.”

Amanda’s blush deepened even as her eyes shot him a coy look. “I beg to differ. I’ve been wearing men’s clothing for a couple of

hours now, and so far there's been not a single ravishment experienced."

"Why, Miss Dupree, I do believe that was an invitation." Warren's grin spread wide with that announcement.

"No, Lawyer Jessop. That was merely an observation." Amanda's smile teased, and Adam couldn't hold back his chuckle.

"You'll be ravished tonight." Adam wished he could say that without his cock standing at attention. "Meanwhile, how's the riding been, wearing trousers?"

"A lot more comfortable. I feel as if I have better control of the horse, too. Although it could just be this horse. I think he likes me."

"Not surprising." Adam had rented them fresh mounts in Denison, boarding their own horses for when they returned. Amanda rode a stallion. He'd been concerned at first because stallions could be rambunctious as hell. She'd fallen in love with this particular stallion at first sight, and she seemed able to handle the horse.

"We're in Indian Territory, aren't we? That's why you're being extra vigilant."

Adam raised one eyebrow. "Yes. We've been in Indian Territory for about an hour. When we take our next rest, I want to show you how to fire that rifle you've got strapped to your saddle." He'd hoped to escape doing that. There was no reason for Amanda to have to worry about firing her rifle with him and Warren there to protect her.

In light of the situation, he'd reconsidered.

"I know how to fire it," Amanda said to him. "My mother—"

"Saw to it you had lessons?" Warren finished for her.

Her smile was just one of the gorgeous things about her. She nodded. Her horse began to fidget, but she controlled him smoothly.

"You have to remember, my mother realized I would likely have to rely on myself for most of my life. In the eyes of Richmond society, I'm not marriageable. So she saw to it not only that I received as good an education as was available in the classical sense, but that I could do a lot of things most women never consider learning."

"I think I want very much to meet your mother," Adam said. "She sounds like an amazing woman."

"She is," Amanda agreed. The soft look she gave him warmed his heart.

"We've got a few hours of daylight yet. I'd like us to get as far as we can today."

Adam clicked to his horse, this time riding with the others. Warren aligned himself on the other side of Amanda, so they flanked her. Adam nodded to him, and their brief exchange of glances told him he wasn't alone in his desire to be vigilant.

If both he and Warren thought there might be trouble, he wouldn't bet against it.

* * * *

They arrived in Denison only hours too late.

Colin checked into the Katy Hotel, making small talk with the loquacious desk clerk. He'd only found out, he'd told the man affably, that he might run into his cousin here in town, as he'd received a missive from his mother informing him of the coincidence.

"Now that is a dang shame, Mr. Baker. Your cousin and her husband left Denison just this morning."

"Well, hell. I'd been looking forward to a family reunion. Unless...listen, Mother didn't seem to know where Cousin Amanda would be headed next. Did she happen to mention where they were going?"

"You know, I don't have a clue. But I tell you, they rented themselves some fresh horses over at the livery, so they're fixing to come back this way. If you've got time to spare, you might wait around, see them on their return."

Colin took the key to his room. "I wish I could. Oh well, some things I guess are just not meant to be."

Neither Bodine nor either of his men chose to check in to the hotel. They'd headed right over to the nearest saloon and planned on going from there to one of the brothels. Personally, Colin was glad to be out of their presence for a while. Their coarseness and their stench irritated him beyond measure. They'd had a great good time giving him a hard time on the trail.

Colin had hoped that whore would still be in town. In fact, he'd counted on it. He'd figured that if he'd been crafty, he might have been able to steal the journal right out from under her.

Now he knew he'd have to hunt up the bastard Bodine and urge him to leave his drinking and his whoring so they could catch up to their quarry. It was early afternoon. No reason to waste daylight. But first he'd bathe and eat a decent meal.

Guests of the Katy hotel could have baths delivered to their rooms. But there was also a bathhouse right next door, a facility that only men patronized.

Clean and dressed in fresh clothing, Colin felt good for the first time since leaving Waco. Stepping out onto Main Street, he could smell the aroma of cooking beef and let his nose lead him to a restaurant just down from his hotel.

The menu featured not only roast beef but Boston brown bread. It took willpower not to order everything on the menu. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel that damned snake in his mouth.

He left the restaurant with a very contented belly and headed over to the livery. Although the stables were officially closed for business for the day, he found a young man on the premises. The young lad was quick to assure Colin his horse had been fed and was enjoying his rest.

"I had no doubts," Colin said. He gave the kid a dollar, making his eyes pop wide.

"Thanks, mister! My name's Ned, by the way. I'll take extra good care of your horse."

“Appreciate that, Ned. There is something you can help me with. I just discovered that I missed my cousin Amanda and her husband by mere hours today. The man over at the Katy Hotel said they rented horses and left theirs here. Any idea where they were headed?”

“Gosh, no. I do remember seeing them, though, and I think the boss said they’d like be at least three weeks.” The young man stopped, scratched his head. “Could mean they’re headed somewhere in Indian Territory, or maybe into Arkansas. Sorry I don’t know for certain.”

Colin tried not to let his anger show. “Don’t worry about it. Say, where can a man get a drink in town?”

“There’s a couple of places over on Skiddy Row. A man can take care of other appetites, too, if you catch my drift.”

Since Ned blushed, Colin was willing to bet either the young man had never fed that particular appetite or just recently had.

The street was just a block south of Main, and Colin had no difficulty locating Bodine. He simply picked the noisiest of the saloons and looked inside.

The man sat alone at a table, an open bottle of whiskey, half gone, sitting at his elbow.

“I’d like to get a move on before sundown.” Colin sat down and gave Bodine a level stare. “They lit out this morning, so we’ve closed the gap.”

“Not going anywhere tonight. Gonna finish this here bottle, then head on over to Cora’s. She’s got the best girls and the biggest place. Man can spend the night getting his brains fucked out, which is what I plan on doing.” He poured himself another drink, then set the bottle down, not bothering to offer any to Colin. “By the looks of you, you could use a tumble. You should do the same.”

“I thought you wanted your revenge on that Ranger?”

“Revenge is thirsty work.” Bodine punctuated that statement by chugging the booze in the shot glass. Then he poured another. “We

rode faster 'n them. We will again. When we leave tomorrow. Any idea where they're headed?"

"Not completely. Stable hand at the livery figured Arkansas or Indian Territory."

"Be better if we knew for certain."

The last thing Colin needed was criticism from this asshole. He nodded and got to his feet. Since they weren't leaving until morning, he might as well pay a visit to Cora's.

He had a lot of anger and aggression to work off. He only had to ask once to be directed to Cora's. The solid structure was one of only a few on this street. The other business owners seemed content to use tents to house their establishments.

He was greeted at the door by a woman who took his hat and escorted him into a parlor. "You're from the South," the woman said. She cocked her head to one side. "Atlanta?"

"Richmond." Colin liked the look of the place. The furnishings seemed comfortable, and the hostess, if she could be called that, deferential.

"We have several fine ladies who would be pleased to entertain you this evening. One, I believe, is from Richmond. Her name is Janine, and I have it on good authority she's very talented."

Colin wondered at the coincidence. He also wondered if the Dupree woman might not have known this Janine. He nodded to the hostess. "Yes, I think I would like Janine."

Some minutes later, he was met by a young woman, blond ringlets piled atop her head, her pretty face painted appropriately. On a hunch, he said, "Imagine my finding someone from my home town right here in Denison. I wonder what the odds are on that?"

Janine smiled. "Maybe not as big as you think. Seems there're plenty of folks from Richmond passing through here lately."

"Really? Well, perhaps once we're in your bed you can tell me all about it."

Colin followed the whore up the stairs, his eyes taking in the tight fit of her gown and the lovely length of leg showing beneath it. Fortune was certainly smiling upon him in this venture.

First, he'd fuck the whore, then he'd see if she could do anything else with that mouth of her besides suck cock. Like tell him where that other whore was headed and when she planned to get there.

Chapter 14

This was the moment after a long day of anticipation. Amanda felt her arousal kindle just from thinking about what would come next.

“Do you know what we want to do to you tonight?”

A fine shiver coursed down her spine, Adam’s words tickling her skin and drawing moisture to her cunny.

“You said you were going to ravish me.” Amanda marveled that breathy, teasing voice could be hers. She’d seen women flirting with men, coquettes who teased but held out for a ring, and others who held out only for the right price. She’d scoffed at their flirtatious ways, somehow thinking if she ever desired a man she’d just come right out and say so. And while she did—and she had—she couldn’t deny this quivery sense deep inside her that dared her to tease and to flirt.

“Well, now, there are many different forms of ravishment, my dear.” Adam’s words brushed her ear, the front of his body braced her back, and his heat became hers.

“What we’ve been waiting and wanting to do is share you properly.”

“Now, Captain Kendall, you have to know there’s absolutely nothing proper about sharing me, delightful though that prospect seems to me.”

“True. Perhaps I should rephrase. Or better yet, let the man whose tools are words clarify our intentions.” Adam rested his hands on her shoulders and squeezed them, sending a wonderful wave of warmth through her.

Warren had been watching them from his position next to the fire. Now he approached, stopping just short of their sleeping pallet, the gleam in his eye telling her exactly how much he wanted her. Amanda felt her toes curl and her belly flutter.

My God, they're both so damn gorgeous.

"I'm delighted to clarify our intentions." He'd stopped with only inches separating them. He reached forward and with one hand began to open the buttons of her shirt. "We're both going to fuck you at the same time and see if we can feel each other's cock inside you."

Amanda groaned. Warren's words, hot and provocative, made her want to rub her legs together. The delicious sensations coursing through her would lead to heaven and she very much wanted to go there again and again with these two men.

"Is that even possible?" She heard the note of excitement in her voice and didn't care if it betrayed her most base desires. When they were together, like this, when Adam reached around and began to unbutton her trousers, there could be no pretense between them.

Her shirt and pants both surrendered to the will of her lovers. The fire, banked high, cast warmth and an orange glow on the tips of her breasts and, she imagined, on the rest of her naked body.

"Both of us fucking you at the same time? Oh, yes." Warren flashed a wide grin, then leaned forward to give her a quick, chaste kiss. "A woman's body is extraordinarily accommodating. One of us will slide his cock into your cunt. The other will slide into your ass. Whether or not we'll feel each other? I don't know. This is a first for all of us."

"It's going to hurt some when I begin to fuck your ass," Adam said. He feathered kisses on her ear, then reached around with one hand to cup a breast and pull and pinch her nipple. "I'll be careful. I'll stop if you give me the word."

"I won't want you to stop."

"We appreciate your enthusiasm." Warren tailed one hand down her belly until his fingers combed through the hair that shielded her

pussy. “However, we don’t want to hurt you unduly. It might take a few tries for us to get where we want to be, physically. Where we all want to be. The same place we are right now—spiritually.”

“Connected,” Amanda said, because it was true and she’d felt it almost from that first moment standing on the train platform in Waco.

“Connected,” Adam said.

“I only have one question.” Amanda’s nipples had peaked into hard buttons, and her cunny yearned to be filled. Their words had done nothing to diminish her arousal, and all she wanted was for the loving to begin.

“And that would be?” Warren bent down just long enough to take her other nipple into his mouth and give it a tiny nip and suck. Then he straightened, his smile dazzling in its devilry.

“How are y’all going to manage to fuck me if you’re still dressed?”

“Good question.” Adam didn’t move away from her as he began to peel out of his clothes. She could feel the motions happening behind her that she saw taking place right in front of her.

They moved in tandem, quickly. Adam only stepped back from her long enough to take off his boots and peel out of his socks. When he returned to her and brushed against her, she felt his hot, hard cock against the crack of her ass.

He combed his fingers through her hair, then tilted her head back. She opened her mouth to him, needing his flavor, the sensation of his tongue in her mouth. She needed him and Warren and this connection between them like she needed to breathe. How could her body have so quickly decided that these two men and what they gave her, what they took from her, was necessary to her very existence?

Warren brought his body close to hers, close enough that she felt his cock brush against her belly. When Adam released her mouth, she sought Warren’s. The sensation of his kiss, the press of two aroused male bodies at her front and back spiked her own arousal. Here, with no one within miles, she freely let loose the groan of greed, the

whimper of need. It didn't matter if her lovers heard desperation in the sounds she made. They would never use her vulnerability against her.

Warren broke their kiss. His eyes glittered as he looked down at her breasts, then up at their lover, whose chin rested on her shoulder. When Warren leaned in and mated his lips to Adam's, such love filled Amanda that she didn't know if she could hold it.

"I never knew I could feel this way." Warren's whispered confession told her they truly were connected, for he'd expressed her very thoughts.

"Complete. Whole." Adam echoed the same sentiments.

Amanda stroked Warren's face. No matter what happened in the future, she would be forever grateful she'd had this experience, this time to touch and be touched. A woman could live all the rest of her years alone, she thought, if she had a box of such memories as these to hold in her heart forever.

"It's the same for me," she said. "I love you." She tilted her head to the side so she could see Adam. "I love you both."

"Mandy." Warren bent to take one nipple in his mouth while Adam caressed and played with her other.

How easy to reach out and down to grasp a cock in each hand. She stroked them the way she'd learned they loved to be stroked, her grasp firm, the motion slow and rhythmic.

She felt fingers on her cunny, and in it, and fingers caressing across the tight pucker of her ass. Moisture came out of her and she groaned, the sound so needy, she wondered anew she didn't feel diminished even as she begged.

"Please." She whispered that plea and knew she was safe to do so, that she could reveal her deepest need or her slightest insecurity to these men and they would never think less of her or play her false.

"Yes." Warren stepped back and then laid down on their pallet, his back flat on the blankets, his cock rigid and rising above him.

“Come here, sweetheart. Slide that hot cunt onto my cock. Take me inside you, let me feel you hot and wet around me.”

Adam’s hands returned to her shoulders, turned her, so that it felt as if he directed her, as if he offered her to their lover. The thought was a thrilling one, and she went willingly, eager to feel Warren’s cock inside her. Adam’s hands guided her so that she straddled Warren. Adam got down on his knees beside them. He reached out, stroked Warren’s hard cock, then brought it to the opening of her body.

Lifting up slightly, she felt Adam’s hand and Warren’s cock together against her dewy folds, and the combination sent a shiver through her. She sank down slowly, relishing the hot, wonderful glide of male flesh into her pussy.

“Lean over him, baby. Place your hands on the ground on either side of his head.”

Amanda complied, a humming sound of pleasure escaping her as that action changed the angle of Warren’s cock inside her. The movement brought her clit to rub against the hair that nested his shaft while his flesh nudged deeply.

“Taste me, Mandy. It’ll be easier if you get me wet first.” Adam, still beside her, thrust his hips toward her, his cock mouth-wateringly close. She opened for him, taking his hot flesh deep into her mouth. She loved this, loved feeling the two of them in her at the same time and could barely contain her excitement. As she moved her head up and down on Adam’s shaft, she played her tongue along his flesh and sucked gently.

“That makes me hot, watching you suck my lover’s cock,” Warren whispered.

Adam drew back from her, and she felt Warren open his legs, then Adam moved until he knelt behind her. The heat of his body warmed her, thrilled her. She looked over her shoulder and met his gaze.

Lust shone from his eyes. That look quickened her heart and deepened her arousal. Warren reached up and cupped one of her

breasts at the same instant he surged his cock up and into her, his stroke powerful and sure.

“You feel mighty fine around my cock, Miss Dupree.”

Amanda moaned and laughed at the same time. “Lawyer Jessop, I do like the way you’ve mastered that rod of yours.”

Adam stroked a hand down her back, pushing slightly, and she followed his cue and laid her head and chest on Warren, leaving her ass pointing skyward.

His hands came to rest on the globes of her ass, and he spread them. Then she felt heat and...*Oh God*...she shivered as he laved his tongue back and forth across her anus. The tingling excitement that had been building inside her stretched higher, and she couldn’t hold back her gasp.

“Hold on, sweetheart.”

The whispered warning preceded the sensation of his cock, big and hot and hard, pressing against her opening.

Incredible pressure built, sliding into a burning discomfort that slowly grew. She felt her anus stretch, inch by inch, felt Adam pressing forward, and bit her lip to remain silent. It hurt but felt good at the same time, and she didn’t want him to stop.

“All right?”

She could only let a tiny sound out and gave him his answer by pushing back against him.

Warren had wrapped his arms around her, one hand stroking her back up and down, a kind of comforting gesture on his part. Now, that hand caressed across and around until he slid it between their joined bodies. With unerring accuracy, he found her clit and began to stroke it back and forth.

“Oh, yes.” Pleasure overrode discomfort, and the intrusion in her bottom began to feed the arousal swirling up from her clit and deep inside her cunt where Warren’s cock continued to give her tiny strokes.

“All right, sweetheart. Take more when you’re ready. You’re in control of us both. Fuck us, Amanda.”

Warren continued to stroke her clit with his fingers, ensuring her arousal stayed high. Amanda felt full already, but she knew Adam had just barely breached the barrier of her bottom. With a movement that was slow and steady, she pushed back and felt him sink just a bit more into her. Experimenting, she changed the angle, pushing down, and was rewarded with the sensation of Warren’s cock nudging her deep inside. Back, then down, she repeated the movement. Low groans and ripe, soft curses told her the men both enjoyed her movements. She felt powerful and wicked, wild and wonderful, as her efforts brought pleasure to them all.

Her excitement clamored for the prize she knew awaited her, and she pushed back, harder, and felt Adam’s cock slide all the way into her.

“Oh, God, yes, I can feel you,” Warren said, pressing his body up, sliding his cock as deep into Amanda as it would go.

“Yeah. Nothing has ever felt this good. Amanda, sweetheart?” Adam asked.

Amanda quivered, on the edge. “Oh God, oh God. I need...Damn you, move!”

First Adam and then Warren surged into her with slow and steady thrusts, but that rhythm didn’t last long. Soon finesse gave way to rampant greed, and their thrusts turned short, fast, and deep.

Beyond anything Amanda had ever experienced, it felt as if release raced toward her from every point in her body. Unable to form even words, feral sounding mews of desire, timed with their thrusts, emerged from deep inside her. Unable to control even the slightest movement, she felt herself surrender completely, every muscle relaxing as she submitted to the possession of these men.

Release poured out of and into her, a flood so rapid, so huge, she squealed and gasped as the waves of unbelievable rapture came at her again and again in a tingling rush of joy she thought might never end.

Shouts, stiffening bodies, and the flood of warm fluid into her body assured her the men both had reached their climaxes.

Adam collapsed over her, his panting as loud and ragged as hers and Warren's. His weight was a wonderful blanket, the warmth soothing the jagged edges of her nerves as tiny shivers ran over her flesh.

"I'm dead," she whispered, because she couldn't think, couldn't reason, could just lay there and bask. Those tiny shivers kept racing through her, and her nipples beaded painfully.

"Mother of God," Warren said.

"Yeah." Adam's one word sounded full of male smugness. Then, "Are you all right, Amanda? I tried to be gentle, but..." The sentence trailed off as he drew in a deep draught of air and then shivered.

"Amazing." She didn't have another word to describe how she felt. Amazing was as close to perfect a word as she could imagine.

"Hold on." Adam withdrew from her gently, then lifted her off Warren.

The men cocooned her, their heat more than ample to keep her warm. Some minutes later, Adam moved, and she gasped with the loss of heat. He chuckled, then covered her and Warren with a blanket. He stoked the fire, then returned to them.

"Are you sore?" he asked.

"A little. I imagine it'll be gone by morning."

"It'll get easier," Warren said. "The more times we take you there, the more you'll stretch."

She understood his was the voice of experience. "I liked it a lot." Paltry words, she thought, to convey the sense of being as one with these two dynamic men.

"I never would have known."

Adam's dry rejoinder teased laughter out of her and Warren. Then he said, "It was better than anything I've ever felt. Ever."

"It was," Warren agreed. "I think you're the part that was missing from us, Mandy."

Amanda sighed and snuggled deeper into her lovers. As much as their words warmed her, they alarmed her as well. She'd told them she had no idea what the future held, and that was as true this moment as it had been when she'd said it.

Blissful this relationship may be, and, yes, she'd never felt more complete. But she understood how transitory the physical could be. She loved them and loved being with them. But she had a life waiting for her in Richmond, just as they had lives waiting for them here. She simply wasn't certain these feelings between them could ever be a forever kind of love.

Chapter 15

Warren's smile felt permanently etched on his face. The scenery had become monotonous a few days ago because he preferred cities over wilderness. The sun must have decided to give summer another try, as it burned down with the intensity of mid-July. His ass felt like it had been molded to the shape of the saddle and would remain so for the rest of his born days.

None of those irritants mattered. He'd never been happier in his life.

He looked over at Amanda and Adam and knew he'd never be able to give thanks enough for the simple miracle of their having come into his life.

He'd carried dark shadows inside him for as long as he could remember, shadows forged by the events of his past and the perilous times he'd survived before landing in Waco. He'd told Adam some, but not all, of what he'd endured. He could see no need to reveal those past wounds to the light of day now. Especially now that he had these two amazing people as lovers.

Every moment he spent with them erased hurts and wounds from the past. They made him feel fresh and clean and new.

How did a man return such a gift?

"If we can get as far as Eufaula Lake before sundown, it'll be a good place to camp." Adam turned slightly in his saddle to look at both him and Amanda. Then he flashed that smile Warren so loved. "It's deep enough. We can swim naked. Um...can you swim, sweetheart?"

Warren knew he addressed Amanda. Swimming naked together was the one thing he and Adam had always been able to do, even in the full light of day, provided they were where women weren't.

Society is a strange beast.

"Yes, I can swim. I've never swum naked, though. I think I'll like it."

They'd been skirting the edge of the Ouachita Mountains since yesterday, and the uneven terrain made riding a little more work than it had been. Warren knew he wasn't alone in keeping an eye on Amanda. She hadn't complained, but he could see the effort the long days took on her face. He suspected that's why Adam considered stopping early.

They weren't that far from the lake. He could smell the water.

Twenty minutes later, they dismounted. The bank of the lake, at this end of it, sloped gently, the grass that grew next to it long and soft-looking.

"Let's tie the horses over by those trees." Adam pointed to a stand a bit away from the water and down wind, hopefully, from where they'd sleep.

Once the animals had been watered and relieved of their saddles, they set about making camp. By now, they'd fallen into a routine of tasks—Warren would lay out their sleeping pallet and get the water for coffee and cooking, while Adam and Amanda set out the gear and then gathered wood for their fire.

Warren kept his eye on the others as he went about his chores. They meshed well together, as if they'd been functioning as a family for years instead of weeks.

They are family. They're my family.

"That's enough work. Let's swim." Adam accompanied his words by walking toward the water as he opened his shirt.

By the edge of the lake, they all three dropped their clothes. Warren enjoyed the sight of his lovers' bodies. Adam's physique made Warren's mouth water. The muscles roping Adam's arms and

chest seemed more substantial than one would guess looking at the man when he was clothed.

The sight of Amanda's breasts with her pink-tipped nipples and the sweet curve of her waist, the lovely, rounded globes of her ass, made him hard.

He never would have imagined how glorious it could be to feel two lovers at the same time as he had when Adam had fucked Amanda's ass while he'd been buried balls deep in her pussy.

Tonight, he and Adam would reverse those positions.

A cool splash of water pulled him back to the moment. Adam had jumped into the lake and had palmed water at him.

Of course, he couldn't let such an insult go unanswered.

Amanda shrieked when Warren dove in. He'd grown up swimming in the Delaware River, which meant that a body of still water posed almost no challenge at all.

Clean and clear, the water held a hint of the day's heat so that the shock of sudden immersion was less than it might have been.

"The man's a damned fish." Adam kicked out, trying to escape retribution.

Not wanting his lover to be proven a liar, Warren dove deep, eyes wide open. Easily able to distinguish male from female legs, he zeroed in on Adam. Grasping Adam's ankle, Warren gave a mighty tug and smiled when Adam's face came even with his own under water.

They broke the surface at the same time.

"Warren Jessop, don't you *dare* do that to me!" Amanda's laughter tickled him. He looked at Adam, felt one eyebrow go up. Adam's smile was all the answer he really needed.

"Now if you had said, 'wonderful, handsome Warren, I beg of you please, please don't,' you might have had a chance to escape Adam's fate."

Amanda surprised him. She didn't beg, scream, or yell. Instead, she gave him a brilliant smile and then dove down beneath the surface, out of sight.

He and Adam both craned their necks, scanning the area, searching for her. In his head, the seconds added up. His heart began to pound hard when that count passed thirty. He knew alarm showed on his face when a minute had passed. He turned to Adam, who looked on the verge of panic.

The sound of a splash drew his attention. Amanda had surfaced hundreds of feet out into the lake.

"Goddamn it, woman, don't scare us like that!" Adam yelled.

"I didn't mean to scare you." Amanda began to swim toward them, her strokes strong and even.

"You said you could swim, but neither of us imagined you could do it so well."

Amanda slowed her pace as she neared them. "My mother—"

"Saw to it you had lessons." Warren wanted to laugh because he and Adam had both finished her sentence for her. Then he caught the look in Adam's eye.

"I'm glad you're that good. I won't worry about you, then." Reaching out, their lover put his hand on top of her head and pushed her under.

* * * *

After they'd dragged themselves from the water, Adam set about catching fish. He'd done this a few times along the trail, his simple string and hook working well. Amanda had wondered if he'd get any nibbles, considering all the noise and splashing they'd made earlier, the three of them. But he'd walked down past where he'd tethered the horses, and in short order had three good sized lake trout.

While he'd fished, she'd rinsed her boy-shirt in the water, wringing it out hard and laying it on one of the near-by large boulders to dry.

"Fish is ready," Warren announced.

Daylight ebbed as they sat down to eat by the fire on a large half-rotted log Adam had found and dragged over. She scanned the forest, the trees marching up the mountain, the slope of the rock not as sharp as the Appalachians back East. It seemed to her there were a lot of old trees and many that had fallen or died.

She noticed Adam following her gaze.

"Nature is miraculous. Likely in a few years, we'll get a dry summer so the forest will be parched. Then there'll be a lightning strike and a fire. Clean up all that brush and dead wood."

"I read about trees way out in California, big trees whose pinecones only seeded *after* a fire." She shook her head. "I guess the earth more or less can take care of herself."

"If we don't get in her way," Warren agreed.

The trout tasted succulent, tender and so good, and Amanda ate more than usual. There was something about being out on the trail, pushing herself to ride farther and faster each day, that fed one appetite in her while creating others.

"I feel free here." She hadn't thought to put it into words, but since this amazing feeling had been authored in part by her lovers, she wanted to share it. "Back home, when I'm at home, life is good. When I'm out and about, it's a little different. I go into town, into shops, or restaurants, even the post office. I can go in feeling wonderful and come out battered because someone recognizes me, well, not *me* necessarily but rather who I represent to them. I love my mother and wouldn't change her for the world. And yet, I'm a target for mealy-mouthed old biddies—and some so-called gentlemen—because of her."

"You have to know it's not your mother, Amanda. It's...people. People, as a group, can be mean, nasty bastards. They have standards

they arbitrarily enforce, and will cut down anyone who's different from them—because, I think, they fear that which is different.” Warren said.

“There are all sorts of different kinds of societies in the world, did you know that? I've read the accounts of British explorers who have gone into all corners of the globe. I've often thought how wonderful it would be if we could make our own society, you know?”

Adam raised one eyebrow. “What would your society be like, sweetheart?”

“Well, for one thing, no one would judge anybody else based on how they're born or who they love. People would be free to make those choices and it would be no one's never mind. And women wouldn't be at the mercy of men—like Sarah was—and would be free to learn and grow and be all they wanted to be.”

“That's pretty radical thinking there, Miss Dupree.” Warren's voice teased. Then his expression sobered. “Quite frankly, these are thoughts that Adam and I have had ourselves.”

One of the most amazing things about these men was their willingness to discuss all manner of topics with her, be they mundane or fantastical. Not once had either of them made her feel inferior because she was a woman.

She smiled and picked up another piece of fish to nibble. Warren had already started the coffee brewing, and the scent of it pleased her nose.

“Radical,” Warren repeated, “but I think it could be done—on a limited scale, mind. If there's one thing I've seen in life it's that people who are rich seem to be able to get away with any damned thing they want. Seems to me if a body had enough money, they could build themselves an oasis—like a town that would be only open to a few people of like-mind. Hell, religious groups have been coming here from Europe and founding their own ‘societies’ since the Mayflower.”

"If you bought enough land, and kept it, only leased out some parcels to people who agreed to live by your rules..." Adam's words trailed off. His gaze was on Warren. The way the two men sometimes read each other's minds and finished each other's sentences was downright eerie.

Warren nodded. "You can make that legally binding in a contract. You can rent or lease out parcels and make that a condition of the lease."

"Be smart to keep hold of all the land, so your rules could never be changed. Something you could hand down to future generations." Adam said

"Yeah." Warren said.

Amanda thought it sounded as if they were actually working out a plan as they talked.

A shiver racked her, and she rubbed her bare arms to ward it off. After her swim, she'd donned just her chemise, and though the temperature of the air still felt warm, she was filled with a sudden chill.

"Cold, Mandy? We'll warm you." Warren's deep voice turned her shivers to heat. He sidled over to her, his movement slow and deliberate. Before he even touched her, the heat of him sank into her, searing her flesh. She'd shied away from thinking of the future beyond this adventure, but already she wondered how she would be able to live without these two virile men once she returned home to Richmond and her life there.

Adam gave her a look that needed no words. Even as he moved closer, the scent of brewing coffee gave way to the scent of her lovers, and it was no longer the dark hot beverage she craved but the hot, hard pounding of their cocks.

Warren slipped his arm around her and pulled her toward him. His mouth, wet and open and demanding, settled on hers. His tongue claimed hers, swirling against hers, sliding along her teeth, reaching into the dark corners of her mouth, drinking her. Her heart sped, her

blood thickened and heated as his flavor became hers, as she used her own tongue and lips and teeth to take as boldly, to delve beyond the threshold of passion into need.

Adam pressed against her other side and his hand stroking down her head compelled her to gently leave the lips of one lover to taste another's. So different, yet the desire each stirred in her was the same—hot, vibrant, irresistible.

As her tongue danced with Adam's, she reached her hands down to each side of her to caress and tease trouser-covered cocks. Twin ridges of masculine desire rose to her stroke, as if they were feral creatures seeking her feminine touch.

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

Amanda felt the change in her lovers instantly, even as she understood it wasn't thunder she heard but the fast and heavy pounding of horses' hooves.

"Oh, God. Amanda, get down!" Adam pushed her down toward the boulders behind them, even as he lunged for his rifle. Warren's actions mirrored their lover's.

A high-pitched trill pierced the air, one voice, followed by many taking up the battle cry. Gunfire exploded toward them out of the inky blackness of the night, followed by the ping of ricocheting bullets. Amanda crawled toward her rifle rather than the boulder. She rolled with it until she found a spot close to the rocks but in the open.

She stayed on her belly and aimed toward the unseen attackers.

The charging warriors never came close. It sounded as if a hundred men screamed and fired, a dozen horses cried into the night, a swarm of unseen attackers racing toward them, keeping just out of sight. The night cloaked them, and Amanda felt her heart pound, fear so intense she thought she might puke. The unseen enemy kept shooting toward the fire, and Amanda joined the men in shooting back, their shots going undirected into the blackness. She heard no sound of impact, no cries of pain, so she didn't think she actually hit anyone or anything.

Then the bandits were gone, riding off in the same direction from which they'd come. The attack had happened and then passed so quickly, Amanda almost couldn't fathom it.

"I thought I told you to get behind the boulders." Adam's attention stayed on the sound of retreating warriors, his gun held fast, aimed, ready.

Amanda ignored the implied scolding. She shot to her feet, rushing over to the men, her hands seeking one and then the other of them.

"You're not shot? Not either of you?" Logic told her they'd escaped injury. She just needed to touch them to be sure.

Warren turned to her then, giving her the same hands-on inspection. "No, we're fine." He sighed heavily. "And so are you. Thank God."

"I thought we were goners," she admitted. Now that the crisis seemed over, she began to shake. When Adam reached for her gun, she handed it to him.

"We might still be," Adam said gently. He pulled her to him and she went, not ashamed to accept the comfort now that the bullets were no longer flying. Warren pressed close, and for a long moment, they stood silent, one solid unit.

Adam's words, however, chilled her, and finally she stepped back to meet his gaze. "Because they might come back?" She asked him.

"No," Warren answered her. "Because they stole our horses."

Chapter 16

Colin wanted to kill Big Ben Bodine with his bare hands.

If he thought he could get away with it, he would shoot the bastard and his minions and count it a high point of his life.

As he thought over the last few days, Colin felt his choler rising. First, Bodine and his so-called partners had too much to drink in Denison, giving them all big heads and even nastier dispositions. They didn't leave the frontier town until after noon the day after they'd arrived, which put them at least twenty-four hours behind the Dupree woman. Then they'd had to make camp after only a few hours on the trail so everyone could finish "recovering" from their drinking binge.

"Ain't my fault! That whiskey was tainted, I swear to God!" Ira's complaint may have had some merit to it as he puked his guts out around his words. By the time the man had finished throwing up, Colin had felt like joining in, even though he'd felt fine just minutes before.

Colin never drank to the point of intoxication. He'd seen too many men ruin themselves while foxed. He'd play cards with a drunkard and buy him drinks until he couldn't see he was being taken, but Colin always limited his own imbibitions.

Then Bodine took two days to find the right trail to follow. One of the horses their prey had rented from the livery had a notch in one of its shoes. Once they realized that, it made following the party—three saddle horses and a pack horse—much easier.

They gained on them, but not fast enough to Colin's way of thinking. Bodine's best estimate put them two days behind their

target, but Colin wondered about that. It seemed to him the whore and her escorts were making good time on the trail, judging on the distance between their camp sites—a distance that seemed longer than between the ones before they'd reached Denison.

"We're going to catch them." Bodine reined his horse back and began to keep pace with Colin. He lowered his voice as if imparting a confidence—or trying to gain one. "You want to get your own back against your missus. I want to get my hands on Kendall just as bad, if not more. I'm gonna make that bastard pay for those years he put me in prison. Dreaming of the day I would face that bastard down was the only thing what got me through."

Colin looked over at Bodine. "That makes two of us who have an urgent need for revenge, and haste."

"Aw, Ira and Porter, they're okay. I'm going to make sure we move faster, on account of I can see your missus is riding better than she was. We're probably a bit more than two days behind them, but if we pick up our pace, we should be able to catch up to them in a couple of days. It'll hurt the horses, but I figure once we have them, the horses can rest, or we can just take theirs."

With that, the man spurred his animal and reclaimed the lead. That he immediately set a faster pace appeased Colin somewhat. He could sympathize with his avowed need for revenge. Just the thought of spending any time in prison chilled his blood and curdled his belly.

Of course, he still wanted to kill Bodine.

I'll likely have to once we find the gold, anyway.

He didn't trust his traveling companions one whit. The moment they saw that treasure, they'd be just as likely to try and kill him and keep it all to themselves.

So he'd have to manage the deed at some point after they caught up with the others. Colin kicked his horse to keep up with Bodine and let his thoughts slip into planning that man's death.

Just before sunset, Bodine held his hand up. Colin had been thinking about the journal, and the gold, and killing Bodine. Now he

looked around. Just ahead a lake stretched out as far as the eye could see. They'd been riding around the edge of a very large hill. Porter called it a mountain. Colin could have told him this rise in land was no real mountain.

"Wait here."

Bodine's order didn't sit well, but Colin bided his time. He did note that Porter rode ahead with the outlaw while Ira stayed back with him.

"Porter says that's Eufaula Lake. I ain't never been this far into Indian Territory, myself. Bodine and Porter have. Porter says we got lots of water ahead of us if the assholes we're following are headed to the Cherokee's main city."

"The Cherokee?"

"Yep. We're on their land now."

Colin watched Bodine approach. The man looked very pleased about something.

"Reckon we're going to catch up to those bastards faster 'n we figured. Looks like they're on foot from this point on."

"On foot? How the hell did that happen? And why not go after them *now*?"

"Looks like a bunch of other horses came upon them," Bodine said. "Hoof prints are unshod, so I'm thinking Cherokee. Or more to the point, renegade Cherokee. The barkeep back in Denison told me about a band of 'em roaming these parts, stealing horses and whatever else they can get their hands on. Since it happened here, we'll keep the horses close and sleep with one eye open."

"Saddles are dumped up ahead, against a tree. Some other things, too, and then beyond, you can see some foot prints. It's going to be dark soon. They won't walk in the dark."

"They're ours now. All we got to do is get some rest and then run them down in the morning."

* * * *

Despite the dire turn of events, Amanda found she'd been able to sleep, and sleep well. She knew the morning would bring facing the harsh reality of having to walk. Adam didn't have any idea when—or if—they would come upon anyone who'd be able to help them.

As dawn broke, they rose, freshened themselves in the lake, then together looked through their gear.

"We'll only take what's necessary, what we can carry." Adam's expression revealed his worry, and Amanda wanted to do whatever she could to ease that.

"Let's cut the ties from the saddles. We can use some to tie the saddlebags together. We can roll some things into the bedrolls and use a couple of ties there, too. If we all carry some," she narrowed her gaze at both men, just in case they thought they would spare her from participating, "we should be able to manage quite a bit."

Adam had his hands on his hips, his gaze on her when she finished speaking. Then he looked over at Warren.

"Bossy little thing, isn't she?"

"I believe I noticed that right from the beginning," Warren said.

Amanda didn't care if they had a laugh at her expense. Now seemed like a good time for laughter.

"I take it you brought Pocahontas with you?" Adam asked.

In response, Amanda pulled the knife out of the sheath built into the side of her boot. Adam nodded, a pleased look on his face. They each began to strip what they could from their saddles. They'd have to be left behind, as they were far too heavy to carry, so it only made sense to use what they could from them.

"Son of a bitch," Warren said. "Do you know that I've had this thing since I came to Waco and I'd *finally* gotten the damn thing broken in right?"

"We might be able to come back for them," Adam said.

Amanda wondered if he was placating the man, or if he meant it.

“Doesn’t matter,” Warren said. He sat back on his haunches and gave Adam a level look. “It’s only a saddle.”

It took a bit of time to rig everything to carry. In the end, aside from the saddles, they left behind the two cooking pots, keeping only the coffee pot. They figured it could serve double duty. They also only packed one tin plate and one cup. They’d share.

Food with utensils and weapons, plus their canteens and the bedrolls, and a couple of items of clothing apiece were the most they could manage. They used rope to fashion slings so the bedrolls could be carried across their backs.

Amanda had wrapped her journal in her bedroll, and she divvied up the money she’d brought, giving some to each of the men. She slung her rifle over her shoulder, the strap on it keeping the weapon in place. The load she had didn’t feel heavy at the moment. She wasn’t willing to bet that it wouldn’t be damn heavy by the end of the day.

“How far you figure we can go in one day?” she asked as they set out.

“In my army days, we marched a good twenty miles a day, and with heavier packs,” Adam said. “If we can manage half that, it’ll be good. I know of some settlements we can head toward. We might be able to replace our horses. But we’re looking at walking for at least three, probably four days.”

“Well hell.” Amanda exhaled heavily. Getting upset over the situation wasn’t going to help. In fact, it had been her experience in life that getting upset over having to do hard or unpleasant things just made them that much more difficult.

Together they set off, their pace solid, unrushed. Adam pointed the way, and as the land was wide open leaving the lake, they walked abreast.

Chatter gave way to silence. Several hours later, the landscape changed subtly in the way Amanda had learned meant a water source lay ahead.

Amanda was delighted to see the stream.

“Water feels nice and cold,” Adam said as he squatted near the stream.

“I’m tempted to soak my feet.” Amanda said as she refilled her canteen.

“And just days ago it was your pussy you needed to soak,” Warren said, kneeling on the bank next to her.

Amanda laughed. “Yeah, I prefer that kind of ache, actually.”

“Hold that thought,” Adam said. “How bad are your feet, honey?”

“Feet and legs sore, but I’ve more walk in me. You?”

“Yeah, about the same. I don’t want us to rest too long right now. We’ll tighten up. Can we go a bit longer before we have a good rest?”

Amanda got to her feet and Adam gathered her into his arms. She allowed herself to snuggle, to lean on him for a moment. She pulled back then stretched up to kiss him. His taste sustained her.

Adam turned her into Warren’s arms. He kissed her and she relished this taste, this pause, which felt more refreshing than a nap would have been.

“That’s better,” she said. Both men smiled at her. “All right, I’m ready.”

The continued walking the trail, the men flanking her. Amanda felt her energy dwindling. They’d been chatting about inconsequential things. But as the day waned, she fell silent.

“Oh, look.” She’d cast her gaze to the bushes beside them and spotted berries. “Nearly over ripe, but good,” she said after she’d tasted some.

They all ate some, and Amanda used her bandana to carry a few for later.

Just before sunset, they stopped and made camp. They found no stream nearby, so dinner was jerky and berries and minimal sips from their canteens. Warren started a fire, so as the night chilled, they at least could keep warm.

“Come here,” Adam invited. He didn’t have to ask twice. Amanda snuggled in between them praying that by the morning her legs would be less sore.

The sun hadn’t begun to warm the air when they set out the next morning. It didn’t surprise Amanda they kept her in the middle between them.

She stumbled once after about an hour. Adam and Warren both caught her.

“Wait here while I get you something,” Adam said as he pulled out his knife. They were more or less surrounded by trees on this part of the trail, trees that seemed to grow thicker on either side of them. Amanda almost felt like they were making their way through a dense forest.

Adam walked into the trees to the right and emerged a few minutes later with a long, fairly straight branch.

“A walking stick. Good idea, thanks.” Amanda grasped the crude tool and thought it would work well.

He nodded, then said, “I think we could all use one.” It only took him a few minutes to fashion two more.

The stick did make the walking easier in that she felt a little steadier on her feet. The sun beat down with real intensity, and only the presence of the trees providing intermittent shade gave some relief. Perspiration ran down her back and down between her breasts. Her legs began to burn and her feet hurt.

“It’s about noon,” Adam stopped, looked up at the sky. “Let’s take a break.”

“I’m for that,” Amanda agreed. She hoped she could just lie down on the ground for a few minutes and let her entire body rest.

“I hear water,” Warren said before she could shrug off her pack. They listened, then followed the sound just a few hundred feet to the north, further into the trees. They found the river, a shallow one, with fairly wide-spread banks. The sound of rippling water was caused by the rocks that protruded, forming a tiny cataract.

Amanda couldn't hold back her groan as she tried to drop the pack from her shoulders. Adam was there in an instant, easing it away from her, setting it down.

"Here, let me help, honey."

She groaned again, this time in bliss as he put his hands on her shoulders and began to squeeze and release.

"I met a man of the Cherokee Nation just before I settled in Waco," Adam said. "His mother is a healer and had taught him many different remedies for common complaints. This was one."

"It feels good."

"Tonight when we camp, I'll do the rest of your body. For now, why not stretch out for a bit?"

Amanda took a drink from her canteen, then took Adam up on his suggestion. She stretched out on the ground and reached for her pack to use as a pillow.

"Use this one of mine instead," Warren said. "It's got our clothes in one end of it and it's a bit softer."

He was right. One end of his pack felt almost as good as a real pillow. "Thanks."

Amanda laid her head down and closed her eyes. She could hear the men's voices, but couldn't make out their words. It seemed like only minutes later someone stroked her shoulder.

"Mandy? We have to get moving, honey."

Amanda sat up. "I fell asleep?"

"Only for about half an hour or so. Sometimes a catnap like that can do you a world of good."

Adam helped her up. She excused herself to move further into the bushes to pee, returning moments later. Warren helped her put her pack and her rifle back in place. Adam proffered her walking stick and her refilled canteen, and they headed off.

She decided Adam had known what he'd been talking about. That short nap had made a huge difference in her mood, and how her body

felt. The pack didn't feel quite as heavy as it had before she'd slept, and she thought her legs might just hold out until the end of the day.

"I guess if you're used to living in a more rural area, this walking isn't so hard," Amanda said. "I walked in Richmond, but never very far, and always along busy and cluttered city streets, so it didn't seem as far, either."

"You mean as opposed to the great American West," Warren said, making her laugh.

"Warren's a city boy, too," Adam said. "Born and raised in Philadelphia. He doesn't see the attraction in land with rocks, trees, rivers and no people."

"I'm a lawyer? No people equals no business," Warren said.

"City boy doesn't show on you," Amanda teased him. "Well, except for your Northern accent, that is."

"I don't have an accent. And besides," Warren quipped, "I *can* see at least one advantage in being on land with no people in sight. Unfortunately, I'm likely to be too tired again tonight to make love to either of you."

The terrain changed subtly, trees now growing fewer and farther between. The land opened up, became more rolling grasslands, a gently sloped downhill grade that was still uneven for walking on.

"There'll be another river up ahead. We should be able to reach it before nightfall. We're fortunate in that, at least. There's really plenty of water all the way from here to Tahlequah. Although I hope we don't have to walk that far."

A few minutes later, Amanda was tempted to tell Adam to be careful what he wished for. She'd been focusing on her feet, on the changing ground beneath them and not the vista in front of her. Adam and Warren both stopped walking, their gazes fixed ahead of them on the trail.

"Not again."

Warren's tone alerted her and she looked up to see what had snagged the men's attention. The sight before her chilled her to the

bone. She didn't think. She just reacted. Relaxing her shoulders, she let the load she carried slip from her body, then slowly brought her rifle forward until she held it in both hands.

There, on the horizon, shrouded in a dust cloud kicked up by horses' hooves, a band of riders came toward them.

Chapter 17

Adam dropped his pack and eased his rifle down and into his right hand. Keeping his movements subtle, he sidled to his right so that he stood slightly in front of Amanda and Warren. The riders coming toward them rode with purpose, and quickly. Though too far away for him to see any details, logic told him such a large party could only be a Cavalry unit or Cherokee warriors.

Not a speck of blue uniform was in sight.

This band was larger than the one that attacked them by the lake. If they were gunning for trouble, he and his lovers were dead. In his peripheral vision, he noticed his lovers working just as subtly as he had to arrange themselves so they could have a clear line of sight for shooting, and become targets themselves.

“Easy.” He knew he couldn’t prevent either of them from doing what they would. He supposed they felt as protective of him as he did of them.

“What? No shooting until we can see the whites of their eyes? Didn’t that get the British killed a century ago during that little revolution we held?”

Despite the moment, Amanda’s quip made him smile. “I meant easy, I’m not convinced they’re hostile.”

“They are many, and we are few, and they are heading toward us so fast they’ve made a dust cloud,” Amanda said.

Adam couldn’t fault Amanda’s logic. “I could run on just my own two feet and make a dust cloud. The ground is dry.”

“They’re not holding their weapons,” Warren said.

Adam nodded. “Yes, I see that.”

It only took a couple of minutes for the riders to reach them. Adam immediately recognized the man in front.

“Adam. I see you’ve encountered the Ani-Yun’ wiya’s latest problem.”

Adam sighed, his relief so great his knees almost buckled. “You could say that, Peter.”

“I apologize on behalf of my chief, and my people. We have been tracking them. If we do not stop these rebels, soon, they will bring grief upon all of us.”

“They attacked us at Eufaula Lake, day before yesterday,” Adam said. A quick sideways glance told him his lovers had lowered their weapons.

Peter raised one eyebrow. “You’ve managed to come a good distance, then. None of you were injured?”

“No, they just stole our horses.”

Peter turned to his people and said something in the Cherokee tongue. Then he faced Adam again.

“My father’s ranch is only about two hours’ ride from here. We’ll take you there. You will need to rest. And eat. My mother and sisters would be honored to attend to your sore legs.”

“Thank you.” Adam glanced over at Amanda and Warren, then looked back at Peter. “These are my good friends, Amanda Dupree and Warren Jessop.” Then to his lovers he said, “Peter Smith. His father is one of the chiefs of the Cherokee Nation.”

“I am really happy to meet you,” Amanda said.

Peter nodded, then gave a signal. Three warriors came forward and dismounted. The horses they offered were without saddles, but Adam didn’t care. One of the Cherokee gave him a leg up. “Amanda? Come here, sweetheart.”

Adam thought she might protest, because one of her best and worst traits was a fierce independence, a need to stand on her own two feet and do things for herself. In this instance, she’d be better off

riding with him. He'd ridden bare-back before, but he doubted she had.

In the next instant, she surprised him. Without a word of protest she came to him, raised her arms. Warren lifted her, and Adam settled her on the horse in front of him.

"I've sent Johnny ahead to let my father know we're coming. The rest of the party will continue following the trail of our quarry."

Warren handed Amanda her rifle and Adam's. He slung his over his shoulder and accepted a foot up onto another spotted horse.

Peter and two of the men who were riding with them to the ranch took up their packs. "I've instructed my men to bring back your saddles."

"Thank you. They'll need to be repaired before we can use them," Warren said.

"George can do that, as he is a fine saddle maker and lives not far from my father. Many of our ranchers have taken to using saddles. Makes roping of the cattle easier." Then Peter turned his horse around and led them in a more northerly direction than they'd been walking.

Peter Smith had never been the talkative sort, and Adam felt content to ride in silence. Amanda soon relaxed against him in such a way that told him she had fallen asleep again.

Warren pulled his horse even with Adam's. His lover sent him a look he didn't have any trouble interpreting.

Thank God Peter and his men had found them. The Cherokee had likely saved all their lives.

* * * *

Big Ben Bodine held up his hand, ordering a stop. He scanned the activity below and felt his temper begin to simmer. If they'd been just a bit faster, they might have succeeded in nabbing those bastards.

On the other hand, if they'd been in the process of subduing them and those warriors had come along, they might have gotten themselves killed.

He'd learned a lot about Kendall while he'd rotted in jail. The Ranger made friends with everyone, including those God-cursed Indians.

"Now what?" Baker asked.

Impatience laced the Easterner's words, and Bodine thought he wasn't far from killing the little prick just because he was tired of his damn complaining.

"Trouble." Let the bastard ride forward and see if he dared to continue on down from this mountain in light of what was going on below. Bodine thought if he insisted, he just might let him.

Baker came forward, pulling his horse even with Bodine's, his gaze narrowed as he watched.

As the tableau unfolded, Bodine began to plan. When the larger party continued on a trail that wouldn't bring them all face to face, he grunted.

One good thing, anyway.

Then the smaller group, including that bastard Kendall and Baker's wife, or whatever the hell she was to him, headed in the direction of a Cherokee settlement with just a few warriors riding escort. Still, the presence of those warriors tipped the scales against him. He and his men could take one Ranger, a woman, and a mealy-mouthed lawyer. They couldn't, however, take on them and those Indians.

"Now what the hell are we going to do?" Baker's words sounded as whiny as a little girl's.

Bodine wondered if he was typical of men in the East. Still, he needed to keep on the bastard's good side. He was after collecting that other half of his fee. *Then* he might kill him. For now, he said, "We wait a bit, and then follow them, although I have a pretty good idea where they're going."

“Bully for you.”

Bodine wondered if the pleasure he would get from beating Colin Baker to bloody death would serve as a sufficient temporary substitute for what he wanted to do to Kendall.

Probably. He took a moment to remember that fee.

He nodded toward the riders making their way north. “They’ve been walking for two days now. They’ll likely need to rest up—a day, maybe more. Those Indians will probably replace their horses, give ’em more food, then send them on their way. They won’t offer escort, of that I’m sure. It would be an insult. So we wait close by, ready to follow them when they leave the settlement. Take them first chance we get. I’m thinking the second day, because then their guard will be down.”

“This is taking entirely too long.”

“Well, we’re in agreement there, but it can’t be helped. We’ll wait until they’re out of sight, then we’ll get moving. There are hills around where some of those Cherokee have settled. We’ll be able to make camp and keep them in sight.”

Baker looked as if he had more to say, but apparently thought better of it. Bodine was impressed. He hadn’t thought the man that perceptive. Turning his horse and walking it away from him was the smartest thing the man had done in days.

“Why don’t we just kill the fucker,” Ira asked as his horse replaced Baker’s beside Bodine.

“Because we need him to get to a bank and get the rest of what he owes us. I checked the other night when he was snoring up a storm. He ain’t got the gold on him, else his corpse would be rotting in the sun already.”

“Maybe he don’t got it, period,” Ira said.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he’s got it. He’s a rich Easterner, I got no doubts there. And I have a feeling that little lady we’re following has something of his that’s valuable, too. So let’s put up with the little fucker’s shit for a while longer. We’ll help him nab what she’s got,

then make him give us that and anything else he has once we get to that bank.”

“You’re a conniving bastard, Bodine,” Ira said. “I like that.” Then he nodded toward the retreating riders. “Maybe we can tell Baker some stories about what happens to carpetbaggers in Indian Territory. Make it so he’s afraid to close his eyes and sleep.”

Bodine thought about that for a moment, then smiled. “If we can’t beat him to bloody death, scaring him to it is the next best thing, I reckon.”

* * * *

Amanda had never given any thought to how the Indians in Indian Territory lived. She’d resided in Richmond for her entire life, and while she’d heard stories of Indians going to war against settlers, innocents being attacked and scalped, she hadn’t fully believed them. She’d read about the forced expulsion of the Cherokee and other tribes from Georgia and the Carolinas as she’d looked into her father’s career. To her way of thinking, ousting people from their ancestral homes and forcing them to walk so far, on a trail where many had died, was far more savage than anything she’d ever heard of the Indians doing.

It never occurred to her the Cherokee would live on ranches, in houses, or that they would have towns and cities, too.

They approached a ranch house, a wooden structure that appeared large enough to house a substantial family. An older man and woman and three younger women stood on the verandah, looking, Amanda thought, rather stoic.

She’d not meant to sleep on the ride, but once she understood they’d been rescued, exhaustion had consumed her.

Warren lifted her down, holding her until she nodded. Her legs, having been given the two hour rest, seemed even stiffer than before.

Adam stood behind her, one hand on her shoulder.

“This is my father, Chief Smith, and my mother, Ellen. My sisters, Mary, Willow, and Jane.” Peter stood between them and his family, indicating each member.

Ellen stepped forward. “Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you so much for having us,” Amanda said.

Peter’s father grunted, then looked at Adam. “You will be given horses to replace those stolen from you. Your saddles will be repaired and returned to you. Those responsible will be dealt with.”

Amanda wondered why Adam didn’t thank the man. And then she understood the Chief was ashamed of what had befallen them.

“We don’t hold you responsible, sir,” she said to him. She gave him her best smile. “And we are very grateful for your kindness.”

Chief Smith looked at her then, the first time he’d done so. “Women’s hearts are softer, and forgiving. This is how they have been made. I am a chief of the Ani-Yun’ wiya. My people. My responsibility.”

“You have walked far. Come, my daughters and I will tend to you.”

Adam squeezed her shoulder, a gesture that filled her with warmth and told her she was safe following Ellen. She supposed the men needed to huddle and come up with some sort of plan—the way men always needed to do. For the moment, Amanda was fine with that. She knew whatever they discussed, her lovers would tell her about it later.

The women led her around the back of the house. There, set off a small distance from the main building, stood two others, not far apart.

“Father built us a bath house like the one they have in Denison,” Willow said. “Mother thinks that soaking in hot water has many healing properties.”

“Hot springs are better,” the older woman said, “but this is good with the herbs I added.”

The small building felt warm and comfortable inside. The younger women undressed her, not making any comment about her man’s

apparel. She sank into the large tub of hot water. Her legs reacted immediately, shooting pains from her feet to her back.

"It is the muscles relaxing," Ellen said quietly. "The pain will soon pass."

They offered her tea, a beverage made from flowers she found pleasant.

"It was wise of your men to see to it you drank plenty of water," Ellen said. "We will have a feast tonight, after you have rested."

Amanda laid her head back and let the water do its work, the scent from whatever herbs Ellen had added combining with the steam and the heat to relax her completely.

Just as the water began to cool, Ellen urged her out of the tub. The younger women dried her, then led her to a bench padded with soft cloths. They offered her no coverings, urging her to lie face down.

Hands began to work on her, a press and release, grip and caress, and Amanda felt herself in heaven. This must be the woman Adam spoke of. She could smell flowers, and the chill of a lotion on her skin told her Ellen—obviously a healer—applied her knowledge to working the pain and the knots from her body.

Painful at times, the massage soon had every muscle in her body relaxing. Soothed, at peace, Amanda felt herself drifting to sleep.

Sometime later she heard voices, then felt familiar arms lifting her. Amazing how, relaxed as she'd been, her comfort rose when his scent, his presence filled her.

"Adam." She sighed his name and tried to fully awaken.

"Hush, baby. I'm carrying you to bed. Go back to sleep."

Her eyes too heavy to open, Amanda decided his suggestion was an excellent idea. She snuggled into him and dropped off.

Chapter 18

The touch of her lovers' hot flesh snuggled against hers awakened her. Amanda felt the curve of the smile spread on her face before she opened her eyes.

"Am I dreaming?"

Adam faced her, his naked body warming hers, his cock stiff and, for the moment, resting against her belly. Behind her, equally hot and hard, Warren's cock nudged the crack of her ass. Dappled sunshine lit the room.

"No, not dreaming. Chief Smith has given us the use of this cabin for the next day or so. They keep it for when they host overnight guests," Adam said.

"How long did I sleep?" It was hard for her to focus on conversation when what she wanted more than anything was to touch and kiss her lovers.

"Not long, only a couple of hours. Which is, coincidentally, about how long we have until our presence is required for dinner." His words moistened the skin of her face as he kissed her cheek.

"Wonderful." Lying in bed in the middle of the day with the heat and scent of two men pressed tight against her had to be *the* most wonderful experience.

"Mmm. Speaking of wonderful, that's how you feel," Warren said. "Wonderful, soft, and sweet."

He ran his hand down her arm, his fingertips lightly stroking her nipple as they passed. He caressed her left leg, then drew it up and out so that it draped over his hip, opening her to their lover.

“Ellen rubbed some kind of cream on me.” She recalled Adam’s words from earlier on the trail, and she speared him with as menacing a look as she could manage under the circumstances. “Tell me she’s the ‘mother of a friend’ you meant and that you know how to do whatever she did to my back and legs with her hands.”

His answer was a smile so smug it fluttered her belly and made her wet between her thighs.

“You not only feel good, you smell good. Good enough to eat.” Warren’s voice vibrated in her ear, and that, combined with the way he rubbed his cock against her ass, made her arousal climb even higher.

She opened her mouth to demand more, but they took choice from her when they rolled her onto her back. Adam’s mouth came down on hers, warm, wet, and wanton. His tongue invaded, sliding and tasting with total command.

Warren moved, came up onto his knees, and began to kiss his way down her body.

Amanda groaned in sheer delight when she felt warm breath on her pussy. The deep stroke of Adam’s tongue, then Warren’s nuzzling of her woman flesh made her shudder and gasp.

Adam’s lips lifted from hers, and he turned his head so he could watch Warren. A smile played across his face, and Amanda knew it turned him on, watching their lover use his mouth on her.

Her eyes drifted shut as her hips rolled, pressing her cunny even closer to Warren’s talented lips and tongue.

“Feel good, sweetheart?” Adam’s question vibrated wetly against her puckered nipple.

Unable to form a coherent response, she could only moan and lift her hips again.

“You going to share that tasty treat?” Adam asked.

Warren chuckled, then worked his way up her body. Before she could ask what Adam meant, Warren rose above her, his cock nestled in the wet folds of her pussy. He stretched, kissing Adam with open-

mouthed splendor. Then Warren eased back, his gaze on Amanda's lips.

"Taste yourself on me, sweetheart." He said to her, and then he kissed her.

Never had she imagined so provocative a kiss. She tasted herself and Warren, a combination that spiked her arousal. Moving her hips one more time, she captured his cock, moaning with pleasure when he thrust into her.

"I want my mouth on your cunt when Adam fucks you. I want to taste you both at the same time." The whispered words sent her over the edge, her release shivering through her. She felt her pussy convulse around the hard cock seated there, a cock that held still and resisted the siren call of her cunt.

"Oh, God." Rapture stole every ounce of her strength. Her arms that moments before had fiercely grasped Warren's neck now slid down to the bed.

Warren withdrew, then rested at the end of the bed on his knees. His cock pointed to the ceiling, looking wet and hard and ready for more.

"That's just the first, sweetheart," Adam said.

Adam scooped her close, turning her on her side, then kissed her sweetly. "Come here."

He lifted her onto him, and his cock nestled where their lover's had just been. The brush of his hot flesh against the bud of her clitoris should have made her gasp with an overload of sensation. Instead, her arousal began to swirl to life once more.

"Yes, that was just the first. For me." And she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"We men are at a disadvantage," Warren whispered in her ear. On his knees right behind her, he brushed his cock against her. She knew he'd saved his release so he could take her ass.

She could think of nothing she wanted more. She looked over her shoulder, then swung her gaze back to Adam. “Fuck me. I want to feel you both deep inside me.”

“Then give me your cunt, Mandy.” Adam’s command, raw and earthy, fed the flames of her passion.

Energy surged and she gained her knees, moved her hips, and slid down onto Adam’s hard cock. Hot and thick, he filled her, differently than Warren, yet just as deliciously. When Adam fisted his hands in her hair, she bent down to him, giving him her mouth. She would give him, and their lover, all they demanded, all that she was.

The glide of Warren’s hands on her ass, the gentle tug as he spread her cheeks fluttered deep in her belly. She knew this time the thrill that awaited her. Moaning as she felt his tongue laving her anus, she ground herself into Adam’s cock, then tilted her ass for Warren to plunder.

His cock, longer and thinner than Adam’s, pressed forward, pierced her opening, and slid slowly into her.

“Oh, yes.” The words emerged a whimper, because the sensation of being full and stretched to the limit made her heart pound and her blood race.

“We’re one,” Warren whispered. He leaned over Amanda, his tongue tracing the shell of her ear. “We’re one flesh, the three of us.”

“One.” Adam surged gently under her, and she could only shiver. Beyond the pure physical pleasure, joy swirled within her. She’d never known anything could be like this. She truly felt a part of them. Connected. *Whole*.

“One.” She added her voice to theirs, the word sounding reverent in her ears. And then she clenched every inner muscle she could.

Warren inhaled sharply, his hands trembling as he caressed her back, and then slowly lifted up from her. Adam’s groan of pleasure came just as softly, followed by another lift, another surge up into her.

“Please. Now.”

They answered her plea, each lover moving in tandem, in and out, their pace slow, steady. Amanda sprawled on Adam, her legs spreading even further. She could only let go, let them take, and in that giving receive the most incredible pleasure. Fast and hard, deep and hot, they moved in her until a keening cry emerged from her soul and rapture possessed her completely.

Again and again, the ecstasy cascaded over her, a waterfall of pleasure she felt certain would never end.

Long minutes later, when only racing breaths broke the silence, she shivered, an uncontrollable convulsion that racked her once, then once again.

Warren eased out of her and helped Adam slide her off him so they cocooned her. They said nothing, these men of hers, just held her until the shaking stopped.

"I was afraid. We were walking and I was afraid because I knew I couldn't keep going much longer." The words tumbled out of her, words she'd held down, denied. Now they could emerge, a kind of spirit poison that needed to be drawn out, discarded.

"Shh." Adam kissed her forehead, stroked her back. "We're safe."

They held her tighter, their heat infusing her with the greatest sense of comfort she'd ever known.

"We were all scared," Warren said then. "But we're here, together, safe. I'm so grateful to have you both. I love you both."

Amanda gave herself over to their care and the coddling. For this brief moment in time, she'd let herself lean, let herself be pampered, and grow strength from her temporary surrender.

* * * *

Warren wondered if the food tasted so good because of the way he'd spent the two hours leading up to the meal. Certainly, Mrs. Smith and her daughters excelled as cooks, and the food was scrumptious. He slid a glance over at Amanda and Adam. No doubt about it,

spending a couple of hours in sensual abandon with his lovers had heightened his appetite for food.

After dinner, they gathered together outside around a fire that burned brightly, giving warmth to the chilled evening.

“Our people are vanishing.” Chief Smith’s voice sounded strong, and sad.

Warren turned his full attention to the man. He’d found the older man reticent earlier. Embarrassed, if one could use such a word, because they’d been attacked by *his* people. Since Adam knew this man and his people, Warren had remained silent, watching and learning. Chief Smith—Warren had no idea what his first name was—held his pipe, a standard European one, and gazed into the fire.

“I was a young warrior when we set out from Georgia to come to this new land. The trail was long and hard, and many of my people perished. My mother and my sister, and other mothers and sisters. Our chiefs did all they could. Staying in our ancestral home had become impossible. John Ross did all he could for those under his leadership, but no man, Cherokee or White, can make such an undertaking easy.”

Above the crackle of the flames, the chirp of crickets and calls of the night owls provided a symphony to accompany the chief’s story.

“So we came to this new land and formed a new Nation. But memories fade, and once more, I fear, we will be removed. I am too old to lead our people on another such march.”

“I only learned of the removal of your people recently.” Amanda’s hesitant words drew a nod from the Chief. Warren wondered if she understood being given permission to speak was a rare thing for a woman, as the look of shock in the younger women’s eyes testified. Many differences existed between the Cherokee and Whites, but the general attitude toward women seemed eerily similar to him.

“People can be cruel. This I know from my own experience. But when I read the accounts of the removal of your people...it was hard for me to know that people could be that cruel. It shamed me.”

“We were few, and the white man, many.”

Warren wondered at the way the Chief seemed to infer that this simple fact justified the actions of the government.

The Chief continued speaking. "The march was hard. But no massacre had been ordered. We had the chance for life. We left behind our sacred land. Some believe this means we will cease to be. I do not. Only if we forget, will the Ani-Yun' wiya cease to be."

"Then you must do all you can to ensure no one forgets." Amanda's words no longer shivered with hesitancy, but rang with conviction.

"So young and so sure." He drew on his pipe, then fixed his gaze directly on her. "And unlikely to leave the comfort of Virginia for the open skies of the Cherokee Nation. You are on a quest."

Amanda looked at Adam, who nodded his encouragement.

"Yes. I seek the legacy my father left me."

"Speak of it."

Amanda left nothing out of the telling, including the circumstance of her birth. She related parts of the journal and how she had fled Richmond, hoping her cousin in Waco could be of assistance. Once or twice, Warren thought the Chief's eyes twinkled in amusement. Amanda's voice dipped when she related the murder of the enlisted men assigned to her father's command.

She fell silent, and for long minutes, not a word was said.

"There is a tale told by some near our city in the rocks, Tahlequah. It speaks of a cave, hidden near a stream, where the spirits of white men cry out, where their blood taints the earth. It is called the cave of souls." He took his pipe out of his mouth. "My people will not enter. You could enter. You could honor the dead. Give them peace. I will draw you a map."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you."

Chief Smith grunted. Then he motioned to his wife and daughters. The women rose gracefully from where they'd been sitting on the ground. They'd put a kettle near the fire earlier. Now they removed it

and poured the liquid into clay cups. The scent of fruit teased his nostrils and made his taste buds water.

“We drink *Oo-wa-ga*, which the women make each autumn from fruit. Then we will have some of the white man’s Arbuckles’.” Chief Smith smiled, and Warren couldn’t help but return the gesture. He’d thought he’d smelled coffee brewing. “It is the one thing from your people I enjoy above all others. And then we will all enjoy a good night’s sleep.”

Chief Smith said that last with just a hint of sly humor, and Warren couldn’t hold back his chuckle. One of the Chief’s daughters moved the pot closer to the fire, and in moments the scent of brewing coffee combined with the fruity fragrance of the *Oo-wa-ga*.

Warren turned his gaze to his lovers. Adam looked relaxed, at ease as Warren had seldom seen him. On Amanda’s face the reaction the Chief’s generous offer—shock and gratitude—played against her exhaustion. Despite the sleep she’d already had today, he knew she’d need more—at least another full day of rest before they’d venture on their way.

Warren also felt at ease and, for once, didn’t have a single worry about staying with his lovers in the privacy of the small cabin. They would share drink, and maybe a few more stories, and then they all three would sleep very well this night.

Chapter 19

“What’s wrong?”

Adam looked over at Warren, disconcerted to realize that man had picked up on his unease.

“Probably nothing,” Adam lied smoothly. “For a moment, I got the strange feeling we’re being followed. It’s probably nothing.”

Of course Warren had to look behind him. Since leaving the Smith holding earlier that morning, they’d been traveling at a steady pace, the ground less rocky, the landscape gentle hills and dales that Adam knew kept rising toward the plateau St. Louis was built upon. By the time they reached Tahlequah, they’d be several hundred feet higher in elevation than they were now.

Warren turned back to Adam. “I don’t see anyone. Of course with the land undulating as it is...”

“Yeah. It could be it’s just my nerves. After what we’ve been through already, maybe I’m just expecting the worst.”

“Maybe Chief Smith is having us followed at a distance,” Amanda said. “He seemed really upset about our being attacked in the first place.”

Adam nodded, seizing on the obvious to put his lovers’ minds at ease. “That could be it. I know when the Benedicts traveled through here heading to Denison, the Cherokee shadowed them all the way.”

But that had been when Peter and his father had their younger warriors on a training ride. This presence behind him didn’t *feel* like the Cherokee. Least-ways, not the ones he called friend.

“I still can’t believe how lucky we were,” Amanda said. “Not just that your friend Peter happened along, probably saving our lives. But

that his father knew of the cave where *my* father hid the gold, and drew us a map.”

“You’re not used to fortune smiling on you?” Warren asked.

“Not really,” Amanda admitted. “I think I’m more used to fate spitting in my face.”

“Me, too.” Warren laughed. “So maybe we were just due for some good luck. Of course, it is a kind of crude map, so I imagine finding the right cave is still going to be a bit of a challenge.”

“He noted a couple of landmarks that will be hard to miss,” Adam said. “Enough so that I’m feeling pretty optimistic about our chances. I’m thinking we have a dozen caves to search rather than hundreds. If the gold is still there, I believe we have a better than even shot at finding it.”

“If the gold is still there? Why wouldn’t it still be there?” Amanda asked.

The expression on her face told him she’d never really considered the possibility of failure. Her positive attitude could be seen as both good and bad, depending on how things turned out in the end.

“Sweetheart,” he kept his voice gentle, “there’s always the chance that someone stumbled upon the gold sometime in the last couple of decades. It would have been pure chance, and they’d have thought their prayers had been answered, but that eventuality *is* a possibility.”

“Well, damn.” Amanda scowled. “You’re right, of course. I’m just going to hope that hasn’t happened.”

“I’ll second that,” Warren said.

They stopped for a brief rest and to eat some cheese and fruit Mrs. Smith had given them for their journey. The day stretched out, sunny and warm, the sky taking on that slightly paler blue of autumn. Throughout the afternoon, Adam split his attention between the banter of his lovers and the growing sense that they were indeed being followed. He trusted his instincts completely and decided that later, while Warren and Amanda, and likely whoever followed them, slept, he’d backtrack and have a look.

They made camp for the night by a small pond, the broad leaf trees offering shade and fire wood by the water's edge. They went about their usual chores, and Adam had to focus on appearing relaxed. He wasn't certain how well he did with that, as Warren kept shooting curious looks his way. They made a fire, and Adam managed to snare a rabbit to roast for their dinner.

He smiled as he prepared the small creature for the fire. Amanda had already proven she didn't really care to witness what she referred to as the "murder of the dinner," though she was quite happy to eat the roasted meat.

"It's going to be a colder night," Warren said much later as he finished stowing the cooking gear. "We should gather a lot more wood."

Dinner was eaten, the horses fed, watered, and tethered closer than had become their custom—a legacy of the Cherokee attack. Adam surveyed the stars overhead and knew Warren was right.

"Mandy? Let me have Pocahontas, will you?" Adam said.

She withdrew the knife from her boot and handed it over, then went back to helping Warren put things away. While the coffee brewed, Adam wondered if whoever followed them salivated over the aroma, since the light breeze that had kicked up at sundown seemed to be carrying in that direction.

He didn't take long to hack a few more branches from amidst the stand of trees that grew along the banks of the pond. One tree had fallen over, likely the year before, and was barren of fresh growth. He chopped that first, then took a few smaller green branches.

Mixing the green judiciously wouldn't put the fire out.

Before long, a large pile of brush stood beside and upwind of the fire. When he'd hauled the last of it, Warren handed him a cup of coffee.

They'd ridden a good distance that day, and that, plus the full night of fun yesterday, combined to tire them all out.

"Let's just get some sleep tonight," Adam said.

He'd spread out the blankets, including a nice blanket Ellen Smith had given them. Their bed wasn't as comfortable as the night before, but they lay down together, and that was all that really mattered to Adam's mind.

"I *am* exhausted," Amanda said. "I wonder when I'm going to get used to the riding so I'm not so tired every day?"

"You're doing great, sweetheart," Warren said.

"Damn right." Adam lay on his side, spooning Amanda whom Warren had gathered close. "We came a lot further today than I thought we would."

"Is the livery owner back in Denison going to be very mad when we give him these horses instead of the ones we rented?" Amanda asked

"Mad to receive fresher, better trained, and younger horses than he had? Not likely," Adam said.

He fell silent, wide awake, and waited. It didn't take his lovers long to fall into sleep.

Still, he waited until he felt certain their sleep had become solid and deep. Easing away from Amanda, he tucked the blanket in close to her back, then got to his feet. He stood, looking down at them for a long few minutes, just in case they awoke. Satisfied they slept on, Adam picked up his boots and walked toward the horses.

The animals showed their training by standing still and quiet. Not bothering to saddle the animal, Adam by-passed his gun belt, pulled his boots on, and took up his rifle. Then he swung onto the horse. He turned, taking one last look at his sleeping loved ones, then softly urged his mount forward.

His eyes adjusted to the dark of night, his horse easily picking its way back along the trail they'd followed so recently. No moon yet shone over head—it likely would rise in another hour, two at the most. Adam ignored the chilly air and focused instead on the trail. When he'd ridden for a half hour, he slowed his horse, looked around for a place to tether the animal.

He was close, he could feel it.

Best to go the rest of the way on foot.

The horse seemed content to rest alone in a stand of trees, its stillness almost unearthly. Adam looped the reins over a low branch then checked his Colt, ensured the chamber was full. Holstering the revolver, he slid his rifle from his shoulder, where he'd carried it. With his rifle cocked and ready, he set out, his steps quiet as he made his way forward. He'd keep to the tree line, keep out of sight, until he knew exactly what he was dealing with.

His progress was slow and silent. He figured he'd walked maybe a quarter mile when objects on the ground just ahead snagged his attention.

He squatted, focusing his gaze on those objects. Bedrolls. Four lumps of bedding, huddled around a couple of rocks. No fire, of course, because that would have alerted their quarry. Adam frowned. Something seemed odd about one of the piles, the one closest to him. Too late he realized what it was.

The press of cold metal to the base of his skull froze Adam in place, even as he cursed his own carelessness.

"Well, now, Bodine's gonna be *real* happy I had to go take a piss in the middle of the night."

* * * *

Amanda wiggled her bottom, her body seeking out Adam's heat to complement the furnace that was Warren snuggled against her chest. She blinked slowly when she realized Adam wasn't there. She drifted for a few moments, certain he'd gotten up to answer nature's call. Finally, she opened her eyes, the realization slow that he'd been gone from her too long just to pee.

Wiping sleep from her eyes, she sat up, her gaze automatically going to the horses. She doubted her eyes at first. Then a shaft of dread stabbed her heart.

She laid a hand on Warren's shoulder and gave him a small shake. He came awake instantly. "What's wrong?"

"Adam's gone."

"Gone?" Warren shot up to a sitting position, his head turning left and right as he confirmed the truth of her words.

"Damn it. God damn it all to hell!" In seconds he was on his feet. "I knew something was bothering him. I fucking *knew* it. Damn him and his Goddamned need to always protect and take care—"

Warren stopped because Amanda grabbed him and gave him a good shake. "At least you knew there was something bothering him. I didn't even know that much. What the hell is going on?"

"Remember Adam sensed we were being followed? Sometimes, it's like he knows things he couldn't possibly. So I can only assume..."

"He went to check on who was following us. I wonder how long he's been gone?"

"Long enough. I'm going after him."

Again Amanda reached out, but this time Warren tried to shake her off.

"Why are men so strong and so stupid? What if he's in trouble? Serious trouble?"

Warren ran a hand through his hair, his impatience practically vibrating off him. "That's why I'm going after him. Damn it, Amanda, I love him!"

And I don't?

She didn't speak the words. She understood Warren had known Adam longer than she had. She loved them both, but she doubted she was really more than a temporary passion for them. They'd never shared a woman. They'd already admitted that much. Likely sharing her was just one more way for these two incredible men to be closer to each other. And she accepted that. Hadn't she been thinking lately that they were getting a little too sentimental, a little too attached?

Hadn't she been reminding herself, over and over, that she had a home to go to?

She belonged in Richmond, Virginia, not Waco, Texas.

So if you know that, why does thinking about it hurt?

Amanda pushed away the unwanted thoughts and focused on Warren.

"We'll both go after him."

Warren looked like he was about to protest, but when she just raised one eyebrow and waited, he nodded. "You're right. He might need both of us."

Amanda nodded. She skimmed off the chemise she'd slept in, pulled on her boy-clothes. She took a moment to pull on fresh stockings before she donned her boots. Pocahontas sat sheathed just inside the leather, waiting.

"I don't have a good feeling," Warren confided as he finished dressing. He checked his hand gun, slid it into his holster.

"Neither do I," Amanda said. "So I guess that means we just have to go and rescue him."

She didn't feel very confident, but she did feel determined. She thought that maybe she and Warren had that in common.

It took only moments to saddle their horses. They both noted Adam's saddle resting where he'd set it earlier that evening.

"He left it behind rather than use it because he didn't want to wake us," Warren said.

Amanda swallowed hard. Then they were on their way, following the path, instinctively staying close to the trees as they backtracked ground they'd covered that day. Worry ate at Amanda the farther they rode. He had been gone a while, as she could see no signs anyone had been in the area.

Finally, Warren held up his hand and Amanda stopped. She saw what had alerted him. Up ahead, Adam's mount stood quietly, its reins caught on a tree branch.

There was no sign of Adam anywhere. Listening, she could hear no stray sounds. Nothing. It was as if the horse had just come to be there of its own accord.

They inched forward until they were close to Adam's horse. Amanda searched the ground frantically, but saw no sign of blood.

Warren brought his horse close so he could lean in and whisper to her.

"I'm going to go ahead on foot, see what I can see. Hold my horse and stay here."

She would have protested, but he'd already slipped from the animal's back and begun to run, low and silent, past Adam's horse, and likely, Amanda thought, straight toward trouble.

How long would she give him? What the hell would she do if he didn't return?

Just as she was trying to decide if she should follow, she caught sight of Warren running back toward her. The look on his face as he drew close to her damn near stopped her heart.

"They're beating the hell out of him. We have to move *now*." He mounted his horse, spun in the direction he'd just been.

"Wait! Give me some idea where he is, and what we're up against. Warren, you have to think! We have to come up with some kind of plan."

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

"Yes, of course, you're right. They have him tied to a tree, and there're four of them." Then he held out his left hand and used his right index finger as if using a pencil on paper to show here the lay of the land.

"They're here. Adam looks in rough shape. Three of the men are close, the other sitting by the fire, as if he's not involved. Their horses are here."

Amanda felt her heart sink. She was a crack shot, but only against painted targets. Then she sat straight, nodded once.

She'd do what she had to in order to rescue Adam.

“All right. Let’s go.”

This time it was Warren who stopped her. “Wait. Remember how those Cherokee attacked us?”

“They stole our horses.”

“Yeah, which made us have to walk and slowed us down. Give me Pocahontas. I’ll get Adam. You scatter their horses.”

Amanda gave him the knife, knowing that if Adam was hurt, she didn’t have the strength to lift him. She dismounted, tying her horse near Adam’s. Then she cocked her rifle.

“How far?”

“About a hundred yards over the next rise. Maybe a quarter mile, all told.”

“Okay. Just give me a couple of minutes to sneak in and around and untie their horses. Then you come in like the wrath of God. I’ll start shooting as I get on one of their animals and ride it back here.”

“Good. That sounds good. All right, let’s do it.”

She took a deep breath and set her resolve. She didn’t know what the next few minutes would bring. She only hoped all those lessons she’d taken would pay off now.

Chapter 20

Adam fought the urge to bend over and puke.

Unfortunately, ropes bound his wrists above his head, so bending over wasn't an option at the present time. The tree at his back no longer scratched, or if it did, he no longer cared. Blood dribbled down his chin, a souvenir from Big Ben Bodine's first punch—before the oaf had gotten the idea to string Adam up and use him as a punching bag. That tactic just proved to Adam that Bodine indeed was dumber than dirt.

A smart outlaw would have given him a bullet in the head, straight off. Maybe he'd just puke the next time Bodine stepped close to him. That might make the bastard reach for his gun.

I must be in pretty bad shape to be wishing he'd shoot me.

At the moment, Bodine had stepped back, flexing the knuckles of his right hand after having delivered a hard punch to Adam's stomach, which was why Adam thought he might just puke.

Bodine and two of his men had taken turns at him a couple times each already. The other two, thank God, hit like girls. Still, Adam thought it prudent to act as if he was in worse shape than he really was. He let his head hang down as if he neared unconsciousness and focused on his breathing.

Are you sure it's an act, old son?

"Are you going to let me talk to him before you beat him senseless?"

Adam didn't recognize that voice. He figured it must be the man who'd been sitting by the fire, watchful and silent. The tone, the

words, spoke of education. And something else, something that seemed almost familiar.

“Yeah, I reckon I can give you a few minutes, Mr. Baker. You know, I’m glad I decided not to kill the sorry son-of-a-bitch first off. This is a lot more fun, and I can still kill him.”

“I certainly don’t want to step in the way of your entertainment, Bodine. I won’t take long with him.”

Southern. The fourth man spoke with a Southern accent that reminded him of Amanda’s.

Adam’s head was yanked upwards by the hair. He blinked as if he had trouble focusing. He’d never seen this man before. In mere seconds, his Ranger-trained brain catalogued the details. Fair hair, mean eyes, better clothes than his cohorts, and didn’t stink nearly as bad as they did.

Not another minion, then.

“I want to know where you’re taking the whore.”

Adam blinked a couple more times before answering. “I’d like to think I’d have better taste than to take any whore you’re acquainted with.”

Adam groaned when his answer earned him a hard kidney shot.

Mean and smart.

Bodine hadn’t targeted that area yet. Adam’s stomach rolled, and he swore he could see stars behind his closed eyelids. He wondered if he would puke after all.

“Let me refresh your memory. Amanda Dupree. You hooked up with her back in Waco. She has something that belongs to me. A journal. She obviously hired you as her trail guide. Where are you taking her?”

“El Paso.”

Bodine laughed. “El Paso’s to the southwest. You’ve been headed northeast, asshole.”

“Northeast? Well, damn. I always did have a lousy sense of direction.”

The southerner hit him again, same spot, only harder. If this kept up much longer, Adam knew he wouldn't have to fake being close to unconsciousness and he was going to puke whether he wanted to or not.

The southerner stepped closer, lowered his voice. "Step-daddy thought he could pull one over on me by arranging for his bastard daughter to get that journal. I'm his only legitimate heir. That journal belongs to me. Now, for the last time, where are you taking her?"

Adam had another caustic answer on the tip of his tongue.

Gunfire and the scream of horses exploded into the night before he could use it.

"The horses!" One of the minions turned toward the animals, but dove for the ground when shots rang out in his direction. The ping of bullets hitting the ground forced the other three to dive for cover as well. Galloping hooves and more gunfire came from another direction. Out of the dark, and then into the light of the fire, a painted horse raced toward him.

Adam had bare seconds to recognize Warren. A flash of metal followed by the clang of steel against rope and wood freed him. He wasted no time reaching for his lover's arm, grateful for Warren's strength as that man grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him upwards. Adam nearly soared up and across the front of Warren's horse.

One of Bodine's henchmen, the one called Ira, suddenly stood, pistol in hand, and aimed toward the darkness, away from Warren and, Adam realized instantly, toward Amanda. Without hesitation, Adam pulled Warren's pistol from its holster, aimed, and fired.

Two shots rang out. From the corner of his eye, he saw another man, one who ranged himself to the front and right of Warren's horse. Gun drawn, his aim on him and Warren, his eyes glazed over as a hole blossomed on his forehead. His weapon dropped as he fell lifeless to the ground.

"Go!" Amanda's voice gave that command.

“Hang on!” Warren said.

He didn’t have to tell Adam twice. One hand still clutched the Colt, but the other fisted Warren’s belt.

Amanda, her body bent low over one of Bodine’s horses, raced ahead into the night, and Warren spurred his horse in the same direction. Shots chased them, but the darkness had already swallowed them and Adam knew he and his lovers had become invisible to the outlaws.

It took every bit of Adam’s will to hang on, to not puke his guts out or pass out. Riding on his belly after the punches he’d taken in the last half hour tested the limits of his endurance.

In short minutes, Warren brought his horse to a stop. Adam vaguely recognized the stand of trees where he’d left his own mount.

“Can you ride?” Warren asked.

“Yeah.” He had to ride. They were by no means safe, not yet. Hopefully, Bodine’s other horses had scattered and he wouldn’t find them until daybreak, maybe longer.

Adam slid off Warren’s lap and immediately bent over, took just a moment to gain his breath and fight for air.

“Here. Get on mine. I’ll ride yours.”

He wasn’t going to argue the point. Warren helped him into the saddle, then took the reins of the Paint, gaining its unsaddled back easily.

“They don’t have any horses,” Amanda said then. “I kept this one, and the other three ran off. Bastards didn’t even unsaddle the poor creatures for the night. They were gun-shy, too. This one nearly dumped me on my ass when I held its reins and fired my gun.”

Adam heard the thread of nerves in her voice. He looked over at her, took in her wide eyes, the stark terror etched on her too-white face.

I scared her, and I made her kill a man.

Memory of the other body falling formed crystal clear in his mind.

There were so many things he wanted to say and several more he needed to say. But all that came out was, "I'm all right, sweetheart. Thanks to you and Warren."

Amanda nodded.

"Let's get back to camp," Warren said.

Adam knew his bravado had endangered his lovers. Whatever illusion of safety they'd had was gone now. "It's nearly daybreak," Adam said. "We should pack up and move out before those bastards find their mounts."

Warren turned in his saddle, gave Adam a level look. "We'll check you out, first," Warren said.

Adam opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. Warren's expression was as fierce as Adam had ever seen it. Considering what his two brave lovers had just pulled off, he thought it might be a good time for him to keep his mouth shut.

* * * *

"Colin Baker," Amanda supplied the southerner's full name. "My father's step-son. I know who he is, but I've never met him."

Amanda kept her attention focused on Adam as the sun reached mid-day. They'd been riding slower than normal, not surprising, considering the shape Adam was in. In the light of day, she saw firsthand the damage those bastards had done to him. His split lip had swollen and he looked like he was going to have a shiner. His chest, when they'd stopped for a rest and she'd insisted on inspecting it, looked like a patchwork quilt of black and blue. She hadn't touched him. She wouldn't have known what to look for or how to do it without hurting him.

She prayed there was no internal damage harder than she'd ever prayed for anything before in her whole life.

"What do you know of him?" Adam asked.

Adam's question, following his announcement of who one of his attackers had been drew her thoughts back to the conversation.

"By all accounts, he's a wastrel. His father had left him an inheritance, his when he turned twenty-five, and he ran through that pretty fast. It's true he was Gladstone's only legitimate heir as far as that goes." Amanda shot a grin at Adam. "My father's son died in the war. But the man *was* free to give anything to anyone he chose. Which he did likely because he didn't feel his step-son deserved anything more."

Adam looked around him, at the land ahead, especially. "Bodine has likely already figured we're headed to Tahlequah. It's the next large town on the trail, and I know he's pretty familiar with Indian Territory." He paused for a moment, adjusted his seat on the saddle. "We'll have to keep our eyes open from here on," Adam said. "They might regain their horses. If they do, they'll be after us for sure."

"Glad you said *we*," Warren said.

Amanda wondered if Adam caught the censure in Warren's voice or if he understood the significance that today, she and Warren flanked *him*.

She knew he was in pain. He couldn't hide that from them. Neither did he complain—typical male, she thought.

"I owe you both an apology."

She turned his attention back to Adam.

"I knew we were being followed, and my only thought was to protect you both. But I should have told you. We should've checked it out together. Instead, I thought I could handle things myself and nearly got us killed. I'm sorry."

"It's always been your nature to lead, to protect," Warren said. "It's one of the things I love about you. But you're not immortal. And you need to understand that for me, life without you would be no life at all."

Amanda remained silent as Warren's words to Adam squeezed her heart. What would it be like, she wondered, to matter to someone that much?

"I know. I feel the same way." Adam inhaled sharply. "Let's take a breather."

Because that had been the first admission of discomfort she'd heard from him since they'd rescued him just before dawn, Amanda figured he must be feeling pretty sore by now.

"How far you figure we've ridden since we set out?" she asked, looking over at the men.

"No more than six miles," Adam said.

The land continued its up and down undulations, the angle maybe a bit sharper than the day before. Amanda wondered if they were heading toward mountains, though she couldn't see any in the distance.

"Do you think maybe you have a busted rib?" Warren asked.

Amanda watched Adam's face as he swung his right leg over the horse. He winced, and she guessed his injuries were hurting more than they had mere hours before.

"I didn't think so, but I could be wrong."

They tethered the horses, and Amanda gathered some firewood so they could at least have some coffee with their lunch. They were just on the down side of a small plateau. She walked a small distance, backtracking, her gaze intent as she searched out the land behind them, the land they'd traveled that day. She could see for quite a distance and saw no sign they were being followed.

"Damn it, Lawyer Jessop, that fucking hurts!"

"Lay still while I check you out and don't be such a girl."

Amanda cleared her throat and nearly laughed when Warren looked up, read her expression, and blushed. "Sorry, sweetheart."

"You're apologizing to Amanda when it's *me* you hurt?" Adam's tone sounded outraged, but the glitter in his eyes gave him away. Flat on his back, shirt open, he should have looked vulnerable.

There wasn't a vulnerable bone in Adam Kendall's body.

Warren laughed. "Yes. I didn't mean to hurt *her*."

"How is he?" Amanda had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop from laughing. Warren's implication was plain and a little bit of a slap at Adam. Though obviously enjoying their banter, it seemed clear to her Adam had already lost the edge of his contrition of minutes before.

"How long are you two going to make me pay for last night?" Adam asked now.

"It's only been a few hours," Warren said, smiling. "Ask me again in another few hours. Can you sit up?"

Adam did so, cursing all the way. He bent his head and focused on breathing. Then he nodded, and Warren helped him to his feet.

Once their lover was standing, Warren shifted his attention to Amanda. "I don't think he's got any broken ribs, and I really don't think there's anything busted up inside him. I know enough to understand I'd feel swelling and a lot of heat if there was. But he is bruised and bound to be sore for at least a few days."

Amanda went over to Adam, who'd not yet buttoned his shirt back up. She gently placed her lips on the worst bruise, one that rode on his belly above his hip.

"I'm sorry you got hurt." She looked up at him then. "You scared the hell out of us, Adam. We were afraid we were going to lose you."

"Yeah, I got that." He reached for her and drew her in close to him.

His arms felt tentative around her, and she made her grip, when she returned his hug, just as gentle.

"How are you holding up?" he asked her after a few moments.

Warren came over to them and laid one hand on Adam's back and one hand on hers. The expression in his eyes spoke of the same tender concern she'd heard in Adam's voice. She didn't pretend not to know what he was asking—what they both wanted to know.

"I killed a man last night," she said softly. "And I know, if I hadn't aimed my gun and pulled the trigger, that man would have killed one or both of you. He had you both in his sights. I hate that I had to do that. But I'd do it again, in a heartbeat, if it meant saving either of your lives. So I'm okay with it."

"Thank you for saving my life. Both of you."

The moment was drifting into the emotional. Amanda couldn't go there. Adam and Warren would spend the rest of their lives together. She was only a temporary part of them, a transitory member of their world. Time to change the mood.

"You know," Amanda stepped back and gave him what felt like a smug smile, "there are some very old cultures in the world that hold once a person's life has been saved, it belongs to the rescuer."

"Is that a fact? My, my, Miss Dupree, you certainly are a storehouse of information."

Amanda couldn't hold back her smile. Adam returned her teasing, accepting her movement away from the emotional, and she felt so grateful she could have kissed him.

Amanda shrugged. "What can I say. My mother—"

"Saw to it you had lessons," both men finished for her.

"Yeah." She smiled, then gestured toward the wood she'd gathered. "Let's have some coffee and food."

Warren nodded. "Good idea. And we'll see if our wounded warrior can put a few more hours in the saddle before we call it a day."

Amanda caught the grim expression in Adam's eyes.

"Bet your ass I can put in a few more hours. The farther and faster we travel, the better I'll feel."

Amanda doubted that. But there could be no denying the man had grit. They both did. She marveled that she could love them both so much. It was just a damn shame she couldn't keep them.

Chapter 21

“I should have killed that bastard when I had the chance.” Bodine managed to work up a spit, sent it streaming to the dusty earth.

He hated having to bury Porter and Ira in the middle of Goddamn Indian Territory. Poor dumb bastards didn’t deserve to get dead. He hated having to walk. But most of all, he hated Adam Goddamned Kendall.

“I haven’t seen any sign of the horses.”

Bodine hated the fancy-ass easterner, too. He looked at the sun overhead, wondered how hot the day was going to get. He’d heard stories that starving people had feasted on other people when they got desperate.

He slid his glance over to Colin Baker and knew that would be a better fate than the prick deserved.

There wasn’t much good about the situation he was in at the moment. Except, of course, he wasn’t in prison anymore.

“Good thing we took the bedrolls and the canteens off the horses,” Baker said.

“How come you’re acting like this is a walk in the park?” Bodine wondered if the man had any idea just how dire the situation was.

Out in the middle of Indian Territory, where settlements were few and far between, not having a horse could very well result in death.

“Well, things have gotten about as bad as they can get,” the fool answered him. “I figure I’m due for some good luck. And, with the beating we gave that Ranger, if they’re moving at all, it’s not very fast, so they can’t be getting all that far ahead of us.”

Bodine wondered if the man hadn’t finally gone plum *loco*.

“Good luck, huh?”

“I’m counting on it.”

A few hours later, they came to a small pond with a few trees growing on one end of it. The remains of a campfire told Bodine this was likely where those bastards had camped the night he and his men had grabbed Kendall.

“They left firewood,” Baker said. He scanned the area, and Bodine wondered what he was looking for. It was afternoon, and in the time they’d been walking, sure as hell the others had been riding. They probably thought they’d gotten clean away.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt for them to be thinking that.

The only hope Bodine had was he was pretty certain he knew where they were headed. He just wasn’t certain why.

He didn’t think Baker realized Bodine had heard every word he’d said to Kendall. Though he’d never had much schooling, Bodine wasn’t as stupid as Baker seemed to think he was.

The woman the easterner was after sure as hell wasn’t his wife, but she had something—some journal—he was desperate to recover.

From what he’d gathered listening in, that journal wasn’t Baker’s personal property so it likely didn’t contain anything that could send the man to jail if discovered. It probably contained mention of an inheritance, likely told of where some stash of gold or gems had been hidden.

Bodine didn’t need all the details right away. He figured whatever it was this prick beside him was chasing after it was here in Indian Territory and not back in Richmond Virginia.

Bodine knew a few folks in Tahlequah. They’d be willing to help him track down Kendall out of outrage over the killing of Porter and Ira, sure, but also for a piece of whatever that treasure was.

The killing of Baker was a treat he’d keep all to himself.

“I don’t know how much farther I can walk today,” Baker said, and Bodine had to blink to get the sweet picture of the man, gutted like a rabbit, out of his mind.

“Well, there’s fire wood and water here. We got our bedrolls.” Bodine dropped the bundle he’d carried over his shoulder, thanks to Ira’s belt. He’d taken it off the man before he’d covered him in rocks. Didn’t think his friend would have need of it anymore. “We could call it a day. If you get the fire going, I’ll see about scaring up a rabbit.”

“Hell, I’d even eat another snake,” Baker said.

Bodine got lucky and caught a fat, juicy rabbit. Before long, the smell of roasting meat made his taste buds water. He only regretted they didn’t have coffee or beans to go with the meat. They’d lost what few supplies they had left when the horses got run off. But rabbit roasted on sticks and water from the pond filled the belly, and was a mite tastier meal than he had any night in prison.

Bodine went to sleep with his gun by his side and slept with half an eye open, just in case Baker had been entertaining thoughts of gutting *him*—except he didn’t think the little prick would ever get his hands dirty.

Breaking camp the next morning didn’t require a lot of work. Roll up his bed and start walking. Bodine’s feet and legs were still sore from the day before. He looked over at Baker, shaking his head when that man began to whistle.

If Baker didn’t stop being so cheerful, Bodine figured he might just kill the bastard for that alone.

Sometime later, when the sun crept half-way to noon in the sky, Bodine’s gaze wandered to the horizon ahead. His feet stopped of their own accord as his brain tried to make sense of what his eyes saw in the distance.

Baker had stopped as well and seemed equally confused about the sight coming toward them.

Bodine heard something then, and he listened hard because he wasn’t altogether certain he wasn’t having one of those strange mirage things he’d heard about. Glancing at Baker, he could see that the other man seemed to be hearing the same thing if the look of confusion on his face was anything to go by.

The vision, and the sound, came closer. He listened, and listened hard, and eventually the sound became words.

“I tell you, Emmaline, I am so *dang* disappointed after all the talk I done heard about the gold hiding out here on Indian land. I surely don’t know where else to look. We only got one stick of dine-o-mite left, so we got to be careful, real careful, where we toss that last one. And anyways, we got to find the fellers who lost these here horses first. ‘Taint right, if’n a body has a chance to do a good deed and doesn’t why, that’s just asking to be sent to you-know-where after ya die!”

A soft braying sound followed this statement.

Bodine turned to look at Baker.

“I told you we were due for some good luck,” Baker said.

Bodine just shook his head as the strange procession—a grizzled old man leading a burro and two horses—came closer.

At that moment, the old man must have seen them, because he stopped and turned to his burro.

“See that, Emmaline? I *told* you we was going in the right direction.” Then he raised his hand in greeting. “Hey, there! You fellers lose a couple of horses?”

* * * *

Amanda stretched her back, the soreness from days of riding sitting low and mean on her hips. She’d never really believed the male was the strongest of the species, leastways not the human species. The behavior she’d witnessed growing up in Richmond as her mother’s daughter had, in fact, convinced her that over all, men were soft creatures and not very bright to boot.

Guess none of them were real men.

She cast a glance over to Adam, who rode on her left. Just a couple of days ago, he’d been beat nearly senseless, could barely sit

on his horse. Now the only sign of that adventure was the slight scab on his lip and a bit of bruising around his eye.

The sun hung low in the sky, and the scent of a river teased her nostrils. She really hoped they were going to camp soon because she'd just about had it.

"Just up ahead," Adam said, proving once more he could practically read her mind.

"Good." She figured she didn't need to act tough. "I don't know why I'm so beat today."

Warren snorted. "During your days you're riding your horse, and at night—except for the last two—you've been riding us. Doesn't surprise me. Maybe we should just let you be tonight."

"That's a terrible idea," Amanda said.

Both men grinned equally devilish grins. "Just teasing, sweetheart," Warren said.

The land looked rockier here, with ridges and rises that seemed to go every which way. It simply amazed her that Adam knew where they were, that he could follow any kind of trail.

"Here, sweetheart, come look at this."

She hadn't noticed Adam pulling the map Chief Smith had given him out of his saddle bag. She nudged her horse—a mare she'd named Virginia just to make her lovers laugh—and moved over closer to Adam. Warren brought his horse around the other side of him, so they were like three points of a triangle.

We're so damn connected I don't know how we're going to separate.

The growing intimacy worried her. But this wasn't real life. This was an adventure, and nothing they'd done or said so far had convinced Amanda that this bond they'd formed was anything but temporary.

Once they got back to civilization, once these two men returned to their lives and their town, she knew there'd be no room for her. How could there be?

“Amanda?” A note of worry laced Adam’s voice.

She shook her head and brought her gaze back to the moment.
“Sorry.”

“Look,” he pointed to a spot on the map that looked like a crescent moon. When she then raised her gaze and looked ahead and to the left, her eyes widened.

“Oh, my goodness! It’s just like he drew it!”

“Yeah, I figure fate finally decided to lend us a hand in order for us to come out right here. I think we’re close. Let’s ride a bit farther over to that ridge and see if we can see the other ridge, the one that starts near the tip of that one and goes east. It’s looking like another hour, maybe. If we can’t see anything, we’ll double back to that river, make camp.”

Amanda’s weariness slid off her at the prospect of being so close to their goal.

They nudged their horses and began riding again, and when the trail narrowed and climbed upward, Adam took the lead, with Warren bringing up the rear. She thought perhaps that having lost their horses and ending up with these Indian ponies had been a blessing in disguise. Virginia didn’t seem to have any trouble whatsoever picking her way among the rocks, and not for one moment did Amanda feel as if she might end up on the ground.

The crescent-shaped ridge turned out to be longer than it had looked, but gradually, they came to the edge of it.

Adam stopped his horse and turned in his saddle, waiting for her and Warren to catch up. She didn’t need to look at the landscape. All she needed to see was the smile he wore. Her eyes took in the land, anyway.

Just ahead and to their right, a small flat mesa stretched out, a pretty piece of ground with some trees and a stream meandering down between this ridge they were on and the next. That larger, higher piece of rock ran east to west, and even from where she sat, she could

see what looked like a dark shadow in the rock, with a small scrub bush growing next to it.

“After all this, can it really be that easy?” She hadn’t meant to say the words out loud.

“Honey, if you think this has been easy, you’re tougher than I gave you credit for,” Adam said.

Amanda shook her head. “You know what I mean.”

Warren reached out and ran his hand down her back. “Yeah, we know.”

“Let’s go take a look. Even if it’s not the right cave, we ought to use it.” He looked up at the sky, at the dark clouds that gathered in the west and seemed headed their way.

Amanda followed his gaze and understood what he meant. They’d probably have rain during the night.

It took another half hour to work their way down from the ridge they were on to the flat little mesa. The river was a bit bigger than it looked, not too fast-running despite the rockiness of the land. Once the horses were tethered and unsaddled, Amanda looked at each of the men in turn.

“I want to see.”

Adam nodded. “Okay, let’s go see.”

The terrain was surprisingly smooth as they made the small trek to what they now could see was the mouth of a cave. Amanda wondered if this could really be it, the cave with the overhang where her father had hidden that Confederate gold all those years ago.

“Well, damn.” Amanda’s words echoed inside the rock cavern. The opening, while tall enough to enter, seemed shallow. They stood about five feet inside the opening. No overhang greeted them, just a wall of broken rock. To the right of the entrance, the cave seemed to open wider, as if a bubble had formed additional space.

No overhang. No bodies. No gold.

They walked the interior of the cave, seeing no sign that anyone, or any creature, had ever explored or even taken up residence here.

“Nothing.” She couldn’t help notice how barren that one word sounded.

Adam walked back to the entrance, his gaze on the rubble that formed one of the walls of the cave.

“Maybe,” he said quietly, “it fell.”

“What fell?” Amanda asked.

“The overhang.”

Amanda surveyed the rubble. “How the hell are we going to find out if it did?” she asked.

Warren came to stand beside them. “We could dig.”

“Tomorrow,” Adam said. “We’ll dig a little tomorrow. In the mean time, let’s set up camp. We’ll put the fire near the cave, but not in it.”

Amanda felt waves of disappointment washing over her. She didn’t know how they were going to manage to dig through that rubble. Sure, some of the rocks looked as if they could be lifted, but the others seemed too large to move.

“Come on, sweetheart. We’ll eat, play, and sleep. In the morning, we’ll dig. Maybe we’ll find it’ll be easier than we imagine.”

“Maybe.” She turned from the cave, her eyes on the river. “I don’t care how cold that water is. I’m getting naked and getting into it.”

“Yeah,” Adam said.

He smiled and looked at her in such a way she felt her disappointment ebb into the background.

“Let’s just gather our firewood first.”

That, Amanda thought, sounded like a plan with a promise.

Chapter 22

“How far behind them do you think we are now?” Baker asked.

Colin watched Bodine as he examined the abandoned camp site, or more specifically, the spot where their quarry had tied their horses for the night. There could be no mistaking the fact Bodine looked at him with fresh eyes.

You don't think I'm such a dandy now, do you?

All he'd had to do to change Bodine's attitude was to kill one crazy old prospector and steal his supplies. Since he'd procured coffee and beans as well, he figured he'd leave it to Bodine to look at horse shit and try to decide how fresh it was.

“I'd say less than a full day. Reckon this was last night's site.”

Colin nodded. “Good. It's just noon. You sure you know the way to this place they're headed?”

“Tahlequah? Yeah, been there a time or two. This trail seems like they're headed just west of the town.”

Colin had made a decision shortly after he'd killed the old man. Rifling the man's possessions, he'd discovered a compass and something that had filled him with instant desire—dynamite.

The old guy had been carrying a stick of dynamite as if it was nothing. Crazy old bastard likely would have blown himself to bits, anyway.

Bodine had shot the man's burro when the stupid jackass wouldn't stop its noise, standing there next to the old man's body. That act had earned Bodine some of Colin's trust, so he'd told Bodine just what it was they were chasing after.

Shame he wasn't going to let Bodine live to see any of the gold.

“Let’s keep moving, then,” Colin said. “We took enough jerky from that old bastard we don’t really need to stop and make camp. I’d rather catch up and move on them just before dawn.”

“Now that’s a plan I can get behind,” Bodine said.

Colin liked the man he’d become over the last few weeks. He felt tougher, as if living off the land had given him a new outlook, and a new set of skills. He’d been soft before he’d made the decision to head West.

He wasn’t soft any longer.

At his urging, Bodine picked up the pace, and they pushed their horses to make up the time that separated them from their quarry. They stopped once in the late afternoon to water the animals and drink from the stream. Bodine suggested making a quick fire, brewing some of the coffee they’d stolen from the prospector.

Because Colin wanted to ride as far as possible that day, he reasoned a quick meal now would carry them to nightfall, possibly beyond. It didn’t take long for Bodine to make that fire and that coffee.

He ate jerky and beans and drank black, strong coffee—a meal Colin would have turned his nose up at only months before—and felt himself well-fed, well-rested, and ready to finish this business.

He couldn’t fail, for right was on his side.

No one would doubt Amanda Dupree had worked some sort of guile to convince the aging and increasingly senile Gladstone to give her money and the journal. Who in his right mind would mention a whore or a bastard daughter in his will?

Colin nodded. He knew he was right, for the bequest to the woman had not been mentioned in Gladstone’s will at all, but had been arranged ahead of time, bestowed by a separate document, given over to that useless lawyer even before Gladstone had died.

“How much gold, exactly, you figure there’s there?”

Bodine's question brought Colin back to the present. He scanned the area, noted the rise in the land, the gradual change in scenery. Trees grew in small groups, farther apart than they had been.

"Likely tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth," Colin said.

"We'll have to get us a couple of wagons, then, once we kill those bastards and have that treasure all to ourselves."

"Huh." Colin pretended as if that was something he'd not thought about. "Yeah, you're right. Where would we get wagons?"

"In Tahlequah. There's a stagecoach trail you'd find, if you rode east for a time. Then it would be north into the town. Don't have any idea how far, really. Won't know till we find the gold."

"And you said it wasn't far from Tahlequah to St. Louis, Missouri?"

"No, it's some distance—near to three hundred miles. But there's a rail station that's not that far—take you either to St. Louis or points west, depending."

After all he'd endured, Colin felt confident that once he got to Tahlequah, he'd be able to hire the wagon and a guide. He'd have Bodine's horse, and two horses ought to be able to pull a wagon filled with gold.

He kept his smile to himself and fell silent, his eyes on the trail and the ever sinking sun.

They smelled the fire first. Dusk had fallen, and with it, their ability to make out the trail. But the smell of a campfire spurred them on. They followed the scent onto a ridge. Here, the night air felt chillier and the slight breeze stiffer than it had been all day.

Bodine had pointed out the clouds to the west, remarked that it might rain that night. Colin didn't care one bit about his comfort at this point. Nothing could stop him now, certainly not a little rain.

Bodine held his hand up. They were downwind from the whore and her guides, but Bodine kept his voice down anyway.

"This here ridge ends just yonder. Best if we go on foot, as I reckon we'll see them as soon as we reach the edge of it."

"Right." Colin dismounted, tied off his horse. He followed Bodine and approached the edge of the cliff. While Bodine got down on his belly, Colin stayed back, waiting.

"Yep, that's them. Don't see no reason they'd be camping in a cave, but there they be."

Cave. Some of the journal he'd read so many years ago came back to him then, and he knew why they were in the cave.

That's where the gold had been hidden.

"So, where are we, exactly? Are we in any danger of being found out here easily by passersby?"

"Not likely. Nothing out this way much but rocks and ridges. I'd say the town's due east, likely not even a full day's ride from here."

"Good, then," Colin said.

"Just trying to see what those bastards are up to. It looks like they're nekked." Bodine's words whispered, and Colin could see the man's attention was riveted on the people less than a quarter mile away.

Colin looked around him and spotted what he wanted on the ground not three feet away from him. Bodine remained lying on his belly, his attention focused on the scene below.

He's made it easy for me.

Colin picked up the rock and took the few steps necessary to bring him even with the outlaw.

Bodine must have sensed his presence, for he shook his head, but still didn't take his eyes off the others.

"What in the Sam Hill you figure they're all nekked for?"

Colin slammed the rock down on Bodine's head with all his strength.

Bodine died silently, blood and gray matter oozing from his head.

Colin dragged him away from the edge of the ridge, out of the way, and returned to take his place.

One down, three to go.

He'd wait, let them sleep. Wait until nearly daybreak to make his move. He smiled, knowing his goal was within reach. That whore and her friends were going to go out with a bang, and they wouldn't even know what happened till they faced each other in Hell.

Colin settled in to wait for the approach of dawn.

* * * *

Warren stretched out, supporting his weight on his elbows behind him, and watched his lovers. All three had chosen to leave their clothes off after their swim, giving themselves and their garments a chance to air out.

Night had fallen, and the fire cast a golden glow on Adam and Amanda and, he guessed, himself. He couldn't remember ever feeling so relaxed or so aroused.

"I'm not going to spend another moment tonight thinking about that gold," Amanda said.

They'd been discussing it, of course, and whether or not they'd be able to dig it out of the rubble—if indeed it was actually there.

"So what do you want to talk about instead?" Warren asked. Since his cock had stiffened and currently pointed at the clouds overhead, he thought the question almost rhetorical.

Amanda shot him a sly, teasing glance. Adam didn't disguise his gaze. Warren felt his cock react to both lovers' interest.

"How about we talk about what you would like to do about that loaded gun you're carrying there, Lawyer Jessop?" Amanda asked.

Warren felt his grin widen. "Funny you should ask that, Miss Dupree. As it happens, there's something I've wanted to do since the first time the three of us got together."

"Name it," Adam said.

Warren loved it when Adam's voice took on that dry, husky tone. It meant he'd been aroused to the point of near madness. Warren

could understand how he got into that condition. They'd not touched each other beyond the comforting these last two days. Both he and Amanda needed to make sure Adam's injuries healed first.

Now, as Warren read the signs of growing need on them both, he felt his heart trip and his belly tighten. There were so many ways to arouse his lovers without even touching them. Warren used one of those methods now, his smile slow, his words soft.

"I want my mouth on your balls while you fuck Amanda. I want to taste you both at the same time, drink you both at the same time."

The fire gave enough light Warren could see the effect his words had on them. Adam's cock bobbed, and Amanda's nipples tightened into sweet little buds.

"My God," Amanda breathed. He knew his words would arouse her. She loved having his mouth—or Adam's—on her cunny. Of course, she loved having their cocks inside her just as much.

They'd laid one of the blankets out by the fire. Warren got to his feet and went over to Amanda, offering her his hand. She gave it, and he pulled her up and into his arms.

He kissed her, his mouth ravenous on hers, his tongue sweeping and tasting every bit of her mouth. She wrapped her arms around him, bringing her body flush with his so that no air could get between them.

Adam came to them, pressed himself against her back, and with his hands, managed to stroke and arouse them both.

Warren released her and Adam turned her into his arms, fastened his mouth on hers. Warren moved, facing them both, so he could spread teasing kisses on their necks and tiny, tasting licks on their necks.

"It feels like it's been forever," Adam said.

"I know," Amanda responded.

Amanda fisted his cock, and stroked it.

"You didn't have to wait for me," Adam said. His lips left Amanda's and sought Warren's.

Warren kissed his lover, the taste of him carrying a slight flavor of their woman, their combined essence feeding the deepest of needs.

“Yes, we did,” he answered when he drew back. “Another time, perhaps not. But neither of us could enjoy what we have together when you were hurting.”

“I love you.”

Because he was watching, he caught the slight flinch on Amanda’s face when Adam said that. And as he watched, she pushed away whatever thought had just threatened her.

“I love you both,” she said. “No matter what, never doubt that.”

There would be issues, Warren thought fleetingly, once this adventure they were on was done. Nothing he could do about that now. All he could do, all Adam could do, was offer everything and pray it would be enough.

Adam scooped Amanda into his arms and brought her down to the blanket. Though they’d never discussed how Warren would take and give what he wanted, Adam pulled Amanda to her side, so they faced each other.

Warren reclined beside them, his head pointing in the opposite direction, and moved Amanda’s right leg so it draped Adam’s hip.

Reaching between his lovers, he caressed Adam’s cock, then moved it, putting it just where it needed to be. Then in one solid thrust Adam was inside her.

The scent of them together teased Warren’s appetite, fired his hunger. Placing soft kisses on Amanda’s bottom, using one hand to stroke Adam’s hip and ass, he maneuvered himself until he was flush against them, until he completed the circle the three of them had become together.

Soft kisses soon turned to lazy licks as Warren took in the flavor of Amanda, spiced with the scent of her juices as Adam fucked her in a slow, steady rhythm. Lost in them, needing more, he nuzzled her bottom, his tongue finding and seeking her tiny rosebud.

Amanda moaned and whimpered, and Warren pressed his hardened cock against her back, just below her neck, a gentle grind that sent shivers down his spine as his hot flesh slid against her soft skin.

Needing more, needing all, Warren bent forward and nuzzled them where they were joined. Their aroma intoxicated him. Humming his pleasure, he tasted them, using his tongue in broad, generous strokes to lap up every delicious drop of juice he could.

“Oh, God.” Adam’s oath touched Warren’s heart, his soul. Knowing he pleased both lovers, he opened his mouth, sucking their flesh, one arm thrown over them both, holding them both close for his intimate kisses.

A scream, sharp and feminine, rewarded him. Adam’s hips plundered, and then he held fast, and Warren drank their release, their flavor now one, and his forever. On and on, the spasms racked his lovers, and he held them, sipped them, reveled in their connection.

“Mother of God,” Adam said.

Harsh breathing filled the night as Warren slipped to his back, feeling sated and desperate for release at the same time.

He didn’t have to wait long. As if energized by the strength of their release, his lovers moved, touched and stroked and embraced him. Together, they used tongues and lips on him. Taking his cock into their mouths in turn, caressing and licking and then sucking his balls, Warren had no time to savor, to hold close the heady arousal they gave him.

His release exploded from him, an all-consuming white-hot fire of rapture that burned off all that had burdened him, all that had been dark and hurting within him.

Like a Phoenix. The thought slithered through his mind.

And then he was cocooned within the heat and the heart of his lovers, and he knew that somehow, he’d been made new and fresh and whole again.

Chapter 23

Adam came awake, every nerve ending in his body vibrating.

He blinked, took in the darkness that still blanketed them, a darkness that seemed just a little less intense than when they'd finally fallen asleep.

Without moving his body, he let his eyes scan their encampment. They lay together inside the mouth of the cave, having settled there after loving. The rain had held off, apparently, and the fire he'd banked just before rejoining his lovers still glowed in large embers.

Danger.

He listened, his senses sharp, but heard nothing. He could see nothing beyond the dull glow of the fire, for clouds had swallowed every hint of the moon and stars.

Adam couldn't explain the sensation of impending doom, but he didn't for one second question his instincts, or doubt them.

Quietly, he reached out, gently touching first Warren and then Amanda.

"Shh," he warned. He waited until their eyes had opened, until they'd blinked away the sleep and met his gaze.

"Not a sound. Just move, slowly. Don't stand, just roll toward the interior of the cave."

Though he could see curiosity, even a touch of worry in his lovers' eyes, they each nodded. Warren moved first, for they'd fallen asleep, as they often did, with Amanda cocooned between them.

Once Warren rolled past the cave opening, he stood. Because they'd been concerned there might be rain in the night, they'd each

donned a little of their clothing. Warren stood in his drawers, and by the look of him, every sense he possessed had gone on alert.

Amanda moved next, not even making a sound when some of the small rocks that littered the cave floor dug into her barely-covered flesh. In short order, she joined Warren, and Adam smiled when Warren wrapped his arms around her from behind, replacing the warmth she'd just lost moving away from their bed. Her chemise covered her, but only came to just below her knees. He thought he could see her shivering and regretted the necessity that had forced her from the warmth of sleep.

Adam took his time. He'd slept in his trousers, with his Colt within easy reach. He took a moment to move the gun first, his motions slow, precise, so that he could roll to it. Working his way toward the others slowly, tucking the blankets into elongated heaps as he went, he prepared to join his lovers. Before rolling the last little bit, he made a quick check. They left their boots just inside the entrance to the cave, and he thought they might be able to grab them without alerting whoever was out there and coming toward them.

If they had to run, they'd best have something on their feet.

There was no doubt in Adam's mind that someone was out there, a threat, and was approaching.

Amanda moved silently, putting her back to the cavern wall and inching forward until she could stretch out one slender hand and reach their footwear.

By the time Adam joined his lovers, she'd returned to Warren and had put on her own boots.

Adam nodded to let her know he appreciated her quick thinking. Once he had his boots on, he motioned them farther back into the cave. He put his finger to his lips and he saw by their expressions they understood.

Any talking, even whispers, could be amplified by the rock surrounding them and maybe alert their enemies.

They waited, still and silent. Adam strained to listen, and once or twice he thought he might have heard something.

Careful, cautious, he copied Amanda's earlier movement and pressed himself against the wall, easing forward.

Breathing slowly, he prepared to inch that last little bit forward to risk a look outside, hoping to get an idea about what had set his senses screaming.

He found a notch in the rock and peered out.

At first he didn't see anything. But then, slowly, a single shape seemed to form out of the faint, thinning darkness.

The man walked slowly, with purpose, toward their fire. At the edge of it he stopped, held something out and down to the embers, then looked up.

The expression in Baker's eyes screamed madness, and Adam focused on what he had in his hand.

Realization hit, and Adam silently swore. Baker's head wasn't turned toward him, but toward the bedrolls.

Adam quickly tucked his Colt into the waist band of his pants. He only had one chance to get it right.

Launching himself at a dead run, he tackled Baker, knocking the now sizzling stick of dynamite out of his hand. They hit the ground hard, and Adam swung his right arm, hand fisted, aiming for the man's face.

Baker growled and came up from the ground, throwing Adam off as he scrambled and reached toward the dynamite.

Adam saw the wick still burned slowly, the sputtering fire inching toward the explosive. He kicked out, hard and fast, kicking the man in his thigh.

Baker stumbled and recovered, then shot his left hand out, a short, fast jab that caught Adam on the side of the head.

"I killed Gladstone and I'm going to kill you and his bastard!" Baker spat as he jumped on Adam, straddled him, and wrapped his hands around his neck.

Adam brought his hands up and grabbed Baker's wrists. He pulled hard, putting every bit of strength he had into prying his attacker's hands off his throat.

Baker lifted his hips from Adam for just a second and Adam brought his knee up, hard.

"Bastard!" Baker hissed in pain, but barely took a moment before raising his right fist and bringing it down toward Adam's head.

Adam jerked to the side, and Baker's fist hit rocky ground. While Baker shook his hand, Adam heaved his hips and legs off the ground, caught Baker between his legs, and then wrapped his legs around the man, squeezing as hard as he could.

The sizzle and crackle of the burning wick sounded closer as Adam wrestled in the dirt, scrabbling for the advantage.

"Warren! Dynamite!" Adam gave in and yelled for help. He hoped to God Bodine wasn't waiting beyond the fire's light, ready to kill his lover.

"Jesus!" Warren cursed.

Baker screamed with rage, pulled back his fist and let it fly, this time catching Adam beside his nose in a punch so hard Adam saw stars.

"No!" Baker pushed himself up, spun and reached for his gun.

Adam shook his head, catching the tableau unfolding in a heartbeat. Warren stood on the other side of the fire, trying to tug the wick from the dynamite. Baker faced him, raising his arm, gun drawn. The sound of the weapon being cocked sounded like a crack of thunder.

Adam rolled, caught Baker behind the knees, pitching him forward. The gun fired and the shot went wide, the ping of a ricochet echoing as Baker shouted a curse and fell forward into the still burning embers.

Screaming, ablaze, Baker rolled clear of the embers, and raised his gun toward Adam.

Adam stared down the barrel of death and jerked when the gunshot exploded. He blinked, his mind slow to register that half of Baker's head was gone.

Turning his gaze, he saw Warren, arm extended and gun still aimed at the dead man.

Adam collapsed back on the ground and tried to catch his breath. Warren came and squatted next to him.

"You all right?" Warren asked.

"Yeah. Fucking lunatic."

Warren chuckled. "I take it you mean the man I just killed?"

"Yeah. Amanda?"

"Safe. You think Bodine's out there?" Warren asked.

"Hasn't fired at us," Adam said. "But we should check it out."

"Yeah."

Warren stood and offered a hand to Adam, who took it. He let his lover pull him up and tried not to groan with pain as he moved.

"You're going to have another shiner, I bet," Warren said.

His lover had moved them both a little away from what was left of the fire. Baker had pretty much smothered it out when he'd fallen into it.

Since they were close to them, he moved over to ensure their horses were uninjured. Fortunately, Baker hadn't repeated Amanda's action of setting the animals free. They quivered, obviously disturbed by the fight and gunshots, but they were unhurt and calmed once Adam came near them.

"He's likely up on that ridge, there." Warren pointed to the same ridge they'd first seen the cave from, its hulky shape just visible in now.

"Likely." He turned to Amanda. "Stay here, sweetheart. Warren and I will check it out."

He smiled when mutiny crossed her face, then vanished. Warren had stepped over to where they'd stored their gear, just on the other

side of the animals and pulled on his pants. Adam reached for their rifles.

"Here," he said, handing Amanda her rifle. "Shoot first and ask questions later."

"Don't worry about me," she said as she levered a round into the chamber and Adam knew she'd be fine. He glanced at Warren, who'd grabbed his own rifle. When he nodded, they set off, on foot, keeping to the shadows but making their way steadily toward the nearby ridge.

They moved quietly, and Adam's every sense searched the lessening dark of pre-dawn. As they drew closer to the ridge, he heard the sound of two horses snuffing.

With Warren behind him, he moved forward, upward, until they'd gained the top of the rock, until they stood once more on level ground.

Streaks of pinky blue painted the eastern sky, and Adam realized that while he and Warren had been climbing, the sun had neared daybreak just enough to allow them to see the ground around them.

The horses had been tethered, still saddled, and stood silently under a tree. They nibbled grass, unconcerned about the approach of men.

They saw him at the same time, Warren's touch alerting him to that fact. Adam approached, his gun drawn, ready.

The figure on the ground lay unnaturally still. Adam sank to one knee beside him, searched for a pulse.

"Dead," Adam said.

"I figured," Warren replied.

Adam got to his feet, looked at the animals. "Might as well ride back to camp," Adam said. "As soon as we pile some rocks over Bodine here."

Half an hour later, under the dawn's burgeoning sun, Adam and Warren rode back down the ridge, the horses' gaits steady as they approached the camp.

Amanda sat on the ground with her back resting against the rock. She hadn't tried to get the fire going, and he couldn't blame her for that.

Colin Baker's body lay exposed and mutilated right beside their fire pit.

Despite that, as he drew close to Amanda, he felt himself returning his woman's very wide smile. "Well, what's put you in such a cheery mood?" he asked.

"Don't you think the fact that we're all alive and unhurt, and the bad guys are dead is reason enough to smile?"

"You're right. Those are pretty good reasons to smile," Adam said.

"Adam?" Amanda's voice sounded tired to him.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Could we maybe move the fire ring over this way a bit?"

"Warren and I will get right on that. Just let us clean up the mess we made, first.

* * * *

It took the men a couple of hours to clean up that mess. Amanda figured some folks might think her a coward, but she didn't care. She was all for doing her share, but she didn't figure her share included burying a man with half of his head shot off.

When they returned, they both looked grim.

"We found another couple caves," Warren said as he set about making a new fire.

"A couple more caves?"

"Yeah," Adam said. "Three more, to be precise, and they all appear similar to this one."

"But I thought that map drawing Chief Smith gave us showed that ridge over there and *this* cave."

“So did I,” Adam said. “But if you take this cave we’re at as being the ridge, then it could be any one of the caves on the other side of this rock.”

“Well, hell.”

Warren sat back on his haunches as the fire began to burn. “We’ll have coffee first, let the sun finish coming all the way up and take the chill off, and then we’ll go exploring.”

“I’m going to go freshen up by the stream and get dressed properly,” Amanda got to her feet and stretched.

“You want company?”

Adam’s smile promised delights, but Amanda shook her head. “No, thanks, Adam. I just need a few minutes.”

She caught the way he’d sent a glance to Warren, but couldn’t get herself overly worked up about it. *Three more caves. Maybe the gold just isn’t there anymore.* It was hard not to feel discouraged. She supposed she’d had it in her head that they would just go to the right cave, find the gold, and that would be that.

Why would I think it was going to be easy when absolutely nothing in my life has been so far? She really should have known better.

As she waded into the river and scooped water over herself, her gaze rested on the two men she’d fallen in love with. Once this adventure of theirs was over, of course, she’d have to say good-bye to them. There really was no place for her here in this wild and untamed country.

The thought of leaving them hurt her heart, but she couldn’t see any way around it.

Adam reached out and ran his hand down Warren’s back. That simple gesture of caring and love made her smile. At least when she was back in Richmond, they’d still have each other. That was some consolation, at least.

Less than an hour later Amanda felt her spirits drop as they set out to explore the other caves. As soon as they rounded the edge of the

hill the first cave had been in, she saw two caves, laid out as if in a row, with a fall of rock between them.

“The other is just around to the other side. We tried to get a good look earlier, but decided we’d all explore together,” Adam said.

“I suppose if you climbed atop the small mountain that first cave is in, this might resemble the drawing Chief Smith gave us,” Amanda said.

“Sometimes the memory fades a bit as we age.” Warren stopped for a moment and adjusted his hat. “Likely the chief drew us the best map he could.”

“Not only that, it’s been more than a few years since he was here. There can be small earth tremors which can cause some of the rock formations to shift,” Adam said.

“I guess we won’t know until we look,” Amanda said.

The first cave had a yawning entrance, wide but not very tall, with no shrub or other rocks blocking the way. Adam and Warren had both drawn their revolvers. She didn’t have to wonder why when she heard a rattle coming from inside the cave.

“Stay close,” Adam said. “There’s no telling how many snakes might be in here.”

Amanda shivered. She hated snakes and, as it turned out, there were several inside the cave. Though the interior seemed a good size, there were no ells or small tunnels leading to larger caverns. Neither was there an overhang, or sign there had ever been one.

The second cave’s entrance had brush and a small tree partially blocking the entrance, which appeared taller than the last, but not as wide. This cave seemed promising, because there was one tunnel inside it. They waited for their eyes to adjust to the dim light, and set off to see how far the tunnel went.

“If it’s too far, we’ll backtrack and make ourselves some torches,” Adam said.

Amanda thought that was a good idea. But the tunnel ended before they'd gone barely twenty feet. As far as they could tell, there'd been no cave-in to block the way. The tunnel just ended.

Backtracking, they soon decided this cave was not the one.

"Let's try the third, then."

Amanda counted it luck they didn't see any other large caves as they neared this last one. It didn't take them long to decide this one wasn't a good candidate to hide a treasure in gold. At first, Amanda thought this one might be the one, because standing before the entrance on a piece of level ground, she thought her surroundings looked a lot like the first cave—the one that in her mind she thought of as *their* cave. But it didn't take long to know this wasn't the one. The opening was tall, and wide, but the interior of the cave wasn't very deep.

"Does it even qualify as a cave?" Amanda asked. Standing at the mouth of the formation, she could nearly reach out and touch the back wall.

"Technically. It doesn't look like a cave-in has made it smaller, either," Adam said.

"So we go back to our cave and start digging," Warren said.

"Looks like we do," Adam agreed.

"I hardly know where to start," Amanda said a little while later as she eyed the large pile of rubble before her.

"There're quite a few smaller pieces. We'll just pick a place and start with them. Let's form a line. I'll grab a rock, pass it to you, you pass it to Warren, and we'll see what we can find." Adam said.

Amanda didn't mind getting her hands dirty, and she didn't mind hard work. She stood between Adam and Warren, and they soon developed a rhythm.

"You've never said a word about what you'll do with your half of the gold, sweetheart," Warren said.

Amanda spared him a quick glance. "I really haven't given it much thought, to tell you the truth," Amanda said. "I tend not to count my chickens before they're hatched."

"That's probably wise," Adam said. "But you must have some idea what you want to do with it. Half that treasure is going to make you a very wealthy woman."

Amanda did have a few ideas, because it was hard not to dream a little when she thought about the possibility of that much money. "There are still a couple of old plantation homes outside of Richmond that are vacant. I thought I'd buy one for Momma and me. Then she could live the life of a real demimonde, the way some women who are courtesans do in England and France. I think she'd like having a big house away from the city proper. What about you?"

She looked up because Adam hadn't passed her another rock.

"You're going back to Richmond?" Adam looked surprised.

"Why wouldn't I? Richmond is my home."

"Why wouldn't you?" Warren asked. "How about because we're here, and we love you?"

Amanda had hoped to put off this conversation until they'd returned to her cousin's house.

She looked from Adam, to Warren, hoping they would see her sincerity. "I love you both too. I told you I had no idea where this was going or what to do about it. But I do know we don't have a future, really. You can see that, can't you?"

"Hell, no." Adam hurled the rock he'd been holding back into the pile. When he put his hands on her shoulders, when he gave her a small shake, she didn't even blink. She felt his frustration but didn't feel afraid of him. "We can have a future. If you want one."

"There's no place for me here. What would I do?" Amanda couldn't stay calm. How could they not know she'd give anything to be able to think of a way to make their relationship work? "I'm the daughter of a courtesan. At least in Richmond I have a business with a

clientele that counts on my being who I am, and my discretion. What do I have here?"

"You have us," Warren said.

"We're not finished discussing this," Adam said.

"Adam, look." Warren's tone sounded strange.

"You think we should just let her walk away from this? From us?"

Amanda felt the heat of both men, they stood so close to her. She felt the power of their love and the passion of their conviction. She turned her gaze to Warren, but he wasn't looking at either of them.

He was looking at the pile of rocks they'd been picking from. Drawn by the expression on his face, she looked there, too.

"Son of a bitch," Adam said.

Stepping closer to the pile he bent down and picked up what had snagged Warren's attention, rubbing it with his thumb, and holding it in the daylight streaming through the mouth of the cave so they both could see it.

The ten dollar gold coin glimmered softly in the sun.

Chapter 24

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Amanda asked.

Adam saw the look of anxiety on her face. He followed her gaze to the stick of dynamite with its restored and very short wick.

“Of course it will work,” he assured her. “I’m a Ranger. I know these things.”

“You use dynamite in the course of your duties as a Texas Ranger?” Amanda asked.

“Adam, I don’t think she believes you,” Warren said.

Adam turned to look at his other lover. He narrowed his eyes at him because Warren had voiced his opinion around a chuckle.

He supposed he should know better than to try and fool Amanda. The woman had a very vital, very intelligent mind—except, of course, when she was spouting bullshit about there being no place for her with them.

“Look, we can’t just light a fire under the dynamite by itself. You need the wick in order to ignite it. We’ve shoved it back in, and the only way to light such a short wick safely is this way.”

They’d decided not to dig any more. There weren’t that many small rocks left. The rest were boulders that would tax them sorely to move them. Even using their ropes and the horses, it would be a challenge to move enough of them without taking days to do it.

They had this stick of dynamite, so why not use it?

He’d shoved it in a crevasse between two large boulders. Then they’d built a pile of kindling, made up of twigs and dry grass, in a mound atop another rock and under the explosive.

Since their campfire still burned, they had a source of fire.

Adam looked over to where they'd moved the horses and the rest of their gear. He held a stick around which he'd wrapped a strip torn from Amanda's chemise.

"Warren, take Amanda over by the horses. I'll light this bastard, and then we'll see what's what."

"You be careful, Adam Kendall," Amanda said. She grabbed his head, and pulled him down into a hard, but delectable kiss.

"What she said," Warren said, then leaned in and kissed him too.

"Don't worry. I've got an argument to win." He let his gaze meet Amanda's. When she turned and walked away with Warren, he had the satisfaction of knowing, from the look on her face, that she knew he meant it.

He waited until his lovers were safely away. Then he stuck his improvised torch into the fire.

It caught quickly, and he moved with purpose into the cave, to where the dynamite was lodged.

Inhaling deeply, he stretched his arm out, and touched the torch to the pile of kindling.

He didn't expect the whoosh of the dry brush catching so quickly. His eyes widened as he realized the entire pile had caught almost instantly into a fierce and tall blaze.

He turned and ran like hell.

He was just out of the cave when the dynamite exploded, the noise terrific, the force from the blast pushing him forward and then to the ground.

"Adam!"

Amanda's scream warmed his heart even as he hoped like hell Warren had a hold of her.

"I'm all right!" He called to them, despite that he felt a few more areas of his body smarting. It would likely take him a couple of months for all the insults and injuries he'd suffered on this adventure to heal.

The cloud of dust that came out of the cave began to dissipate. His lovers joined him and they waited together for the last of the dust to settle.

Together they walked to the entrance of the cave and took a few cautious steps inside. A hole had been blown where the dynamite had been wedged, a good sized hole they'd have no trouble fitting through. Beyond the newly gaping maw, the view appeared shadowy and dark. Warren turned and retrieved the makeshift torch Adam had used to light the fuse. There wasn't much of Amanda's chemise left on it, but the thing had gone out when it had hit the ground. Warren re-lit it and brought it forward, inserting it through the hole to light the interior.

In one corner, along the wall, laid out in a row, were the remains of the soldiers who'd accompanied Amanda's father on his final duty as a Confederate officer. And there, just on the other side of the makeshift grave, stacked against a wall in neat piles, bars of gold bullion reflected back the light of the small torch.

"Well now, Miss Dupree," Adam said. "I do believe we've found your legacy."

"Our legacy," Amanda said. "We agreed to split it, half for the two of you, half for me." She frowned and looked up at Adam. "But how in the heck are we going to get it back to Texas?"

Adam smiled. "Don't worry. I have a plan."

* * * *

Amanda ached in places she'd never ached before.

"I had no idea gold would be so heavy," she said. Sprawled by the fire, dinner a memory, Amanda watched the flames as she sipped the coffee Warren had made.

Adam was shaking out their bedrolls, just in case some of the stone dust from the explosion earlier had gotten caught in the fibers. He put them together upwind of the fire.

Warren had taken the coffee pot off the fire and replaced it with the cooking pot.

"I'm heating some water," he said when she met his gaze.

"Why?"

"So we can take care of you," Adam said. He came over to her and slipped his arms around her, lifting her to her feet.

Warren relieved her of the coffee cup, and Adam bent down and laid his lips on hers. She tasted only passion in his kiss. Whatever anger he'd felt earlier seemed to have evaporated.

Amanda didn't kid herself into thinking he'd let the matter of their futures drop. His kiss seduced her and she gave in to it, and to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaned into him and used her tongue to taste him, drink him into her so that he'd become a part of her.

"I love you," he whispered, and placed tiny little butterfly kisses on her cheeks, eyes and chin.

He stepped back just a little. Warren stepped up behind her, and the heat of his body seeped into her. The men undressed her until she stood naked. They took turns bathing her, using another piece of her sacrificed chemise.

Adam lifted her, laid her on the pallet he'd made. They washed her feet, and she didn't think she'd ever been quite so cared for in her entire life.

"Now roll over, baby, and I'll show you what Peter's mother taught me about making those sore muscles relax," Adam said.

Warren gave her one of his shirts that he'd folded to use as a pillow. Stretched out, she groaned the moment Adam put his hands on her shoulders and began to work the muscles. Then she felt another pair of hands, and groaned again as Warren set to work on her legs.

"How does that feel?" Adam asked.

"Oh, God. Don't stop." Amanda didn't care that her words came out sounding weak and pathetic. The way they massaged her felt so good.

“Just relax and let us take care of you. Go ahead and drift off if you want.”

Their touch, their tenderness and their passion heated her, so that arousal became a gentle humming in her blood. “Mmm. But I want you. I want you both.” Even though she felt too relaxed to do anything about it at the moment, that much was true and it seemed vitally important, right then, that they know it.

“Don’t worry,” Warren said. “You’ll have us. After we ease the soreness.”

“Good.” Amanda wasn’t sure if she’d said that loud enough for them to hear. She felt herself nearing sleep, and as her muscles continued to relax, as the pain eased, she fell a little deeper into the land of slumber.

Sounds tapered, so that she no longer heard the crackle of the fire or the music of insects. She became aware that no one was touching her. And then the heat returned, and she knew her lovers had joined her, on either side of her. She was safe and warm.

The touch of male hands resumed, this time their caress more gentle, arousing. Eased onto her side, she recognized the presence of hard cocks, and the scent of hot male.

“Yes,” she said that, softly, as she felt them press closer, press in. Adam’s cock filled her pussy, a hard, firm possession that thrilled and drew her from sleep. He pulled her closer to him and she breathed him in as her face nestled against his chest.

Warren spread her ass cheeks. She felt the warm moist bathing of his tongue on her anus, and then pushed his erect cock against her, pushing until the ring of muscle gave way.

“Oh, God, yes. Yes, fuck me.”

“One flesh,” Adam said. “We are one flesh, Amanda Dupree. You belong to us just as we belong to you.”

Amanda wouldn’t argue. She only wanted to take and to give. To love them here and now, while she had them. Later would be time

enough to try and get these two amazing men to see the truth, to see reality from her point of view.

Dropping those thoughts, Amanda let her lovers take her, as the friction of flesh, the thrust of hips and the sweet climb to rapture consumed her soul completely.

* * * *

“Hey, sleepy head. Want coffee?”

Warren’s voice awakened her. Amanda groaned as she stretched. Blinking, she sat up to see the sun shining brightly, high in the sky. They’d covered her with a blanket last night but it lay pooled at her waist now. Warren crouched by the fire, with Adam nowhere in sight.

“He left already?”

“He was anxious to get to town so he could get back, so he left just before dawn. If all goes well, we can begin to make our way back to Denison tomorrow morning.”

“I hope they have what we need in Tahlequah,” Amanda said.

“Likely. It’s a pretty big city,” Warren said. “Adam’s been there before. Since Chief Smith knew what we were doing here, I wouldn’t be at all surprised to discover arrangements have already been made.”

“The bank in Denison will take the deposit for us?”

Warren nodded. “Absolutely. I’d been half afraid the ingots would have been stamped with some sort of ownership number or name. But as they’re not, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Amanda yawned, got to her feet and stretched. When she noticed Warren’s attention fixed on her naked body, she smiled. “Ownership name, like, United States of America?”

Warren shook his head then gave her a smile that told her he was aware she’d just blatantly teased him. “Yes, or in this case, Confederate States of America.”

“But they have no markings at all.” Amanda said.

“Exactly. So, finders keepers.” Warren said.

Amanda pulled on her remaining chemise. She planned to dress again in her shirt and pants, but she wanted to have a soak in the river first. Well, she wanted that soak second. First she wanted some coffee.

Warren handed her a cup. Then he took up the bedding, gave it a shake, and folded it roughly to go over their two saddles that he'd moved close to the fire.

Amanda thought he'd made a pretty good makeshift bench.

"We never told you what we wanted to do with our half of the gold," Warren said.

"No, you didn't," Amanda agreed.

"We've wanted some land of our own for awhile now," Warren said. "After Maddox died, and Caleb, Josh and Sara settled down in that big house far from town, Adam and I began to think about buying a parcel close to them, further away from Waco."

"I remember you and Sarah talking about that at dinner," Amanda said. She couldn't help but grin. "Sarah was pretty peeved you wouldn't let her just give you the land."

"She's a warm and generous woman. Loyal to her friends."

"I haven't known her long, but I got that. And I like her, a lot."

"I'd figured I'd buy another building in town, one with an office for me, and a bit of space in back for a couple of bunks. So some nights I'd stay in town, and then other's I'd go home."

"If it's a law office, you could buy a house, couldn't you? Just off the main thoroughfare? Then you'd have a more convenient place to stay."

"Perhaps. With Adam resigning from the Rangers, he'd be busy most days running the ranch. I can even see myself putting away my law career in favor of learning how to ranch. Then I wouldn't have to travel that much at all."

"And outside of town, close to friends, you'd be able to live as you choose," Amanda said.

“Which would be true,” Warren said as he got to his feet, “of three people just as easily as two. I’m going to set things to rights here, sweetheart. Why don’t you go have that swim I know you want?”

Amanda felt small and mean, and that fact just made her even more depressed. She wasn’t trying to be difficult, and certainly didn’t want to hurt the two men she’d come to love.

If they had a place far from town and close to friends, then yes, they could live as they chose.

But would it last? And what would she do with herself all day? She needed more in life than keeping house and baking bread. She had a career, and that career made her feel free in a way she didn’t want to live without.

For the rest of the morning her thoughts circled round and round this dilemma. Warren seemed to understand her mood, for he gave her space, and not unkindly, either.

Just as she was getting sick of her own thoughts for company, a sound intruded on the stillness of the day. Squeaky, rhythmic, it seemed to be coming from atop the ridge behind them.

Warren already held his rifle when she reached for hers. Together they stood, not completely certain what was coming toward them.

They both sighed with relief when a wagon came into view, with Adam in the driver’s seat.

* * * *

Amanda sighed as she sank back into the wooden tub filled with steaming-hot water. Her eyes closed as she let her mind drift in purest pleasure.

“You look like you’re in heaven,” Warren said.

He sat on the bed, still fully dressed. She knew he was waiting for Adam, waiting until he was here and the door locked before shedding his clothes.

They were all a little more cautious when they were amongst civilization—even a civilization as rough and tumble as the one in Denison, Texas.

“Do you think the bank owner has gotten over his shock yet?” Amanda asked.

“Not likely. I do hope he’s made arrangements to transfer some of the money to the bank in Waco, though. Shouldn’t be a problem as both are owned by the same outfit.”

“Yes, I imagine it’ll be a good idea for you both to have your money close at hand.”

The sound of a key in the lock brought Amanda’s attention back to the present. The door opened then closed. Footsteps, and then, “You look very relaxed in that bath, sweetheart.”

“I am.” She opened her eyes just long enough to meet Adam’s gaze, then closed them again, listening to the sounds of movement. A kiss. Her smile spread.

“You could have started without me. I would have just joined in the moment I returned,” Adam said.

“I thought I’d let Amanda enjoy her soak first,” Warren said.

“So what did the sheriff say?” Amanda asked, keeping her eyes closed.

“Basically, he took my statement about Bodine and Baker, and is going to send a telegram to the appropriate authorities in the territory to notify them. As for the gold, he says since there’re no markings on it, and since the War Department in Washington long ago claimed the lost Confederate gold was stolen at the end of the war and then distributed in the Confederate states, it certainly can’t be that. Basically, Red Hill said it’s our gold. Oh, and he said congratulations, too.”

“Good.” Amanda felt her smile widen.

“I also got us train tickets to Waco, leaving early the day after tomorrow.”

When she heard nothing more, she opened her eyes and encountered two very unabashed male gazes.

“What are y’all staring at?”

“You,” Adam said. “Just you. Wet. Naked. Beautiful.”

Amanda felt her cheeks heat. Considering all they’d shared these last few months, it amazed her she could still blush at all.

“Must be the red hair,” Warren said to Adam, “that makes her blush so easily.”

“If you were gentlemen, you’d remove your clothes so I wouldn’t feel so...naked and on display.”

Adam turned his head to look at Warren. “I never told her I was a gentleman. What about you?”

“Nope,” Warren said. “I never made such a claim, either.”

“Careful, sweetheart,” Adam said when he saw her raise her hand in the water. “If you toss water our way, you’ll get your side of the bed wet.”

“That’s not my side of the bed. I sleep in the middle.”

“Unless you throw water on this side of the bed,” Warren agreed.

“I’ve made dinner reservations for us, too,” Adam said, “down the street at Bobby’s, where we ate before. I was thinking we’d have a good dinner, then come back here and engage in some very naked fun.”

“Then I guess I’d better carry on with my bath,” Amanda said.

“We’ll just watch,” Warren agreed.

Amanda didn’t doubt their gazes were riveted on her and that they took in every movement, every stroke of the cloth as she bathed herself. But she wondered if they realized the significance of their poses. They sat close together, two long-time lovers, connected so completely she knew they’d be lovers for life. They’d been together, a couple, before they’d met her, and they’d likely remain one once she returned home. They belonged together, and they belonged in Texas.

Amanda loved them more than she’d ever believed herself capable of loving.

There will never be anyone else for me.

She knew that to be true, even as she knew one more truth.

Sometimes love just wasn't enough. She'd thought and thought, but no matter how she looked at things, there was no place for her here, in Texas, with them.

Chapter 25

Adam had thought they'd all three wolf down their dinners, considering this was the first decent meal they'd had in weeks.

Instead, each of them seemed content to savor every bite.

It hadn't taken them long to decide on their meals. He and Amanda had ordered steak, Warren the roast beef.

Warren had also chosen a bottle of wine, and although Adam didn't know wines at all, this one tasted good.

Silence seemed to reign this night, and he realized the lack of chatter said more than a thousand words ever could have.

Adam's gaze slid to Amanda, and he smiled at the look of contentment on her face as she slowly chewed her steak. She took a sip from her wine glass, letting her gaze meet his, only for a moment, as she did.

We're losing her.

Just as he'd known those few short weeks before they'd been in imminent danger, so he knew this night that they were losing her. He didn't know what more either he or Warren could do to convince her to stay with them.

She'd insisted on sitting on the opposite side of the table from them tonight as if she was already trying to separate herself from them. As if she could really do that simply by choosing where to sit at a dinner table.

We'll just see about that.

The table next to them sat vacant, affording them a modicum of privacy. Adam picked up his own wine glass, took a sip, and made sure Amanda read the look of heat he knew she could see in his eyes.

He planned, very soon, to strip her naked and have his lusty way with her, over and over and over again.

“Did I tell you that gown looks lovely? The green turns your eyes to emerald fire.” He saw his compliment unnerved her a little, and he wondered if perhaps they should have wooed her more than they had.

“Ah...thank you,” Amanda blushed.

“It’s going to be even lovelier when it’s in a heap on the floor and we have you naked and writhing between us,” Warren’s quiet declaration made Amanda reach for her glass of wine again.

There. That polite expression she’d been trying to wear vanished with Warren’s words, and her fiery eyes shimmered a deeper green.

Adam wasn’t surprised Warren understood their woman and had come to the same conclusion as he. The man’s empathic sense was astounding.

“I won’t be the only one writhing,” Amanda whispered.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Adam agreed. He gave Warren a sideways glance. “I think I can guarantee we’ll all do our share of writhing.”

Amanda shook her head and turned her attention back to her meal. Adam smiled because she began to eat just a little faster.

As he continued to enjoy his own dinner, he let his thoughts relive the last three months, from the moment he turned on the train platform in Waco and met Amanda’s gaze for the first time, to now.

They had her body and her heart, he realized. Somehow, they’d failed to reach her mind. He didn’t know how to show her the three of them *could* have a life together. He knew they could because he’d watched the Benedicts—a family of one woman with two men—make their place and begin their life journey together.

Thoughts of the Benedicts reminded him of something. “I imagine Sarah would have given birth by now, don’t you think? There’ll be a brand new cousin for you to meet day after tomorrow when we get home.”

Amanda's smile widened. "My God, you're right!" Her smile gentled. "I hope it went well for her. Sometimes first babies can be difficult, or so I've been told."

"I'm sure everything's fine," Warren said. "Maybe tomorrow we can pick up a little gift for them, for the new mother and the baby."

"I think Sarah would like that," Amanda said.

Adam wanted to get back to the hotel. It took everything in him not to rush them all along. The sun had set, but this night felt warmer than the last ones they'd spent on the trail.

"What about the horses?" Amanda asked.

The non sequitur confused Adam. "The horses?"

"Yes, your horses and the one I borrowed from Sarah. If we're going by train, what do we do about them?"

Adam felt his face color. It didn't help that Warren turned away because he couldn't contain his own laughter.

"Well, they get to ride the train, too, sweetheart. In one of the freight cars."

As she processed that bit of information her expression went from confused to nonplussed in three seconds flat.

"You mean to tell me," she said, stepping close and lowering her voice, "that we could have taken the train from Waco to Denison in the first place?"

"Well, yes, of course we *could* have. But think of all the fun we'd have missed."

Her expression softened. "You're right. I don't think I would trade the time we had together for anything."

"And there's more to come," Warren said. He ran his hand down her back. "Come on, sweetheart, let's go to bed."

* * * *

They simply overwhelmed her.

Using soft sighing kisses and long, silken touches, their hands and lips worshiped her. There could be no other word to describe the reverence, the gentleness, and the passion the men lavished on her. Amanda let herself go, tasting one's lips and then the other's. She shivered from the sensations they created in her. Her men knew how to touch her now, how to caress and tease so that her arousal climbed. On this night it was like a lazy winding river of pleasure that seduced her completely.

They gave her no time to think, no time to react. One step inside the hotel room and they had their hands on her, undressing her, petting her.

Adam braced her in his arms, his lips soft, tantalizing, and she began to relax into the rhythm of his kiss. And then Warren went down on his knees and put his mouth on her pussy, his tongue and lips kissing, tasting, nearly *devouring* her intimate flesh.

He sucked her clit into his mouth, and Amanda cried out as ecstasy crashed through her, stealing the breath from her body and the strength from her legs.

"Oh, God." She'd had no control, no way to mete out or measure the fire that consumed her. She felt helpless in the face of their loving, and while an echo of warning skittered through her thoughts, they'd stolen her will as well, and she could only take whatever they chose to give her. Tonight, it seemed, they wanted to give her everything.

Adam chuckled as he scooped her into his arms and laid her on the bed. "It takes us a fair bit of time to recover from our release, until our cocks can harden again so we can fuck you, or each other, a second time. But you don't have that limitation. I wonder how many times we can make you cry out in rapture tonight."

She heard an edge to his words that should have worried her, but then he stripped his clothes off and lay down beside her, his mouth taking hers in a kiss that was totally carnal. His mouth trembled on hers, a leashed passion she'd felt in him before. She had no time to react because the instant he released her, Warren turned her face to his

and she drank their combined essence from his lips, the flavor of them, as always, heating her blood and quickening her heart.

Adam fastened his mouth on her nipple, drawing deep, his teeth nipping, his tongue soothing, and she wondered anew at the invisible strings of lust that connected her breast to her womb. He worked his way down her body as Warren speared two fingers inside of her, possessing her.

Amanda bowed off the bed, the sudden invasion shooting her close, so close, to release.

“My turn to drink.” Adam’s words vibrated against her belly. He slid lower, his head between her legs, and made good on that promise. His tongue swirled into her while his opened lips caressed and his mouth sucked, plunging her once more into a storm of passion.

“Please.” Amanda didn’t know what she begged for, whether for more or for a moment of sanity, a moment to think.

“No thinking.” Adam’s declaration cut through her confusion, his ability to know her, to understand her both her blessing and deepest threat.

She could only feel as he set about to drive her insane. Each stroke of his tongue, each tiny caress of his lips and teeth seemed designed to rob her of everything but the desire to burn, the desire to erupt in rapturous glory.

Warren claimed her lips again, his kiss gentle, wooing.

“We love you, Amanda. You’re a part of us now. You’re the best part of us. Now and forever.”

“No, I can’t—” She wasn’t even certain what she protested.

“You can. You will.” Adam surged up her body, thrust into her with one long, deep stroke.

“We love you, and you belong with us.”

He took her mouth then, and she marveled the sharing could be so different, the flavor of them so unique. So necessary.

In the dim recess of her mind, Amanda realized this was war as much as it was love making. They aroused her, drove her, until all she

was, all she wanted was more. Wrapping around Adam, arms and legs, she tilted her hips, moved with him, fast and furious, as she chased release.

Something she'd once heard echoed through her mind as wave after wave of rapture seized her. The French referred to this moment as *le petit mort*, the little death. Yes, a part of her died even as she felt herself being reborn, no longer the woman she used to be.

Adam slid his hand under her, brought her closer to him. He drove into her, his cock caressing her deepest place, and then he stiffened. Within her, the pulse of his ejaculation throbbed and the heat of his seed bathed her womb.

No longer able to keep her arms around Adam, she let them fall to the bed. Each breath seemed an effort, and each thought fled before it could fully form.

Adam eased out of her, his sweat-slickened body sliding slowly to her side. He turned her head to him. This kiss, gentle, questing, soothed her, steadied her so she could meet his gaze unflinching.

"I love you."

Before she could respond either to the vow or the challenge of those words, Warren stroked his hand down her body, his fingers tweaking a nipple, then sliding down to comb through the auburn curls that shielded her cunt.

"My turn." He inserted two fingers into her again, worked them in and out in a relentless rhythm.

"Do you know how much it arouses me when your body grips my fingers like that? You're so responsive, so hot. Only for us."

He rose up so that he ranged above her, the expression on his face intense as he increased the pressure, as he stroked her pussy. She felt the sopping wetness and knew some of that was from Adam, but some was her own dew, a physical manifestation of the heat both these men stirred in her in equal measure.

"Only for us," he said again. "Say it, Amanda."

The demand abraded even as the caress reignited her inner fires. She wanted to deny him, deny his words, his meaning. This had become a war she feared would spawn no winners, only victims.

“Say it.”

She expected this edge from Adam. He demanded, he led, with such natural authority that resistance seemed incomprehensible.

Warren’s forcefulness, so rare, compelled her beyond her ability to deny.

“Yes! Damn you, yes. Only for the two of you! Only and ever! Are you satisfied?”

Warren replaced his fingers with his cock and thrust into her again and again. Wanton, burning with need, Amanda clung to him, received him, and cried out because what she needed, what she had to have, kept leaping out of her reach.

Desperate for release, she whimpered, frustration racing passion for possession of her soul.

“Here.” Warren slid his arms around her, reversed their positions, eased her up and onto her knees.

Even as she began to ride him harder, she tilted her bottom to the air and bore down on Warren’s cock, ready for more.

Adam gained his knees and moved behind her. He grasped her hips, spread her ass cheeks, and prepared her with his tongue. Then the tip of his cock caressed the rosette of her anus. He pressed forward, his cock hot, hard, relentless.

Amanda felt her body open to him, felt him slide into her in one long, slow, and steady thrust.

“Again! Oh, God, Adam, please. *Fuck me.*”

Beyond desperate, she could only give and take, rub and move and claw. She would do anything, everything, if only...

From somewhere deep in her soul, the eruption gathered, a powerful, unstoppable force of heat and emotion and sensation. And then it came, the burning, hot flood of release overtaking her completely, spasm after spasm. She could only collapse on Warren,

her body spent yet open, greedy, sucking every drop of passion her lovers gave her as the rapture possessed her completely and seemed never to end.

The pounding of her heart and the rushing of her blood blocked out every sound, every sense. Gradually, sensation returned to her fingers, her toes. Her hearing cleared, and she wondered how a woman could survive such ravishment.

Adam withdrew from her, eased her off Warren, and brought her down to the bed, on her side, so she faced him. Behind her, she felt Warren move against her back, effectively cocooning her, an embrace she knew she would miss desperately in the months and years to come.

“Goddamn it, Amanda. Don’t you get it? Can’t you see?” Adam demanded

“Adam.”

Warren’s quiet calling of his name got his attention. He looked into their lover’s eyes for a long moment, then turned his gaze back to her.

“You’re ours,” he said more calmly, and Amanda felt the tremble in his hand when he smoothed her hair from her face. “You’re ours. We’re yours. *We belong together.*”

“I love you. I love you both beyond anything...everything. There’ll never be another for me, not as long as I live. But I don’t belong *here*, Adam. There’s no place for me *here.*”

“Of course there is, sweetheart.”

Warren’s tone, gentle bordering on pity, stabbed her heart and made her want to cry.

“Of course there’s a place for you here,” Adam agreed. “You just can’t see it. Maybe you’re afraid to see it.”

She had no words to give them then, and no hope, for she felt none of that rare commodity herself.

In the deepening dark of night, she could only shiver, missing them already, as her tears silently soaked her pillow.

Chapter 26

“I can’t help feeling that you’re making a horrible mistake,” Sarah said.

Amanda looked over at her cousin and offered her what she knew must look like a very sad smile. “I know you do. But I honestly can’t see that I have any choice.”

Sarah personified contentment, her seven-week-old son Charles held firmly at her breast. Named after his paternal grandfather, Charles Benedict displayed a fine appreciation for his mother’s cuddling and his morning meal.

He had, his fathers’ claimed, almost as hearty an appetite as did his younger-by-five-minutes brother, Samuel.

Amanda bent over the younger of Sarah’s twins, asleep in her arms. She placed a gentle kiss on his brow, smiling when he wrinkled that brow as if already protesting being fussed over by a female.

In the course of these last three weeks, Amanda had come to regard Sarah as the sister she’d never had. She already loved the babies, and Caleb and Joshua Benedict had earned her respect as only two other men had ever done. Thinking of those two other men now made Amanda’s heart clench.

She loved them so much, and she wished with all her heart she could stay. She just couldn’t see how that would work for the long haul.

Adam and Warren fit in here. They had their friends, here. Warren had his law practice, and although Adam’s resignation from the Rangers was all but certain, she knew he belonged here, too, whether as a lawman or a rancher.

Amanda's life was back in Richmond. She had her mother and her business—a business that flourished because of who she was, how she'd been born, and her place in that world.

Adam and Warren had stayed with her under her cousin's roof until yesterday, when they'd ridden back to town. They'd been loving and tender despite their frustration with her. Maybe in time they'd come to realize that as painful as this choice was for all of them, she was doing the right thing.

"You're the sister I never had, and to think you're just going to leave, to leave me and Adam and Warren—"

"Sarah."

Amanda looked up to see Caleb standing in the doorway. He went over to his wife, bent down and kissed her. One finger caressed his son's cheek, as if measuring the strength of the baby's pull on her breast.

"Sweetheart, Amanda's not making this decision easily. Just look at her. Why don't you cut her a little slack?"

"No," Amanda got to her feet, "it's all right." She handed Caleb his sleeping son. She looked from him to Sarah. Her cousin's smile wavered, became blurry, and Amanda knew she was going to cry again. Before she could embarrass herself by breaking down completely, she said, "I'll just go finish packing so I'll be ready to leave whenever you are."

Caleb was going to drive her into town, using the same buckboard Warren had used to bring her to the ranch that first time. Had it only been a few months ago?

A few months. A lifetime. Amanda knew she had no choice but to return to Virginia, even if a part of her heart—the biggest part, the best part—would stay in Texas forever.

* * * *

Adam looked up from his desk, movement outside the window catching his eye. Warren Jessop took the steps down from the courthouse and set his course for the Ranger office.

Adam nodded when the man entered. "Just give me a moment to finish this," he said, then turned his attention back to the report he was writing.

"Nothing from Austin yet?" Warren asked.

"Not yet," Adam said. He couldn't understand the delay. He'd felt certain he'd have had a letter from his superiors accepting his resignation and appointing another Ranger to head up the Waco office waiting for him on his return from Denison.

"The Benedicts should be bringing her into town any moment," Warren said. "Do you think she'll be surprised when we make her that offer?"

Adam smiled. "Probably. That's why I'm pissed I haven't heard back yet. We could have been ready to leave with her today if I had."

"You know, we could always just kidnap her. Keep her until she forgets all about Richmond."

Before Adam could respond to that outrageous suggestion, the door swung open and Wyatt Earp stepped in. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Adam.

"I wouldn't have made this detour for anyone else. I hope you appreciate that, Kendall."

"Hey, Wyatt. Good to see you again." He shook the man's hand. Wyatt's words hadn't made any sense. "You detoured back here for me?"

"Well, that and because Bat wanted to visit the Benedicts."

"Masterson's here, too?"

"Yeah, he's getting our horses unloaded from the train. He tells me Caleb and Joshua have a spread near here. Anyway, I hope it's a favor I've done you and not brought you trouble, instead. I was in Austin as you know, and in the course of my visit happened to

encounter Colonel Jones. When he discovered I was on my way here, he asked me to hand deliver this, to you.”

Jones was Adam’s boss. He took the envelope, and since all gazes in the room rested on him, he opened the letter.

“What does it say?” Warren asked.

Adam heard the thread of anxiety in Warren’s voice. He finished skimming the document and looked up.

“My resignation has been refused, my promotion to Major stands, and I’m ordered to continue in charge of the Waco Division.”

A month ago this would have been welcome news. Today, especially today, not so much so. Before he could comment, the door burst open.

“Captain Kendall, come quick. There’s trouble at the train station!”

* * * *

“Masterson! What a surprise!” Caleb Benedict said.

“Hey, Benedict. I told you I’d be by for a visit. How are you? And how’s...”

Amanda tilted her head to the side, reading the look of chagrin on the face of the dapper gentlemen who’d just shook hands with Caleb.

“Sarah’s just great,” Caleb said. He chuckled, then set Amanda’s valise down just beside the corner of the train station building. “This is Sarah’s cousin, Amanda Dupree. Miss Dupree is just on her way back to Richmond. Amanda, this is a friend of ours, Bat Masterson.”

“You helped my cousin in Denison!” Amanda said, having recognized the name. Recalling the story Sarah had told her, she thought her description of the sometime lawman an apt one.

“Yes, ma’am. A pleasure.” Masterson doffed his hat. Then he turned back to Caleb. “Actually, I’m not the only old friend to come calling. Earp and I took the train from Austin. Got in just a few

minutes ago. Figured we'd look you up before heading out to Arizona."

"Wyatt's here?" Caleb made a show of scanning the area.

"Headed on over to the Ranger office as he had a letter to deliver to Adam Kendall."

"Gentlemen, please excuse me while I go inside and get my ticket."

"Sorry, Amanda. Just let me—"

Amanda touched Caleb's arm. "Nonsense. Visit with your friend. I can certainly get my own ticket. I'll be right back."

Amanda made her way through the small throng of men and women waiting on the boardwalk outside the station. The northbound train she'd be on wouldn't arrive for another hour, but she'd heard a train pull out just as they were nearing the station.

Must have been the train Caleb's friend came in on.

Waco certainly seemed to be a busy destination. Joshua had said at dinner the night before that the city just kept growing.

Amanda couldn't say Richmond was growing, but it was recovering nicely after those devastating years of the War of Northern Aggression and the hard times that had followed.

She'd almost reached the door to the station when her attention was caught by a man who stood, seemingly alone, staring at her. He seemed familiar, but she couldn't place where she'd seen him before.

She'd just turned away from him when he practically leapt forward and grabbed her arm, giving her a shake.

"By God, I have you, you interfering daughter of a whore! I swore I'd track you down to the ends of the earth. You ruined me! You ruined me and my family, and now you're going to pay!"

Jonathan Marley. The crooked businessman whose threats, after she'd uncovered his fraudulent scheming with his partner in crime, had sent her fleeing westward in the first place.

Everything happened so fast. One woman screamed, a couple of men yelled, and Caleb and Mr. Masterson rushed forward, murder in their eyes.

Marley yanked her backwards and drew his gun. He held that weapon very close to Amanda's head. She noticed the weapon shaking and swallowed hard.

"Stay back! This is none of your concern. I've got business with this strumpet. She's just a whore's daughter anyway. Now, back off."

"I may be a whore's daughter, but you're a thief *and* a fugitive from the law. There's an arrest warrant issued against you in Richmond."

"Do you know how long I worked to set up that enterprise! And for what? Some tart comes along calling herself a private investigator and alerts the police. You ruined everything, ruined me! My wife and children won't even see me, and I had to leave the only home I've ever known!"

"They call that the wages of sin, Marley." Amanda kept her attention split between the gun she could just see out the corner of her eye and the growing crowd. She hoped to hell no one tried to be a hero, because she sure as hell didn't want to get her head blown off.

Directly in front of her, the throng of spectators parted, and Adam came rushing up, Warren on his heels.

Her men came to a sudden halt, ranging themselves beside Caleb and Bat Masterson. Another man who's arrived in their wake stood to the side, his eyes narrowed and focused on Marley's gun.

With the arrival of the Texas Ranger, the crowd fell silent.

"Amanda." Adam stood stock still, his gaze on her, not on the gun being held close to her head.

"Adam."

"Friend of yours?" Adam asked.

"No, just a fugitive from Richmond. Jonathan Marley."

"Ah, the embezzler you outted in your investigation of bank fraud. The one you reported to the authorities."

“The same.”

“Damn it all to hell, Adam, aren’t you going to do something?” Caleb demanded.

“Don’t need to,” Adam said quietly.

The expression on his face held so much love and respect, Amanda very nearly cried.

“What do you mean, you don’t need to?” Masterson asked. He looked as if he was calculating the odds of drawing his weapon and shooting Marley.

“Her momma saw to it she had lessons.”

Warren stood next to Adam and had said that.

“I was only waiting for you to be here so you could arrest him.” Amanda said softly.

“Do you think this is some kind of joke?” Marley dug the barrel of the gun into the side of her head. “I didn’t come all this way...”

That was as far as he got. Amanda dropped her satchel from her left hand. When Marley jerked, his attention diverted by the sound, she formed a fist with her right and punched out, catching his right wrist on the inside, numbing his hand so that he dropped his gun. She followed through, throwing her fist up behind her hard and fast and connecting dead-on with the man’s nose. She followed this with an elbow to his solar plexus, and Marley went down.

Warren reached out and pulled her toward him while Adam reached down and hauled Marley to his feet.

“Now that’s what I call one spunky woman,” the man who’d arrived with Adam and Warren said. “Anyone know if she’s taken?”

“She is,” Adam said. He turned his attention back to Marley, who could do nothing more than blink at the end of Adam’s grip. “This is Texas. We don’t hold with men threatening women here.” And he smiled as he punched him square in the face.

Poor Marley, Amanda thought, was down and out.

Amanda looked up, startled, when a round of applause broke out.

“Why that’s the smoothest move I’ve seen in a long time,” one older man said. “A private investigator, are you?”

“Ah...yes. Yes, I am.”

“Will you be opening an office here in Waco? I’ll be one of your first clients,” a middle aged woman said. “If’n you find missing persons. Haven’t heard from my son for a decade.”

The first man who’d stepped forward nodded. “You can count me as a client, too. Name’s Bill Hamilton. I own the mercantile just off the square. Had a feller cheat me out of some money a while back. Reckon you can find him?”

The people seemed to move in on her, all chattering, excited at the prospect of having a real detective agency opening up right there in Waco. She couldn’t count how many more people offered to hire her right then and there.

“Why, I’ll bet you this fine young lady’s company will become just as famous as the one up north opened by that Pinkerton feller,” one man said.

“More so, on account it’ll be a *Texas* company,” countered another.

Amanda looked from one face to the next. No one was looking down their nose at her. No one was calling her names or telling her she had no place...

No one thinks I have no business being an investigator.

“Well, Miss Dupree?” Adam asked. “You fixing’ to open up a detective agency right here in Waco?” He smiled at her, and she could see so many things in his eyes. Mostly, she saw love and hope. She let her gaze meet Warren’s, felt her heart fill with the emotion he silently sent her.

Isn’t this exactly why Momma got me all those lessons in the first place? So I could take care of myself and find my own place?

Amanda had found not only her place, but two men who loved her and whom she knew she would love for the rest of her life. Why hadn’t she seen that before now?

Her vision blurred, but that was all right. She figured the moment called for a tear or two. “As a matter of fact, Captain Kendall, I do believe I am.”

Adam reached out and pulled her into his arms. Warren stepped forward and gently touched her shoulder.

“Welcome home, darlin’,” Adam said. “Welcome home.”

Epilogue

“Thank you for making sure the house was ready before Momma got here,” Amanda said. She stood up on tippy toes to kiss first Adam and then Warren.

“You’re welcome.”

She giggled because they both had said that at the same time.

The last few months had seen a flurry of activity for Amanda and her men. She looked down at the simple gold band that adorned the third finger of her left hand.

She and Adam had been married in a private ceremony in the courthouse, attended by Warren and the Benedicts. While she was officially Mrs. Adam Kendall, she was Warren’s wife, too.

They’d purchased a large tract of land from the Benedicts, effectively splitting the massive ranch Sarah had inherited from Tyrone Maddox in two.

They’d stayed in Adam’s house while their new home—within sight of Sarah’s large house—was being built. In town, they’d rented a small office, and she and Warren had opened the Jessop-Kendall Agency. With Amanda in charge of investigations and Warren heading up legal matters, they’d already begun to do good business.

And just two days ago, they’d moved into their new very nice and very big home.

A not-so-discreet cough caught her attention. With her men, she turned to look at Joshua Benedict, who stood smiling just inside the parlor.

"I'm smiling because I just left a very nice romantic moment myself. Sarah says come and eat. The babies are asleep at last, and dinner is ready."

The twins had been fractious, both of them teething, and Amanda had offered to take her husbands home and leave the Benedicts in peace.

Sarah, of course, would have none of that.

As usual when they all got together, dinner was a fun, laughing, delicious affair.

"Amanda, what time does your mother's train get in tomorrow?" Sarah asked.

"Around five. Terence is traveling with her, and he's such a caretaker. Momma's in good hands. I'm looking forward to seeing them both."

"Do you think she'll stay?" Sarah asked.

"I hope so. I think Terence wants to stay. He told me in his last letter he would be checking out the area, and if he thought he could fit in, then he'd send for his friend."

"I told you the place is getting lousy with lawyers," Adam teased.

Everyone laughed, including Warren. "We could use another lawyer in our business," he said.

It didn't take long for a table of four men to plow their way through Rosa's excellent roast beef and mashed potatoes. Soon, most of the dishes were cleared and a pot of coffee and a still-warm pie had been set on the table.

Warren opened the satchel he'd brought with him, taking out the raft of papers he'd prepared.

This evening was more than just a meal. They were in the final stages of planning something she and Adam and Warren had discussed months before on their way to finding the gold. They'd shared the idea with the Benedicts, who took no time at all to decide they thought it was a good idea. Now that idea was about to become reality.

“Here’s the latest draft.” Warren began to hand documents out to everyone. “As you can see, we’re establishing the town as a trust and attaching a covenant to it. The land we set aside—principally, the land directly surrounding our houses, in a one-mile wide and three-mile long parcel—will become the independent settlement. The key,” he said, looking at each of them, “is keeping ownership of the land within our two families, *leasing* out lots, and requiring each tenant to sign the covenant.”

“Hell of a good idea,” Caleb said. “This will guarantee our privacy, and our right to live our lives as we choose, as well as doing the same for our descendants.”

“All that’s left,” Warren said, “is to decide on a name for the town.”

Joshua looked from Caleb to Sarah, both of whom nodded. “We’ve been talking, the three of us,” he said, “and we’ve decided to leave that honor up to the Jessop-Kendall clan.”

“Your idea, you should name it,” Sarah confirmed.

Amanda looked from Warren to Adam. “Thank you. We’ll sleep on it,” she said.

* * * *

Amanda let her arms drop to the bed, every ounce of energy drained from her body. On either side of her, Adam and Warren groaned as they, too, collapsed into their new, soft, and extra-large mattress.

“Mother of God,” Adam said. “Woman, you plum wore me out again.”

“Amen,” Warren said. “You, wife of ours, have an insatiable appetite.”

“Me? All right,” she conceded. “It was my fault the first time. But that second time was all you two. I’m going to have to start eating more at dinner time. Maybe then I could keep my strength up.”

“The woman is going to kill us,” Adam said to Warren.

“There are worse ways to die,” Warren said after a moment.

Amanda smiled, her eyes closed, her mind drifting. Sleep beckoned, the heat from her lusty husbands’ bodies cocooning her in comfort and security.

A thought occurred, and she giggled.

“What?” Adam asked.

“I just thought of the perfect name for our town.”

“Yeah?”

Adam turned to face her, and before she knew it, she found herself on her back looking up into two loving gazes. “So what are we going to call it?” he asked.

“The only name that fits us all, Benedicts and Jessop-Kendall’s alike. We’ll call our new town Lusty.”

“Lusty, Texas,” Warren repeated. “Kind of has a nice ring to it.”

“I like it,” Adam said.

Amanda liked it, too. And since she’d only really begun to live once she’d discovered love under two lawmen, she couldn’t think of a more appropriate name.

THE END



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