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Wild Texas Heat



Kelly Conrad

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Letter from Kelly Conrad

Regarding Ebook Piracy

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Thank you so much for your participation.

With deep gratitude,

Kelly Conrad

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Prologue

“Reno Garvey, on this day, June 17, 1885, this court finds you guilty of murder and sentences you to be hanged from the neck until dead.”

Reno could still hear the haunting echo of those words as he climbed the creaking steps of the gallows, one by one. The dark rain clouds seemed low enough to touch, and the wind howled against him, the flying grit cutting into his skin. Rough hands slipped the rope around his neck, and as he took one last look at Sadie, suddenly a black hood blinded him to the tears she was shedding. While he stood waiting for the trapdoor to open and the rope to tighten around his neck, his thoughts went back twenty-five years to the day his daughter was born.

* * * *

A dust storm held the tiny cabin within its blustery grip. Already the windows had a layer of dirt on them, casting the room in a semi-darkness of gloom. The flickering lamps did their best to lend light, but large shadows climbed the walls as Reno stealthily moved around the small space.

Sadie lay on a hard, lumpy bed, waiting for the birth of their child.

“Oh, God, Reno,” she moaned. “The pain is cutting me in two!”

“Try to hold on a little while longer, sweetheart,” he said as he grabbed her hand and held it tightly. “The doctor’s on his way.”

She’d been in labor the whole night, and Reno knew the child would be coming soon. Sadie was a strong woman, but her face was a nightmare of pain. He tried to hold her down, but she jerked around like she was hit by a horde of wayward bullets. When the pain had finally passed, he left her side for only a moment and hurried to the window.

“Reno!” she cried out when the pain grabbed her again. The fear in her voice cut through him as she scratched along the bed for his hand.

Reno turned from the window where he was trying to see beyond the wall of dust for the first signs of the doctor, but he knew it was useless. This storm was keeping everyone inside. He was tormented by Sadie’s cries and could almost feel every pain she was having. He leaned over her, wiping the beads of sweat from her face as she struggled with the pain.

“Remember, Sadie, we talked about this. Just do what the doc said, and go with it. Try to steel yourself against the pain and go with it!”

“He’s not coming, is he?” she gritted out. “The storm, it’s keeping him away, isn’t it?” Suddenly, she screamed. “The pains are so close together they—”

The last one was the toughest and hardest. When it finally hit her, Reno could see the child’s head as it came peeking through.

“It’s coming!” he shouted, but when he looked up he saw that Sadie had lost consciousness.

* * * *

A flickering light teased the darkness behind Sadie’s lids, waking her up to shadows and silence. She seemed to be floating in some kind

of euphoric twilight sleep until she suddenly remembered the god-awful pain she'd felt before. Now as she looked down at her stomach and saw how flat it was, she knew her baby had been born, and she had lived through it. But what about the baby? While the house creaked under the dying wind, she lifted herself to get up. She hadn't taken a step before the room began to whirl, and she grabbed the bedpost to keep from falling.

While hanging on to it, she faintly called out, "Reno!"

Within only seconds the door opened, and Reno crept in. "My God, Sadie, get back in bed. You're in no condition to be walking around."

"The baby, Reno, is it all right?"

"She's just fine, but I think she's hungry."

"It's a girl?" Sadie asked as she crawled back in bed.

He looked down at the child and smiled. "It sure is, Sadie. A little white-haired girl that's so beautiful she'll put your eyes out." He laid the child down in Sadie's arms and then sat down beside her. "Can you believe that something so beautiful could come from an old cowpoke like me?"

Sadie smiled as she pushed her nipple into the soft, rose like mouth. "She is beautiful, isn't she?" She looked up at Reno, her eyes rimmed with tears. "Oh, God, Reno, how can I possibly give her up? I love her already."

Reno's eyes clouded over with sadness. "I know, darlin', and I feel the same way, but we have to remember that it's for her own good."

"I'm not sure about that," Sadie whispered. "Who could give her more love than her own ma and pa?"

"Sadie, you know it would be wrong to keep her here not bein' married, and me on the run all the time. Besides, I'm as poor as a church mouse."

"But I've got money. A little, anyway."

"It ain't enough, Sadie, and you know it. Not for a place in town. Ain't neither of us farmers. Any ranch we tried to run would go to seed in no time."

"That only leaves the Pink Palace."

"I know, sweetheart, and I'm as sorry as hell, but we both know you can't raise a child in a brothel."

Sadie cried. "I never was ashamed of what I do before, but now when I look into that sweet face and see all of that purity and loveliness..." She looked up at Reno. "Oh, Reno, I'd give it all up in a second if we could keep her."

"I know, darling, but it ain't only that, and you know it. Even if you did quit, what would you do? We got nothin', Sadie. We couldn't begin to give her all the things she needs."

"We could give her love, Reno, so much love."

"I know, darlin', but we need to be sensible. She can't live on love. I've got family in Boston who's got money. They'll be able to send her to a good school and raise her in comfort. If she'd been a boy, maybe it would have been different, but you know as well as I do that a little girl takes lots of care, and my family can give it to her."

"Reno, you hated it in Boston. Why would you send our daughter there?"

"There ain't nothin' wrong with Boston. It's that crazy sister of mine. She's a good woman, but honest to God, sometimes she acts as crazy as a loon. On top of that, she's into all that Boston society stuff. Why, that woman is so damned stiff-necked and proper with her snooty friends and all, she almost drove me crazy. Anyway, I stayed there as long as I could, and then I had to get out."

"Are you sure she'd be the right one to raise our little girl?"

"Don't you see, Sadie? All those things that were bad for me are just exactly what our little girl needs. I wouldn't put her somewhere she couldn't be happy. Besides, Harriet may be crazy, but she loves children."

"What'll you tell her? I mean about us?"

"I'll just tell her the child's mother died. They don't have to know the truth. Besides, one look at that little face and she'll fall in love with her."

Sadie looked down at the child and smiled. "That's true, but for Lorraine's sake—"

Reno smiled tenderly. "Lorraine?"

"Doesn't she look like a Lorraine? All pink and blonde?"

"Lorraine," Reno repeated. "Lorraine Garvey. Sounds kind of special. Uppity and all that."

"If she's going to live in Boston, she'll need a name like that," Sadie said. "So people will know she comes from a good family." Sadie looked up at Reno with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Reno, I don't know what I'm going to do without her."

"I know how you feel, but keep one thing in mind. She's our daughter, and no matter how uppity she gets, Whiskey Hill is still her home. In the meantime, I'll have my sister Harriet keep—"

* * * *

Suddenly the trapdoor opened, and Reno felt the sturdy plank slip from beneath his feet, sending him to his death.

Chapter One

Whiskey Hill, Texas

July 14, 1885

“Yee-haw!” Jude Bonner shouted while tossing his hat in the air.

With a big smile on his face, he ran toward the Lucky Lady Saloon to find his friend Sundog. Seeing him at the bar, he elbowed his way through the crowd and pushed the crumpled letter in front of him.

“It’s official, Sundog. The best little whorehouse in Texas will be mine in a matter of hours.”

After quickly upending a shot of whiskey, Sundog, a beefy blond cowboy with brown, sun-bronzed skin and the shadow of a beard, pushed the letter back at him.

“You’re dreamin’, Jude. Nobody’s gonna sell a moneymaker like that.”

“Believe me, this one will.” Jude slapped his money down on the counter and called out, “Hey, barkeep! A shot of whiskey here.”

“Yeah? What makes you think so?”

Jude leaned toward Sundog as if telling him a secret. “Because she’s one of them prissy little Boston females, and you know how they are. Cold fish from head to toe.”

“She’s comin’ from Boston? Who is she?”

“She’s Reno’s daughter, Lorraine Garvey. Now that he’s dead, the Pink Palace belongs to her.” He upended the shot glass and drank the amber liquid in one swig, feeling the heat burn its way down to his stomach.

“Lorraine,” Sundog said, looking at his empty glass. “Sounds uppity. You know, squeaky clean.”

“It sure as hell does, and as soon as that uppity little gal finds out what the Pink Palace is, she’ll be so anxious to get rid of it, she’ll probably pay me to take it off her hands.”

“I don’t get it,” Sundog said, turning to Jude. “Why don’t she know what it is?”

“I guess because old Reno never told her. She refers to it in her letters as the social club.”

“Social club,” Sundog repeated thoughtfully. “Ain’t that the kind of club where ladies—”

“Sure is,” Jude said, upending another shot of whiskey.

“And she’s comin’ here to sell it? Jude, as soon as she sees it, she’s gonna know what it is. Why in hell didn’t Reno tell her the truth?”

“Hell, Sundog, you know how his family was. He couldn’t tell them that he owned a whorehouse, so he called it a social club. Just between you and me, sometimes I think he believed it himself.”

“Reno sure left you with a can of worms.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I’m talkin’ about his daughter. She’s gonna take you apart piece by piece when she finds out. Damn, Jude, I wouldn’t be in your boots for all the tea in China.”

“What are you so worried about? Don’t forget she’s a tenderfoot from Boston, and you know how they are. She’s probably the bookish type. You know, a horse-faced spinster that’s been sheltered all her life. Hell, I doubt she even knows what a whorehouse is.”

“Jude, you’re assumin’ that this gal is as green as cabbage. That’s your first mistake. Your second is forgettin’ that old Reno was a tenderfoot once hisself, and female or not, if she’s any kin to him, you’d better be careful.”

“What do you mean?”

"I mean he was a fightin' son of a bitch and she's his daughter. I'm warnin' you, Jude. If that little gal is anything like her pa, and she finds out you're tryin' to cheat her—"

"Hell, I ain't tryin' to cheat her. Reno was the one that lied to her."

"Yeah, but you could've told her the truth in any one of them letters, and you didn't."

"Sundog, I'm just tryin' to save her a little embarrassment. You don't talk about things like that with a lady. It'd be...What do they call it? Vulgar. Ain't that the word?"

"She won't see it that way, Jude, and when she finds out, she'll have your hide stripped off before you even know she's mad at you. It's what Reno would have done. That old coot didn't get hisself hanged for nothin', you know."

"Put your worries away, Sundog. This is a sure thing. I feel it in my bones. Besides, what can she do? She's just a delicate little female."

"A *delicate little female*?" Sundog repeated and snickered. "Jude, them female cats is the ones with the longest claws."

"You know, I think as a new management kind of thing I might offer the men a two-for-one deal."

"All right, so don't listen, but when that *delicate little female* starts rippin' you apart, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Hey, I heard you. So, how about it? You wanna be my first customer?"

"I ain't never heard of a 'two-for-one deal.' What're you dreamin' up now?"

"You ain't never had two gals at one time?" He punched him in the gut. "Let me tell you, friend, whiskey ain't the only thing that'll make you crazy. When this deal goes through, I'll set you up with two of Sadie's best gals and take bets on whether you can live through it."

"You know what, you smart-assed cowboy? I'm gonna hold you to that. But for the time being, let's just wait and see what kind of

trouble you've got yourself into this time. This is one show I'd give a month's wages to see. When will she be here?"

"If the stage pulls in on time, she'll be here tomorrow around two."

"Me and the others'll be there just to say I told you so."

"Sundog, do you ever preach anything but doom and gloom?"

"Hey, I just call 'em the way I see 'em."

"All right, have it your way," Jude said and lifted his glass toward the bartender. "Hey, barkeep. Keep 'em comin' for me and my friend here." He looked around. "Where's Shiloh and Blaze? I'd like to give 'em the good news."

"Shiloh's over at the Pink Palace spendin' his last dollar on a little tart that's been leadin' him around by the balls, and Blaze is sittin' over there losin' his money to that big-city swindler in the string tie."

Later in the evening, Jude began feeling his drinks and started crying in his beer. Turning to Sundog, he said, "You know, Sundog, I been thinkin' about Tempest. My past ain't too pretty. Do you think it'll matter to her once we decide to settle down?"

"Tempest? You got a thing for Tempest?"

"She's a real special female."

"But she's a damned whore, Jude."

"I know, but she's better than any other female around here, and I ain't gettin' any younger. Besides, I want a female that wants to do it as bad as I do. I ain't gonna saddle myself up with a woman that says *no* six days a week and *maybe* on the seventh."

"Jude, Tempest can't say no. She's a damned who—"

"Don't use that word, Sundog."

"The point I'm tryin' to make is, the minute you stop givin' her money, her answer changes."

"Damn," Jude said, looking up at Sundog. "You think so?"

"I know so. Hell, Jude, you got plenty of time to pick and choose. Besides, you got somethin' workin' here that'll take all your attention. Don't get hog-tied to no female until all this is over, hear?"

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. You know,” Jude said, “if I can make this deal with this Boston gal, it’ll make up for everything that’s ever happened to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know I’ve chased lots of rainbows in my life tryin’ to make quick money. I always had the idea in mind that when I get enough I’d move out of that rat trap I’m in now, get me a spread somewhere, and settle down with a real special woman. I did pretty good at first, never goin’ outside the law until I met Luke Jensen and his gang. I was young, Sundog, and didn’t have a brain in my head, but one mistake was all it took for me to ruin my life. I paid the price for my part in robbin’ that Wells Fargo stage, but the people around here won’t let me forget. Now that I’ve got a reputation, the law watches me like I’m a rattler ready to strike. Okay, so I made one little bitty mistake. Do they have to look at me the way they do every time a bank gets robbed or someone gets shot? I’m the first one they suspect. What the hell’s wrong with these people?”

“Jude, my God, stealin’ a payroll from a Wells Fargo stage ain’t exactly a little bitty mistake.”

“I know, but no one was killed, and they got the money back. I been thinkin’, Sundog, maybe you and the others would do a lot better with me out of the picture. My reputation’s done shot to hell, but it ain’t too late for you guys.”

“Hell, Jude, are we gonna go through this again?”

“Sundog, you know as well as I do that it’s gettin’ harder and harder to make a buck around here. If it wasn’t for practically killin’ ourselves workin’ in that damned rodeo, we wouldn’t have a dime to our names. No one trusts us anymore. I hate to say it, but maybe we better split up.”

“Jude, shut up, for God’s sake. You get in this mood every time you start drinkin’. We ain’t splittin’ up, and that’s that.”

“But I’m just thinkin’ of you and the others.”

“Hellfire, Jude, it wouldn’t do any good to split up. We’d follow you around like a hound dog follows his master. I done said it once, and I’ll say it again. You’re stuck with us, so get used to it.”

* * * *

Nightly, a tinny piano, wild, raucous laughter, a few passionate moans, and a stream of raunchy words could be heard echoing down the dusty street from a small rise where The Pink Palace stood. This gaudy pink building might have been an eyesore to some, but it’s what kept the small town of Whiskey Hill alive.

The old-timers say an old cowpoke once had a shack there where he made whiskey in a still and sold it to the local saloon. Since then it was always referred to as Whiskey Hill. Later, after the old man died and the town began to grow, the name of Whiskey Hill stuck. It wasn’t long after that that a man by the name of Reno Garvey bought the shack, tore it down, and built a lively structure called the Pink Palace. He knew it was the ideal spot because it was far enough away from town to make the wives happy, but near enough to make the men happy. His ladies were painted-up, high-class whores who, for the right price, were not above doing anything the men wanted. Not able to deny his Boston blue blood heritage, Reno couldn’t abide being the owner of a whorehouse, so he constructed a big sign that read Cowboy’s Social Club and hung it on the front of the building.

It was a two-story mansion with a veranda that spread across the front, providing a place where the girls could come out and get some fresh air without having to socialize with the rest of the people.

A picket fence with a squeaky gate surrounded the structure, and every time it opened, the squeak seemed to echo down every street in Whiskey Hill. Anyone who knew about the Pink Palace was familiar with the sound of that front gate.

Some called it the Gate to Hell.

Chapter Two

As she looked down at the daguerreotype, she could tell he was a real hellion—one of those cowboy creatures who lived way out west. He stood wide-legged, his pants punched down into his tall boots, and his six-guns hanging askew along his hips. The curled brim of his hat cast a shadow over one eye, and he looked tough, his face molded by the wild life he lived. He was a dirty-looking thing—no, not dirty like unwashed, but *naughty*.

Lorraine felt her heart give a jolt slightly when she looked at the way his jeans molded around his generous manhood.

Oh God, how was she going to get through this?

She could never talk to a man like that, a man so blatantly handsome, a man who looked as if his body were made of steel, a man who threatened her with his stormy blue eyes, the sexiest she'd ever seen. She was used to Boston men, men who were mild-mannered, soft-spoken, rather foppish, and—she might as well admit it—boring. There was no doubt about it. If she ventured into the untamed West, it would be like throwing red meat to a dog. She'd be gobbled up in one bite. Oh, how she wished she didn't have to do this.

Suddenly, she heard someone coming and hurriedly put the daguerreotype away. As she punched it down into her drawstring purse, she nervously rose from her chair and looked out the window, wondering when the carriage would get there to take her to the train station.

Turning, she caught her image in the wall mirror beside the door and took the opportunity to check herself one last time. With gloved hands, she carefully pinched her cheeks and smoothed her upsweep

while wondering about the women out west. From the pictures she'd seen, they looked rawboned and tough. Many of the famous names drifted through her mind, but she knew enough to know there were all kinds. What about those who lived in town? Were they stylish? How did they wear their hair? What did their clothes look like? Since the West was so uncivilized, she couldn't believe there were that many places to shop, so how could they possibly keep up with the frequently changing styles?

With a trembling hand, she felt to see if her hat was secure enough and then began to place her flyaway, wispy blonde tendrils around her face. When her gaze shifted, she saw the fear in her eyes and turned away from the mirror in frustration. Who was she kidding? She didn't care about the women of that godforsaken country. She just wanted to do what she had to do and get out. She tried to calm her nerves by sitting back down and taking a much-needed drink of her tea, but try as she might, she couldn't get the man in the picture off her mind and dreaded meeting him. No telling what kind of animal he was. Just the idea of having to do business with him made her heart pound like a herd of wild stallions.

"Have you taken care of everything, dear?" her aunt Harriet asked, interrupting her thoughts. "Packed everything you'll need? By the way, what is the name of that place you're going to again?"

"Whiskey Hill."

"Whiskey Hill? Whiskey Hell is more like it. Have you ever heard such? Couldn't they do better than that? What happened? Did they run out of names?"

"It's just a name, Auntie. It must be a nice place. I've heard some people call it the Playground of the West."

"It doesn't matter. You have to consider where it is. If it were in Wyoming or Arizona, maybe the lofty name might mean something, but it's *Texas*. Their cattle don't have long horns for nothing, you know. Devil cattle, that's what they are. I cringe every time I think of them."

"I don't remember seeing you cringe when you bite down into a longhorn steak," Lorraine said sarcastically. "Texas steers are the best you can buy."

"That mouth of yours. You get it from your father, you know. All that sarcasm. Or maybe you're just growing up. I don't know."

"Auntie, please. You know as well as I that I turned twenty-five this year, and believe me, I feel every day of it. If I haven't grown up by now, I never will."

"Pish-posh. You talk like you're eighty. Believe me, twenty-five is still a baby, and a baby shouldn't be going down to that godforsaken place alone."

"Auntie, I wish you'd stop doing that."

"Doing what, for heaven's sake?"

"Sounding so ridiculous."

"Ridiculous or not, I still say nothing good ever came out of Texas. And every time I think about that father of yours and what he did to you—"

"Auntie, he must've had his reasons."

"Don't defend him, Lorraine. He dumped you on my doorstep and left without so much as a fare-thee-well."

"Well, I'm sorry I've been such a burden."

"Stop that. You know I didn't mean it that way." A small smile played at her lips. "I'll never forget the day he surprised me with a little bundle in his arms. He explained that your mother had died and he needed someplace for you to stay until he could take care of you." Harriet looked at her. "You were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't have refused to take you in even if I tried." Her eyes grew soft and warm. "I came to love you as much as any mother could, and what I did, well, maybe it was wrong, but it was for your own good."

"What was?" Lorraine asked.

"I couldn't do it," she said, pacing and fanning herself with her hankie. "I just couldn't let you go back with him to that creature he

called his wife. Not a ring, not a ceremony. She was his common-law wife, that's what she was."

"Auntie, what are you prattling on about?"

"Nothing, dear. I'm just talking about your father. He was always such a..." Her nose curled visibly as if she smelled something distasteful. "I think in the West they call them *rounders*."

"Auntie, every family has a black sheep. I guess Papa was ours."

"Oh, he was a black sheep all right. Well, I made sure he was no longer welcome in our lives, let me tell you. And that woman—"

"Woman?" Lorraine asked and looked up at Harriet. "What woman?"

"Some slut he'd taken up with. He didn't fool me. I knew she was your..." Her words suddenly stopped, and her gaze cut toward Lorraine as if afraid she had said too much. "Never mind."

"Mind what? Auntie, you're not making sense."

"Dead, indeed," Harriet kept mumbling. "She was no more dead than I was. Well, I fixed them. I told them never to try and see..."

"You're doing it again, Auntie. Half sentences."

"Well, anyway, it worked. I never heard a word, not a blessed word from them, until the letter from the sheriff came telling me that he got himself hanged." She sobbed into her hankie. "I swear, Lorraine, I could just cry! The shame! We can't even hold our head up in polite society anymore. He never even let us know about the social club he started. A fine time to learn about it, when he's cold in his grave. Well, it's a good thing he isn't here now, because I would certainly give him a piece of my mind!"

"Auntie, please," Lorraine said. "You're being too hard on Papa. He went out West and started a business. What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, Lorraine, that man couldn't add two and two. How in God's name did he manage to start a business?"

"He might not have been book smart, but from what you told me, he was as tough as nails, and I think we have to give him credit."

"You can give him credit if you want. I'd like to give him a frying pan right in the middle of his empty head." She pressed her hankie against her nose. "My poor baby," she sobbed. "When I think of you out there in that wilderness all alone, I could just die."

"Papa made it. So will I. Besides, I don't really think there'll be much to do."

"I never understood why you didn't write back and insist that...that...*person*...come here."

"I couldn't do that. The social club is there, Auntie, and I have to see it before I can set a fair price. If everything goes according to plan, I'll probably be back by the end of the week."

"Well, you know I would go with you if I could, but with your cousin Rachel down with the fever, I don't dare leave her."

"It's all right. I understand." She leaned over to get her luggage. "I guess I'd better get out on the portico. Mr. Fowler will be here soon with his carriage. It was awful nice of him to offer to take me to the train station, don't you think?"

"Oh, please! He's not being nice. He just wants to show off his new Rockaway carriage. A sickening display of wealth, if you ask me."

Lorraine sighed and shook her head. "All right. I don't have time to argue with you. I have to—"

"Lorraine, don't go yet," Harriet said. "I have something for you." She turned, went to a drawer, pulled out a box, and then hesitantly gave it to her. "Before you open this, remember I'm just doing this for your own safety." She put her hankie up to her nose again. "I'll worry so about you."

"A going away gift? But Auntie, I'll only be gone—"

"No, it's not a going away gift exactly. It's just something I hope you'll consider wearing while you're so far away from home."

"I don't understand. What is it?"

Harriet nodded her head. "Go ahead. Open it."

As Lorraine slowly opened the package, her eyes widened in surprise. She saw something she never thought she'd see in her lifetime. Crazy old Aunt Harriet had struck again. She had a reputation in the Garvey family of being a little ditzy, but this was the limit. Lorraine gingerly reached in and drew the monstrosity out and held it up before her.

"Auntie!" she gasped. "A chastity belt?"

Just then Harriet heard something and looked outside. "The carriage is here."

"Oh, my God, what'll I do with this thing?" Lorraine cried out, turning and looking for a place to throw it. Finally, she pushed it back into the box and ran out.

"You wear that, young lady!" Harriet shouted as she followed Lorraine out to the carriage. "Listen to me," she said when she finally caught up with her. "You may think I'm crazy now, but when you find yourself surrounded by a crowd of wild-and-wooly cowboys who won't take no for an answer, you'll be glad you have it."

Her aunt's words made Lorraine's face flush red. "Auntie, please, you're embarrassing me."

While placing a long chain around Lorraine's neck, Harriet said, "Now you listen to me, young lady. I'm not letting you in that carriage until you promise me that you'll wear it."

Bewildered, Lorraine looked down at the dangling key around her neck and then back up at her aunt. "All right, Auntie," she finally said and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Good-bye, I'll see you soon."

"There'll be rest stops between here and there, so put it on the first chance you get, all right?"

"Whatever you say, Auntie. Now please, I've got to go."

The woman smoothed Lorraine's hair like a mother. "Good-bye, dear. I'll say a prayer for you."

"No need for prayers, Auntie, I'll be fine."

While Lorraine's suitcase was being loaded, she got in and turned in her seat to wave to her aunt, who waved back. She felt guilty at the flood of relief she felt when the carriage finally rode away from the house of the well-meaning woman who watched her from the arched gate.

When she was well on her way, she gazed down at the key for a while and then leaned her head back to relax, thinking of the name of the town she would be visiting.

Whiskey Hill.

Whiskey Hell is more like it, she remembered her aunt saying.

With an amused smile on her face, she leaned her head back, letting the name whirl in her head.

Whiskey Hell... Whiskey Hell... Whiskey Hell...

While floating around in warm, velvet darkness, she suddenly found herself surrounded by a crowd of drunken faces. She tried to fight them off with her chastity belt when she saw a woman with a powdered face, a sluttish smile, red lips, and flaming hair holding a baby in her arms. The woman's bright red hair reminded her of fire, and she suddenly realized that the carriage was going at lightning speed and at the end of the road was a wall of fire.

Oh, my God, she was riding into the pits of hell! She raised her arms up as if she were shielding herself against the flames while her feet pressed on the floorboard trying to stop the carriage, but the flaming wall kept coming closer and closer!

Suddenly, the carriage hit a pothole, and her eyes flew open. She lunged forward, looking around, and released a thankful breath when she realized she'd been dreaming.

"Whoa!" the driver yelled out as he pulled back on the reins and stopped the horses. Suddenly, his head appeared in the window. "You all right, Ms. Garvey?"

"Y-Yes, I'm fine, Mr. Fowler, thank you."

By the time she readjusted her hat and got herself back together again, they had reached the train station, where she boarded a

westbound train to Texas. She watched out the window while the scenery changed from the civilized to miles of nothing but prairie and became completely mesmerized by an odd-looking plant of all sizes and shapes called a cactus.

It was a long ride, but comfortable, until she finally boarded a stagecoach that became almost airborne as it bumped over the crude dirt roads. The satanic driver carried a whip, and with his deep, guttural “Haaaaw,” he regularly flogged the poor horses that must have been breathing fire. Her nightmare had come true. She had truly entered into the pits of hell!

Chapter Three

A horde of butterflies seemed to be banging into each other in Jude's stomach as he paced nervously, waiting for the stage to come in. He was excited. It wouldn't be long now before the Pink Palace would be legally his. Hell, the woman might be on her way back home by the evening stage.

As he continued to pace, he suddenly heard the galloping of horses' hooves and turned toward the sound. The dirt flew while the stage came clattering down the street and then slowed to a stop. Jude quickly reached for the handle to open the door and eagerly looked at each woman as they stepped down.

Oh, my God, he thought, she isn't here!

"Rattlesnake, what the hell did you do with the Boston lady? Didn't she make this stage?"

"She's here." He nodded toward a disheveled woman who was frantically trying to brush her dress off.

Jude turned to where the driver pointed, noticing a trim figure in a wrinkled traveling dress. He leaned over, trying to see her face, when he saw what state the poor woman was in. He could well imagine how she must feel. A first stagecoach ride was bad for someone who wasn't accustomed to it, especially a woman—especially a Boston woman.

Oh my, he thought. This is going to be so easy.

* * * *

Lorraine was as mad as an old wet hen. In addition to trying to rid herself of the dirt and grit that seemed to have attached itself to her, she felt as if she'd been baked, boiled, and fried by the hot Western sun. The heat had drained all her energy, and she felt wilted, not surprised at all that her finely coiffed hair was hanging in strings around her face.

"Good mornin', ma'am."

When Lorraine whirled around, she found herself looking at the broadest chest she'd ever seen. Her gaze slowly crept up the large body until she was looking into the same stormy blue eyes she'd seen in his daguerreotype, only now they seemed to glow with enjoyment.

"I take it you're Mr. Bonner?"

He touched his hat. "In the flesh."

Lorraine's gaze did a quick assessment of what he called his "flesh" and noticed how rugged and raw he appeared. She stubbornly resisted the feeling of erotic heat she felt and looked up at his mocking smile.

"May I ask what you find so amusing?"

Jude's gaze shifted down to her wrinkled clothes and then up to her disheveled hairdo. "Did you have a rough ride?"

She blew at the stringy hair in her face and said, "Yes, Mr. Bonner, I did. Now, if you could direct me to the nearest hotel, I will try and put myself back together."

"It's right behind me."

She looked past him and felt stupid when she read the sign that said Whiskey Hill Hotel.

"The hotel is also the official stage depot since most of the passengers will be looking for accommodations."

"I see. Now, if you will remove yourself from in front of me, I'd like to get a room."

"It's number twenty-two on the second floor. It looks out on the street, and you can feel a nice northeastern breeze come through the windows once in a while."

She picked up a strand of her hair, removed it from in front of her eyes, and forced a smile. "Well, you seem to have thought of everything. I suppose I should thank you."

"Don't bust a gut or anything. I knew you were coming, so I snatched it up before someone else did."

"*Bust a gut?*" she repeated, and grimaced as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. "What colorful vernacular."

"Thanks. I think. Anyway, the cattle buyers are in town. That's one reason why I'd like to get this business of ours over with."

"You seem to be in a bigger hurry than I am. Why the rush?"

"To accommodate the men who are looking for a little..."

"You were saying?"

"Get that stupid look off your face, you moron!"

Lorraine looked around to see who he was yelling at and caught her breath. Walking across the dusty street were three of the dirtiest, sexiest cowboys she'd ever had the misfortune to see. From head to toe, they were a rough-looking bunch. Their appearance lived up to every picture of a cowboy she'd ever seen. They wore the traditional Western clothes complete with a fair amount of fringe that swung with each step they took, boots, and hats that curled slightly at the brim. Their skintight jeans said so much—dirty words she could only think, not say out loud.

"Ms. Garvey, I'd like you to meet the Daltrey brothers. This here is Shiloh. He's the only one of the three who had a different mother. This here is Blaze, and this grinning son of a bitch here is Sundog."

She watched them as they surrounded her, their piercing gazes making her feel naked. The moment she saw their handsome faces, her guard suddenly went up. If she wasn't careful, she could easily become charmed by their flirting eyes, lush lips, and ready smiles. Saying nothing, her gaze moved to their scruffy jaws and steel-like muscles that rippled even through their clothes.

Blaze had long hair that dragged his shoulders. When she noticed the color, she knew where he must have gotten his name since his

burnished hair looked as if it were on fire when the sun hit it. His firm mouth curled as if on the verge of laughter, and his eyes were so soft and green they reminded her of a warm, misty glade. His too-handsome features were offset by a strong, manly profile.

She could tell with one look that Shiloh was a scrapper. The set of his chin told her he had a stubborn streak, and his dark skin, dark, curly hair, and slight accent suggested Mexican blood. Since he had a different mother, Lorraine was sure she must have been a Mexican *señorita*. His arrogance told her that he was aware of his effect on women. When he looked at her, his midnight eyes glittered chillingly in the shadow of his dingy Western hat, making her sure that his steady gaze was sending her a naughty message.

Sundog's face was bronzed by the wind and sun, and his strong, handsome features might have been misleading if not for a sort of manliness that showed in the way he strutted around. Sundog's presence was not easily overlooked. He smiled easily, exposing teeth that were strikingly white against his tanned face. His blond hair was unruly and slightly curled, and his eyes were as blue and as free of guile as a summer's day. If eyes were the windows of the soul, as she had heard, it seemed strange that he and Jude were such tight friends since Jude's sinner's eyes and Sundog's angel eyes cast them in opposite roles. She knew instinctively that Jude must need Sundog the way a sinner needs the light.

As each one of them nodded and touched the brim of their hats, Lorraine said, "I'm sorry Mr. Bonner thought it was necessary to introduce us since I won't be here long enough to get to know any of you. I'll be taking care of my father's business and then leaving immediately."

"You boys wait here until I get Ms. Garvey settled," Jude told the others.

Shiloh quickly pushed past him. "Oh, no, my friend, we will help." After touching his hat in respect, he grabbed her luggage. "These are yours, *señorita*?" he asked.

“Yes,” she said, still letting what Jude hadn’t said earlier bother her. She allowed him to hustle her into the hotel, but his unsaid words kept digging into her until she finally stopped in her tracks, jerked herself out of his grip, and turned and looked at him. “I have a feeling there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Don’t worry. There’s plenty of time for that.”

“Mr. Bonner—”

“The name’s Judah, but my friends call me Jude. I figure since we’re gonna be spendin’ a lot of time together we might as well be friends. You didn’t tell me what your name was.”

“Mendacity.”

He looked at her and chuckled. “Lady, that ain’t a name, that’s a condition.”

“It means *lies*, Mr. Bonner. If you’d ever spent one day in school, you’d know that. My given name is Lorraine, but since our relationship is purely business, you may call me *Ms. Garvey*. If you’ve planned anything underhanded here, just remember one thing. I’m smarter than my father was, and I can spot a con man a mile away.”

“Oh my, you are a tight-ass, aren’t you?”

She suddenly kicked his shin.

“Owww!” he cried out as he leaned over to rub his leg.

“A tight-ass, Mr. Bonner? You haven’t seen anything yet. For your information, I am my father’s daughter, and the sooner you learn that, the sooner we’ll begin to understand each other.”

“Look, I didn’t even know old Reno had a daughter until I was lookin’ through his belongings—”

“You were snooping, Mr. Bonner! Snooping into my father’s belongings to see what you could steal!”

Sundog jabbed Jude in the ribs. “I told you so,” he whispered as he shuffled by him.

He turned back to Lorraine. “Ms. Garvey, I’m tryin’ to be a gentleman here, but you—”

“*Trying* to be a gentleman?” she said as she whirled around to face him once more. “A true gentleman doesn’t *try* to be. He just *is*.” With that, she quickly turned to unlock the door, but her anger seemed to turn her fingers to rubber. “Tarnation!” she cried, unable to make her hands stop trembling long enough to get the key in the lock.

“Tarnation,” Jude repeated with amusement as he stepped around her and took the key from her hand. “Here, let me do it.” He smoothly inserted the key and turned it. When they heard the subtle click, he opened the door. “Just takes a little patience.”

“Hogwash,” she said with accusing eyes. “It takes experience. I’m sure you’ve had plenty of experience unlocking women’s doors.”

“Only my share,” he said with a sexy wink.

“Ohhh!” she exclaimed as she grabbed the key from his hand and pushed her way through the door.

Jude turned and put his hand against Shiloh’s chest. “You guys wait out here.”

“Hey!” they said.

“It’s okay, boys,” Sundog said. “Jude here just wants to save himself some embarrassment when this *delicate little female* draws blood.”

“Smart-ass!” Jude said and then leaned down to get her luggage.

After taking off her hat, she said, “It’s rather musty in here,” and went to open a window. Her eyes widened when she noticed The Lucky Lady Saloon directly across the street. Trying to avoid the giant painting of a whorish looking woman holding a royal flush on the front, she turned away and saw the bed. When she sat down on it, she found it very springy and began bouncing up and down.

“It sure is springy. It should be fine for sleeping.”

“I’m glad you’re happy with the room,” Jude said, his gaze at an angle as he watched her bounce up and down.

Lorraine laughed like a child at play. “Listen,” she said as her blonde hair began to fall the rest of the way out of her upsweep. “It’s squeaking in rhythm. Over and over—”

"I don't think you should do that," Jude said.

"Why?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Because you might break it."

"But it se—" Before she could finish what she was saying, she suddenly felt herself being pushed back on the bed and kissed. "Get off me!" Lorraine shouted while she struggled. When she finally broke free, she grabbed her purse and began hitting him with it. "You bastard! How dare you try something like that with me? Maybe you can treat other women like that, but I'm not one of your cheap whores!"

"Hey! What the hell have you got in that purse?"

"A derringer," she said as she slid it out and pointed it at him. "And it shoots just as fast and just as far as that monstrosity you wear on your hip! You just remember one thing. I have it with me at all times. Don't think because I'm a woman that I'm easy, or dumb. That's a mistake that'll lead you to your grave."

"Yeah?" he said and pointed at her dress. "I felt something under that dress. Is it another gun?"

"It's a chastity belt, Mr. Bonner. So you see, your plan to rape me didn't work out."

"A fuckin' chastity belt? I didn't know they still had those things around. Do you wear it all the time?"

"I intend to wear it as long as I'm here. My aunt had it especially made for me when she knew I was coming out West."

"What the hell is it made out of?"

"A thin sheet of metal. Pliable, a little stiff, but fairly comfortable. The best part is, it locks."

"You mean you're locked into that thing?"

"I've got a key," she said, pulling the chain out of the front of her dress and dangling it in front of him.

He scratched his head and snickered. "That's the damndest thing I've ever heard of."

“In case you’re wondering, I intend to leave here just as pure as I was when I arrived.”

“Pure? You ain’t pure, lady. You’re just damned cold. If you ask me, you could do with some heatin’ up.” Grabbing her, he kissed her again, his lips hot with a taste of the wild on them.

Lorraine struggled, her arms beating at him until he finally released her.

“Don’t worry, I ain’t gonna force you. Although if I did, it might make a woman out of you.”

“Oh? And what kind of man would it make you?” She could see that her reply hit him right between the eyes and got a perverse pleasure out of rendering him speechless. She returned his defiant gaze for several seconds until he finally turned and stalked to the door.

“Be ready tomorrow morning by eight.”

“Eight? Isn’t that a little early?”

“Not if I have to feed you beforehand. Now I’ve got to go out and warn the population that you’ve arrived.” Rubbing his bruises, he added sarcastically, “I’m sure they’ll be as excited about it as I am.”

Chapter Four

“The woman wears metal underwear!” Jude said. “I’d swear it on a stack of bibles. I’m tellin’ you, Tempest, that woman right there is the reason God made whores.”

“Jude, what the hell is wrong with you tonight?” She picked up the bottle and peeked down into it. “You must have somethin’ in that bottle other than whiskey.”

“Tempest, if I’m lyin’, I’m dyin! She called it a chastity belt.”

“A chastity belt? Oh yeah, I’ve heard of them things. I didn’t think they still had ’em around, though. You know what a chastity belt is, don’t you? The knights back in the medieval days locked their ladies up in ’em. You know, to make sure they stayed faithful while they was out fightin’ wars and goin’ on crusades.”

“Locked?”

“Yeah. With a key and everything.”

“My God, it’s just like she said.”

“*I have a key.*” Jude remembered seeing the key swinging to and fro in front of his unbelieving eyes. He’d seen it earlier, but he’d thought it was some kind of jewelry. He even thought it was rather attractive. Now, in an effort to get the woman and the experience out of his mind, he looked around.

“I don’t see much goin’ on. Business doin’ okay?”

“So-so. Not bad, but it could be better. It’s Sunday night, though. You know how business is on Sundays. The wives are draggin’ their husbands to church and such, so we don’t get many customers. We really should close this place down at least one day a week, anyway.”

“Tempest, that reminds me. You got everything set up for tomorrow? She’ll only be here for a few hours, so you and the other ladies dress up like respectable women and just sit around drinking tea and eating them little sandwiches, okay?”

“Jude, baby, why don’t you forget all that? Hell, we’re not gonna fool her. She don’t even have to come in to know what kind of place this is.” She looked around at the walls and furniture. “Look at the way this place is decorated. We could sit here and make nice until the cows come home, but unless she’s a complete fool, she’s gonna see right through it. As a woman, I can tell you right now, if she thinks you’re tryin’ to trick her, she’ll cut out your heart and serve it to you for lunch.”

“Maybe, but give it a chance, Tempest. She’s a Boston gal, so she probably won’t even notice. You’ll do it for me, won’t you? Just long enough for her to come through here and look around?”

Tempest shook her head and laughed. “All right, sweetie, but I’m tellin’ you right now. Boston women ain’t no different than any other. If you ain’t up front with her, it’ll make her madder. I know what I’m talkin’ about, Jude.”

“Women,” Jude mumbled.

Tempest lifted her long hair and began fanning her face and neck. “Hot tonight, ain’t it?”

“Yeah, and I have a feelin’ it’s gonna get hotter.”

“Hey, don’t worry so. No matter what happens, you still got little ol’ Tempest here.” She rose from her chair and straddled him. “I feel like a wild woman tonight. How about lettin’ me give you a ride on the house?”

“On the house? What’ll Sadie say about that?”

“I can handle Sadie,” she whispered and leaned down to kiss him.

Jude tried to get into it, but the face of that metal-wearing she-devil kept flashing across his mind when he remembered the way he felt when she was bouncing up and down on the bed. He’d been ready then. If she’d let him, he would have had her right there. And then he

learned about that goddamned chastity belt. Suddenly, he pushed Tempest away and got up.

“Sorry, Tempest, I’m just not up to it.”

“What’s wrong, baby?”

“Got a lot of things on my mind, that’s all. See you later.”

“I know what’s on your mind,” she said angrily. “You gonna let that prissy little cunt come between us, Jude?”

“Hey, I’m sorry.”

“You’d better not be savin’ it for her. You know how unhappy I can get.”

“I ain’t savin’ it for nobody.”

“You’re my man, Jude. I don’t let no woman take my man and live.”

The words she said sent a chill up his spine. “That ain’t funny, Tempest. This gal ain’t done nothin’ to you.”

“Yeah?” she said, looking at him with steely eyes. “You just make sure she don’t.”

Jude just stared at her for a moment and then slammed out.

* * * *

I feel like I’m in a nightmare! Lorraine thought as she walked along the dusty street that in no way resembled the clean streets of Boston.

She longed for the graceful Victorian mansions, the manicured parks, the flowering trails with couples walking, women twirling their parasols, and men dressed to perfection with bowler hats and pungent cigars. Here all she saw were crude storefronts, dirty people, and rumbling wagons. This was a crude handmade town that looked as if it had been built in a single afternoon.

Suddenly, she wanted to leave this place. She wanted to get out of this ugly, dirty town that was so different from Boston it made her feel as if she were a million miles from home. She thought back to her

earlier confrontation with Jude Bonner. She'd been sure she'd won the first round with him but now realized she'd won nothing and never would. This was his world, not hers. The most she could hope for was that her business would be over with as quickly as possible and she could get out of here.

As she walked, she saw livery stables, saloons, general stores, and gambling halls and quickly realized that the West was a man's country. Very little here was built for a woman. As a result, the women eventually became as masculine-looking as the men and just as tough. The women weren't to be blamed for their femininity being taken away from them. If they wanted to survive, they had no choice but to become as hard as the men. Suddenly, Lorraine felt a hand on her arm.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

Lorraine turned toward a young woman, smiled, and said, "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, but ever since you came to town, I been noticin' your lovely skin." She rubbed her own face. "Mine feels a little like leather, but yours looks so soft." She reached up, but Lorraine pulled back, avoiding the woman's rough touch.

"Oh, I...I'm sorry."

The woman turned away quickly and Lorraine felt bad, so she called out, "Excuse me, miss...?"

The woman turned back around and smiled timidly. "I didn't mean to bother you. My man's waitin', so I'll just—"

"No, don't go," Lorraine said. "You were asking me about my skin."

The woman smiled. "Yeah. It's just so beautiful. I wondered what you used on it."

Lorraine gave a shrug. "Nothing much. Just a little jar of miracles that has a lot of ingredients in it that are designed to make a woman's skin soft and beautiful. It helps your skin retain its elasticity. I've used it for years and would highly recommend it."

“Las-ti-city,” the woman said, struggling to say the word. “You must know a lot about such things.” She looked around at the store. “Did you get it at the general store?”

“Oh, no,” Lorraine said and smiled. “It came from Boston.”

The woman’s smile dropped. “Oh, well. Too bad.” She smiled timidly as she turned away. “I guess...I guess I’ll be goin’ now.”

“Wait,” Lorraine said and began digging in her purse. When she drew out a small bowl-like bottle, she handed it to the woman. “Would you like to have this?”

The woman took it and held it as if it were something precious. “Is that the las-ti-city stuff?”

“Yes. It’s almost full.”

The woman quickly handed it back to Lorraine as if she were trying to resist temptation. “Oh, no, I’d better not. It must be expensive.”

“There’s no charge,” Lorraine said. “Please take it. I have more.”

The woman looked at Lorraine, wide-eyed. “You mean you’re givin’ it to me?”

“Yes. I want you to use it with my compliments. The instructions are on the label.” Lorraine showed her where they were.

“Oh my,” the woman said as she looked at the printing on the jar.

Lorraine saw her confusion and said, “Here, let me help you. It says that you should wash your face before you go to bed and then apply the cream to your skin very thoroughly and wear it overnight. The next day when you get up, you should wash it off.” She handed the bottle back to her. “Do this every night before you go to bed, and before you know it, your skin will improve. Also, if you will take my advice, stay out of the wind and sun as much as possible.”

“But I have chores—”

“It’s proper for a woman to work around the house and the man to do the outside chores.”

“My man wouldn’t cotton to that.”

Lorraine smiled. “May I ask your name?”

“Sybil.”

“Sybil, believe me, your husband will ‘cotton’ to the idea when he sees how your skin has improved. He’ll probably want to make love more often, don’t you think?”

“Oh, well, he usually goes to the Pink Palace for all that stuff. I mean, when he can afford it.”

“The Pink Palace?”

“Yeah,” she said, pointing toward the end of town. “Of course the ladies in there are all fixed up to please a man.”

Lorraine turned and looked to where she was pointing and saw a pink building sitting upon a rise. “Is that it? That pink building with a sign on front that says—?” Lorraine gasped.

“Yeah, that’s it. The Cowboy’s Social Club.”

Lorraine could feel a burning anger slowly begin to rise inside her until it threatened to blow like a spewing volcano. “Tell me, is that the club that was once owned by Reno Garvey?”

“Yeah, that’s it. It’s really a whorehouse, but I guess you knew that already.”

“Uh, yes. Well, Sybil, I have to be getting along. Be sure to follow the instructions I gave you, and I’m sure you will begin seeing a change in your skin soon.”

“Yeah, and thanks so much.”

“My pleasure.”

Lorraine was walking along the boardwalk toward the hotel when she looked up and saw Jude sitting on a bench in front of the Lucky Lady Saloon. It occurred to her that he had made that bench his headquarters and watched as she went in and out of the hotel. His men, some leaning against the building and others sitting very nonchalantly chewed on matches, but they didn’t fool her. They were all looking at her just as hard as he was. When Jude rose from his chair, suddenly they all stood and followed him over to where she was. She wanted to hit him, shout at him, and accuse him of every

ugly thing she could think of but decided to keep her secret, so she said nothing.

“Mr. Bonner,” she said with forced Eastern poise, “Shiloh, Blaze, Sund—”

“Get inside,” Jude barked, not letting her finish her greeting.

She looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “What?”

“I said get inside.”

“Why?”

“The sun’s goin’ down, that’s why. I don’t want you on the street unless I’m with you. This is a wild town, and you shouldn’t be out alone. You might not like what you find.”

“I was talking to a young woman. What’s wrong with that?”

“There’s plenty wrong with that. You don’t know these people, and they don’t know you.”

“But the only way I can get to know anyone is to talk to them. Besides, she just wanted to know how I keep my skin so soft. It was nothing.”

“Don’t do it again.”

“And what gives you the right to tell me what to do?”

“What gives me the right, boys?” he said, talking to the three behind him.

“Because you’re the boss,” they said in unison.

Lorraine felt the anger rise in her. “You may be their boss, Mr. Bonner, but you’re certainly not mine, and I will do as I please.”

Jude made a move toward her, and she turned quickly and hurried inside. When she got just inside the door, she stopped suddenly and turned and looked back at him. “I’m going to my room, Mr. Bonner, not...not because I’m afraid of you, but because...I’m tired.”

“That’s a good decision. After all, I know a little more about this town than you do, and the dark streets of Whiskey Hill ain’t no place for any lady. Especially one from Boston.”

Giving him a look that told him to go to hell, she turned and pranced proudly up the stairs and to her room without looking back.

* * * *

Later on that night, after a cooling bath, Lorraine was relaxing while sitting on the frame of her window, fanning herself. The night was hot, and her clothes seemed to stick to her, so she peeled down to almost nothing. By the time she got through, she was dressed in a brief silk wrapper and no underwear.

She tried to sleep, but she did nothing but toss and turn. About midnight she heard a knock on her door. Opening it, she saw Jude and his cowboys gathered at her door trying to stay on their feet. There were four of them, and all were big, tough, and so ruggedly handsome that her breath stalled in her lungs.

“Do you know what time it is? What do you want at this hour?”

“I been tellin’ the boys about you,” he slurred, “and they just wouldn’t believe me, so I have to prove it.”

“Mr. Bonner, I’m very tired. If you and your...gang will kindly leave, I would like to retire for the evening.”

Jude smiled back at the others. “See how she talks? So uppity and all. ‘Retire’ instead of ‘hit the sack.’” He looked back at her. “Are you wearing it now?”

“What?”

“That thing. That metal underwear.”

“Metal underwear?”

“Yeah. If not, could you show it to my men here? I’ve told them all about it, and they don’t believe me. So, I brought—”

“Mr. Bonner, I don’t appreciate being made the subject of your drunken ramblings. I would appreciate it if you and your drinking buddies would leave, or I will be forced to get the management.”

“Hey, all we want is a look at that...that...what do you call it? Oh, yeah. Chastity belt! These guys ain’t never seen one before.”

“You want me to show you my chastity belt?”

“Well, yeah. What’s wrong with that?”

“You bastard!” she shouted, grabbing her purse. “I want you out of here. Do you understand? Out! All of you!”

“Watch that purse! It’s a weapon,” Jude yelled out to his gang.

“Yes, it is,” she said. “And so is this!” Suddenly, Lorraine was pulling something out of her bureau drawer and beating them with it. “You want to see it? Here it is, you moth-eaten prairie wolves!”

* * * *

The men ducked while quickly moving toward the door. When they were safely on the other side, they looked at each other as if they couldn’t believe what they’d seen.

“How do you like that?” Jude said. “Beaten half to death with a chastity belt!”

“That was it?” Blaze said. “That metal thing?”

“Yeah. I been tellin’ you about it. It’s her metal underwear.”

“Hellfire, Jude. After that I need a drink. Let’s go back to The Lucky Lady.”

“I don’t know, Shiloh. There was some trouble startin’ up when we left.”

“That kind of trouble we can handle. Just don’t ask me to be in the same room with that hellcat from Boston and her metal underwear!”

* * * *

When the men were gone, Lorraine looked down at her chastity belt and noticed it was scratched up and bent all out of shape.

“Cheap metal,” she mumbled. “It’s a sad day when you can’t even beat up a bunch of cowboys without it tearing up.”

She stood there trying to bend it back into shape, but the more she fooled with it, the worse it looked until the thin metal tore. She was about to throw it away when she wondered if maybe she could find

someone in Whiskey Hill who could fix it. So, instead of throwing it in the trash can, she threw it back down in her dresser drawer.

Maybe tomorrow, she thought.

Chapter Five

Who were they, these men who surrounded her? Why were they dressed in buckskin and boots, their kisses cruel and ravishing? Why did she allow them to touch her with hands that roped steers, pulled triggers, fought in fistfights, and made love with women of questionable virtue? If she preferred the soft, tender strokes of a Boston man, why was her body responding to the rough handling of the kind of man she hated?

Suddenly a fog parted, revealing the bedroom of a whore. She wore a dress of glittering sequins that would be worn by a saloon girl, and her hair was in an upsweep with a wealth of plumes sticking out of it. She began to slowly undress while Jude, Blaze, Shiloh, and Sundog watched.

Before she knew what was happening, she was in the center of four glorious bodies that were making love to her. Her breasts were being pressed and fondled, and tiny jolts of heat stabbed her as they flicked her nipples with their tongues. She responded as one of them kissed her sensitive neck, and another licked her earlobes, sucking and biting them wickedly. It was not something she'd felt before, and it was sending her into a naughty tizzy. She felt their hands stroke her, going below her waist—but that's where the feeling ended. Something was wrong. She couldn't feel anything. She could feel their lips, their hands on other parts of her body, but it stopped at her waist. There all she felt was a wicked want. Curious, she looked down and saw the reason why. She was locked into her chastity belt!

"The key," she called out, her words an urgent echo. "I'll get the key!" She looked down at the chain that should have been around her neck, but it was gone!

She immediately heard a voice echoing from somewhere far off and saw her aunt Harriet holding the key up and waving it. "Don't worry, Lorraine. I have it! They'll never get it from me!"

"Oh no!" Lorraine cried out.

She turned and saw the men back away, leaving her wanting and so alone, her body dead and cold without love, without warmth, without satisfaction. Was this what her life would be like without them?

Suddenly, she lunged forward, sweat creeping down her face, and in her gripping hand, she held the key that was attached to the chain around her neck. She squeezed it in anger, tore it from her neck, and threw it against the wall.

"Leave me alone, you old crow! I'll be the one who decides who shares my bed!"

All at once, a loud knock sounded on her door, sending a tremor of fear through her. "Who is it?"

"Jude," came the muffled reply.

It's him, she thought, remembering her dream.

"Uh, well, all right." Hurrying to the door, she put on her robe and gathered the material tightly up in front of her, hiding herself. When she opened the door, she was shocked to find him shirtless. "Yes?"

"I heard you shouting. I—"

"You heard me? Where were you?"

"Next door. I took a room to be close to you."

"But why?"

"Just to make sure that you're all right." He gave her a sheepish look. "Say, I wanted to apologize for me and the boys earlier. We were drunk to the gills."

The shadows in the hall embraced him as he lounged against her door. With his shirt gone, she could see his muscles ripple as he

moved. Realizing someone might see him half dressed at her door, she moved back. "You'd better come in."

* * * *

As Jude entered the room, he noticed the flush on her face, making it look as if she'd just been making love. He looked around the room and saw the messy bed. "Is anyone here?"

"No," she said, "of course not."

"Maybe I should go," he said, but he didn't move to leave. He just stared. He didn't know what he expected, but seeing her undressed and her hair hanging down, he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

His gaze naturally went to her lips, which were shining and so pink and moist he wondered if the color was natural. Her eyes were a deep purple, like a western sunset, and they sent out a fiery sparkle, like stars that shone from heaven on a warm western night. Her lashes alone could give him chills. Their inky darkness was long and curled, and when she lowered her lids, they swept her cheeks. Her brows were a neat, sculptured line that swept up like a bird in flight, and her hair, which was usually up, was tumbling down around her shoulders. It was pure radiance when any kind of light bounced off it. She seemed to be so perfect Jude wondered if she could possibly be real.

For the first time, Jude realized how young and inexperienced she was, and it made him wonder why she would leave her home in Boston to come out West instead of sending some man to take care of her business for her. He knew in that moment that if she belonged to him, he would take better care of her.

If she belonged to me.

"Look, I just came to see if you were all right. Now that I know you're okay, I guess I should leave."

"I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep. As you can see, I'm fine. I just had a bad dream."

“Yeah,” he said, reaching up and combing his hair with his fingers. “Then I guess I should leave.”

* * * *

Lorraine smiled. He kept saying he should leave, but he didn’t move. Suddenly, she wasn’t anxious to have him go. Without his clothes, he looked so different. His mischievous, lopsided smile and his half-naked body made him seem almost boyish, less threatening, and casually provocative. Her eyes raked across his chest, his arms, and finally shifted up to meet his eyes. Something burned in them.

The strained silence between them was suddenly filled with raucous language from across the way, drunken ramblings, and the shrill laughter of the saloon girls. The voices seemed to surround them as it drifted in on the hot summer wind, its mystical fingers blowing illicit kisses against their almost-naked bodies. It seemed to bring them alive with longing.

Suddenly, she was in Jude’s arms, still floating in her misty, dreamlike lust. If she let herself, she could imagine herself still there, still wanting to yield to the burning sweetness held captive within her, but suddenly, up came her Eastern reserve, and she pushed him away.

“Must you treat me like one of your whores every time we’re alone?”

“You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that kiss. If you do, then, woman, you’re a bigger liar than I am.” He grabbed her, this time with more force, more passion, and pushed her against the wall.

She gasped, loving his forcefulness and feeling more passion than she had ever felt with a man before. With a mighty thrust, he quickly lifted her hands out, making her feel like a biblical whore with her hands held captive to the cross. She knew she should fight, but her body betrayed her, filling her with the melting fire of surrender. It lurked just beyond her Eastern stiffness, telling her to give in to his

lips, his body, his passion. Before she knew what was happening, she felt herself sliding down the wall, his steel-like body against hers.

"I c—can't," she whispered.

"You know you want it," he whispered.

"I..." His kiss muffled her words, shattering that hard shell that she had built so carefully. His warm, sleepy scent of soap and cigarettes sent her senses spinning, and her body craved his hands.

"I want to love you, Lorraine. Let me love you."

His whispered words sank deep into her being, opening up an avalanche of desires—desires that came rushing out through the locked door of her stiff upbringing. The night was dark, they were alone, and no chastity belt held her bound. She slowly opened her thighs, allowing him access to her treasured womanhood. The heat in the room roused her erotic pleasure to such heights, and she felt her cunt throbbing with want. She kept telling herself that it was indecent and that she must make him stop, but where were the words that would stop him? Where was her resistance?

And then, suddenly, she felt his hands moving all over her. His tongue licked her erotically, and his lips grazed her nipples, his mouth open and searching as he kissed his way down her body until he came to her cunt. Her breath stalled in her lungs when she felt him lick her cleft, edging his tongue in little by little until her hips began to move, coercing his tongue to go deeper and deeper still.

"Ohhh!" she cried out when suddenly the musky feel of desire reached upward higher and higher until she at last shattered.

With careful ease, he pushed his cock inside her, starting a raging fire when she felt her cunt begin to stretch. His rhythmic movement pulled whimpers from deep within her throat. Finally, she reached around him and squeezed his flesh, then raked her fingernails along his back. No longer could she hold herself back. She wanted him. For the first time, she felt a hunger so strong and wicked, it was like a savagery that must be satisfied. With his warm, heavy body on hers,

his lips biting and sucking, his hands squeezing, and his cock bursting her open, she knew she was being had by a man—a real man.

He continued to plunge into her over and over again, each plunge starting a newer and deeper ecstasy until she could hold back no longer and shattered again, and again, and again! It was the most amazing experience of her life what this man—this cowboy—was doing to her. The moment one fire was quenched, another would start until she was limp in his arms, the warm, sultry wind blowing across two naked bodies that lay on the planked floor of her room. She'd never felt so much like a woman, and slowly tears began to seep from beneath her lids.

* * * *

Suddenly, Jude felt as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown on him when he heard her crying. He stopped abruptly and looked down at her, at her tears, her body so beautiful, her wet face so young and vulnerable. He couldn't move another muscle. He'd wanted her so much he'd lost his head.

My God, had he forced her?

"...what kind of man would it make you?"

Her words whirled through his mind. She was right. What kind of man was he? A brute? A beast? An animal? Ashamed to face her, he quickly got up and ran out the door.

* * * *

Lorraine watched him go and sat up, disappointed. She knew instinctively why he had quit. He thought her tears were tears of shame. He didn't know that her tears were tears of release, release from years of being only half a woman. Jude had shown her what it was like to be a real woman, and for that she would always be grateful.

* * * *

The next morning, Lorraine chose the most attractive of all her outfits, topping it off with a cute little hat with a point that dipped down over one eye and perched at a saucy angle on her head. After she was dressed, she opened a drawer and took out her chastity belt to take it to be repaired, but at the last minute she left it there, not wanting to be bothered. She moved to turn away, but was stopped by an inner voice.

Are you doing the right thing? You'll be left without protection.

"Yes, I will, won't I?" she mumbled as she thought of Sundog, Blaze, and Shiloh, but mostly of Jude and the way he'd made her feel. They all looked so dirty with sex. She could almost taste them in her mouth. As she thought of each one, she remembered their broad shoulders, trim waists, and the most chiseled chins she'd ever seen, and yet their lips were soft and inviting, almost warm-looking. Shiloh had eyes that were dark and insolent, while Blaze's eyes were compelling and magnetic. The blue of Sundog's eyes was cold and proud and as sharp as a porcupine's quills. But it was their leader, Jude, who stood out among the rest. He was a dark-skinned cowboy with sinner's eyes, eyes that burned with a savage inner fire. She felt a chill when she thought of them—and last night's lusty encounter that still hung on.

Looking down at the chastity belt, she didn't move it but left it there.

Later, she told herself, and turned, left her room, and slowly descended the stairs.

* * * *

When Jude turned and saw Lorraine coming down the stairs, he didn't know if he could face her after last night. Once again he was

taken in by her beauty and stared as if he were looking at a goddess. He'd never seen a woman who could take his breath away as this one had. Yesterday when he had welcomed her to Whiskey Hill, her hair was falling down and her traveling dress was a real mess, but since then he'd learned what a beauty she really was. With so many differences in their personalities, they hadn't gotten along well, but it didn't bother Jude.

After last night, he tried to convince himself that she wasn't and never would be his kind of woman. Educated and well-bred, she drank her tea with her little finger extended while he swigged whiskey with both hands. Sure, she was a rose, but she was a rose with thorns. All he wanted was her signature on a paper that signed the Pink Palace over to him for a certain sum of money. After that, he didn't care if she went back to Boston or rode off into the sunset with the meanest *hombre* in town.

Now as he walked along the boardwalk with her, he couldn't help but be proud, especially when she drew the eyes of every other cowboy on the street.

"Good morning," she said with a blinding smile to those who looked her way.

"Mornin', miss," they replied while taking their hats off and stepping aside for her to pass. It was something that few of them did for the other women in town since they seemed to blend into the scenery after a while.

But not Lorraine Garvey. She was something to see in her Boston clothes and her perky little hat. He could tell by the envious looks on their faces what each one was thinking. For some reason all this was making it more difficult for him to go through with his little deception. The closer they came to the pink mansion, the more he tugged on his collar and the more he grabbed his guns to shift them around on his hips.

Suddenly, he stopped.

She turned and looked at him. “What’s wrong?” she asked and then looked around. “This isn’t—”

“No,” he said, “this is Diamond Jim’s.”

“Diamond Jim’s?”

“Yeah. I just thought we’d have that breakfast after all.”

“But, Mr. Bonner, it’s so late.”

“I know, but a fragile little thing like you needs food. I know for a fact you ain’t had nothin’ all morning. You’ll have me worryin’ about you if you don’t eat.”

She smiled. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m fine. Let’s just continue on to the social club, and maybe I can have something...”

While she chatted on and on, suddenly they were standing in front of the pink mansion, and the squeaking gate never sounded as loud as it did now.

She turned to Jude and said innocently, “What are we doing here?”

“This is...this is...”

“The social club?”

“Uh, well...yes.”

“I see. Well, I suppose we should—”

“Uh...no, I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Mr. Bonner, I have to see the inside if I’m to set a fair price.”

“It’s really not necessary, believe me.”

“I’m going inside,” she said, fire in her eyes. “And if you won’t go with me, I’ll go alone.” So, turning loose of his arm, she hurried up the walk.

When Jude saw her stumbling along with her head bowed and her shoulders shaking, he ran to catch her. “I’m sorry. Oh, God, I’m sorry. I did plan to tell you, really I did, but when we met, I don’t know, there was just no good way to bring it up.”

“Liar!” she yelled, looking up at him, tears swimming in her eyes. “You didn’t intend to tell me!”

Just then a black housemaid came out and said, “Well, hello, Ms. Garvey, we’ve been expecting you. Please come in.”

Giving Jude a look that told him she’d be happy to see him burning in hell, Lorraine determinedly climbed the front steps and went inside. He hurried to catch up with her and took her arm, but with an angry jerk, she pulled herself away.

When the two of them got inside, Jude moaned out his misery when he saw several women gathered around a loom, a quilting frame, and a tea service with finger sandwiches. It looked so fake it was embarrassing. One of the women wore a ridiculous snow white wig, another sat wide-legged, like a trollop, and another had makeup packed on her face so deep she looked like a giant china doll.

“Ladies,” Lorraine said in greeting.

Jude was nervous as she turned to look around. His gaze followed hers as she lifted her eyes to the rafters, looked at the gaudy wallpaper, the tassels and the colors that were so poorly chosen they almost made him sick to look at them. Next, he followed her as she proceeded to a wide staircase that led up to the bedrooms. Just as she stepped up on the first step, Jude stopped her.

“Lorraine, uh, Ms. Garvey, there’s no need to go any further.”

“Oh?” she said, turning back to him. “And why is that? Are you afraid I’ll be shocked?”

“You shouldn’t even be here. This is no place for a lady like you.”

“Coming here was necessary, and now that I’m here, I intend to look into every nook and cranny.”

She turned to continue her walk-through when Jude said, “Why are you being so stubborn?”

She stood still for a moment and then turned back to him. “Stubborn? Mr. Bonner, if you want me to sell you this establishment, you will have to let me look it over. If you don’t want to show me through it, then I’ll have to do it myself. Please wait for me on the porch.”

“But I thought you’d take one look—”

“And what? Feel shock? Disgust? Beg you to take it off my hands? Well, I’m sorry that I couldn’t live up...or *down* to your expectations, but I’m neither shocked nor disgusted until I look at you!” She put her hands on her hips and advanced on him. “You bastard!” she shouted. “You were going to try and fool me, but when that didn’t work, you tried to physically keep me out of this place as if I wouldn’t know after one look what kind of place this is. What do you think I am, stupid?”

Going around him, she ran out, but Jude turned quickly and ran after her. When he grabbed her, she jerked herself out of his grasp, and yelled angrily, “Get out of my sight, Mr. Bonner, or I might just use your own gun on you!”

“What happened to your Derringer?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve got it with me. Just for your information, I already knew about this place from the talk on the street. Now I know why you didn’t want me talking to anyone, but you were too late. I found out, and because you tried to fool me, I wouldn’t sell it to you now for all the tea in China! Did you hear that? I said no sale, Mr. Bonner. No sale!”

Chapter Six

When Lorraine slammed into her room, she locked it and then fell down on the bed and cried for at least a half hour. She hated that bastard Jude Bonner. She hated him with a passion. Finally, she sat up and reached for her purse to get her hankie, but while she was digging, she saw something on the floor in front of her door. She slowly rose from the bed and reached down and picked it up. It was an envelope with a letter inside. She took it out and opened it. It was unsigned and written in print. A chill played along her spine as she read the warning.

Whiskey Hill's reputation for booze and lust is known all over Texas along with the local bad boys. You're playing with fire. Jude Bonner, Shiloh, Blaze, and Sundog are killers. Go back to Boston!

She looked at the note front and back, wondering when it had been delivered.

Maybe the hotel clerk would know.

She quickly got up, put her hat back on, straightened her dress, and left her room. While she was going down the stairs, she saw Jude coming up. They both stopped when they saw each other.

"Lorraine."

"Leave me alone," she said as she hurried down the stairs. Just as she reached him, he stretched his arm across to the other side and clutched the banister to keep her from passing. She stopped and glared at him. "If you will please remove yourself, I will continue on my way."

"Where are you going?"

"Is that any of your business?"

“I think it is. While you’re in town, I’m responsible for you.”

“Really?” she said, a tiny smile playing along her lips. “Then I should give you something to be responsible for.” Lorraine reached down into her purse, pulled out the note, and gave it to him. “I assume you can read.”

“Maybe I ain’t as smart as you, but I did go to school, at least a little.”

“Just as I thought. Shall I read it to you?”

She reached for the letter, but he quickly jerked it away. “I’ll manage.”

She could see his eyes scanning the print. “Well?”

“Where did you get this letter?”

“I found it on the floor when I returned from the soc—” She hesitated, still feeling her anger. “Pink Palace.”

“Someone’s tryin’ to scare you. Ain’t a word of this true. Sure, Whiskey Hill’s a well-known town, but it ain’t no different than any other. You’re from Boston, and maybe you ain’t used to seeing whorehouses, so I guess you’re a little shocked, but believe me, every town has ’em.”

“Tell me, how does your gang play into all this?”

“We’re friends, that’s all. I got to know the Daltrey brothers when we were doin’ some work on the railroad. We took to each other and started ridin’ together. I guess some people might consider us a gang, but hell, here in the West any group of men that spend time together is considered a gang. Some of them rightly so, but not all.”

“Is that so?” she said as she looked closely at him. “It occurs to me that I don’t know you, Mr. Bonner. Just who are you? How do you make your living? Rob banks, hold up stagecoaches, cheat at cards?” She cocked her head, waited for a moment, and then said, “Well?”

“I invest in different things in and around Whiskey Hill. I’ve got an interest in The Lucky Lady, the Pink Palace, a copper mine just outside of town, a silver mine over in Calico County—”

"I heard that area was deserted. I think they call them ghost towns."

"Sure, there's a ghost town there, but there's also a silver mine about five miles south."

"What about the Pink Palace? What's your interest there?"

"Me and Reno was partners, I guess. I spent a lot of time with him, so when he died, he asked me to handle everything for him, which included selling it. He wanted to make sure it didn't fall into unfriendly hands, and since I knew it was a moneymaker, I figured I'd buy it myself."

"I see. You saw an opportunity to rob a dying man of his last dollar. Is that right?"

"Woman, you're about the most irritatin' person I've met in a long time. You got a real bad habit of twistin' up my words. Old Reno was my friend, and I wouldn't take advantage of him in a million years. He asked me to see that the Pink Palace was taken care of, and that's exactly what I'm tryin' to do. I know now that I made the best decision when I decided to buy it, because yours is the unfriendliest hands I've seen around here in a long time. I think Reno would turn over in his grave if you got your hands on that business."

"What a thing to say. If he hadn't wanted me to have it, he wouldn't have left it to me."

"That ain't entirely true. He was gonna leave it to someone else, but his lawyer advised him against it, said under the circumstances you were the lawful heir."

"Under *what* circumstances?"

"That ain't for me to say. If she wants you to know, she'll tell you."

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Then ask Sadie," Jude said.

"Sadie?" Lorraine asked. "Do you mean that...that painted-up *madam* at the Pink Palace? What has she got to do with any of this?"

“She runs the Pink Palace, that’s all. Best business woman I’ve ever seen. Kept things runnin’ smooth after Reno died. She’s a great gal, and famous all over this part of Texas.”

“I’ve never heard of her.”

“Well, I guess Boston’s a little behind the times.”

“Boston is the center of—”

“Boston is the center of Boston!” he said glaring down into her eyes.

With an angry huff, she said, “You are impossible to talk to.”

“Well, Ms. Garvey, you ain’t no Sunday picnic.”

“Tell me, Mr. Bonner, why would my ownership of the Pink Palace be such an awful thing? I am my father’s daughter, after all.”

“Because you’d take it and ruin it with your gossip sessions and tea parties. Reno knew you wouldn’t approve. That’s why he called it a social club. Don’t you realize that the Pink Palace keeps Whiskey Hill alive? If you change it, you’ll destroy the town and all its people.” He tapped the note he was holding. “There’s one thing in this note that’s true. Whiskey Hill is known far and wide because of the Pink Palace. If it shuts down, you’d be drainin’ the life’s blood out of Whiskey Hill. In no time it would become a ghost town like Calico and so many others around here. If you want to destroy the hopes and dreams of the people in this town, go ahead, but I don’t have to stay and watch it. I just hope to hell Reno’ll forgive me, but if he’s lookin’ down at us now, he’ll know I did my best. I ain’t lookin’ to hurt you or anybody, so I’ll just apologize for my part in this little farce and let it go at that.”

“Farce,” she repeated. “I’m impressed. I wouldn’t have thought you knew—”

“Save it, lady. I’m gettin’ tired of all your put-downs. If it’ll make you feel better, me and my gang of killers will be leavin’ at sun up tomorrow morning.”

Her eyes widened. “Leaving? But...”

He crumpled the note, pressed it in her hand, and then turned and left. "I just hope you can sleep nights."

"Mr. Bon..."

When he quickly disappeared from her sight, she stood alone, feeling a chill in spite of the warmth of the day. She could tell herself it was for the best, that to have those dirty cattle-ropers out of her life was the best thing that could happen, but if that were true, why did she feel as if she'd lost something valuable from her life? And what about this town? Would it dry up and die as he had said? She certainly didn't approve of whorehouses, but to shut it down and watch the town die along with it was beyond cruel—it was heartless.

She slowly walked to the door of the hotel and looked into the faces of everyone who passed. Oddly, she thought of the young woman she'd talked to the day before and wondered how it would affect her and her family. The people in Whiskey Hill may not be Boston stock, but they were honest, hardworking people who came west to settle the country. It seemed untamed to her because it wasn't what she was used to, but it certainly wasn't as bad as she'd thought.

Suddenly, she knew why she didn't want to sell to Jude. It wasn't because of her stupid morality. It was because she knew she'd be breaking the only link she had to him. After they signed the papers, he would walk out of her life as quickly as he'd walked in.

But he was walking out anyway, so what had she accomplished?

She'd close the Pink Palace down and never see Jude again. She'd go back to Boston, back to the boring men she'd known before. Men who would never ravish her lips, sending the kind of thrill through her that Jude did. She would never again feel his hot breath mingling with hers, never feel his muscled body over hers, or feel his demanding kisses.

And then she thought of the Boston men. Not one Boston man would ever have reason to feel the impact of her purse on his head because none of those men would step out of line. She knew how her days would be spent. One would pile up after the other, and the boring

men would eventually become a blur as she waited for the one who would be different. She knew now that she would never meet him in Boston. Perhaps they existed only in the wilds of the West where she had met not one, but four of the lustiest men she'd ever known.

She quickly punched the letter down into her purse and walked out into the dusty street and over to The Lucky Lady Saloon. She stood at the entrance for a moment until she saw Blaze and then walked toward him.

"Blaze...uh, Mr. Daltrey."

Blaze turned, the look on his face turning cold when he saw her. "Yes, ma'am," he said with forced gallantry.

Lorraine looked around. "Do you know where Jude is?"

"He was here some..." He turned to look and saw Jude upstairs on the landing.

Lorraine's eyes followed his. When she saw Jude and a strange woman standing in the doorway of her room, Lorraine felt a stirring of jealousy. "Is...Is that his girl?"

"No, she's just one of the girls that works here."

"Mr. Dal—"

"My name is Blaze, ma'am."

"Blaze, has Jude mentioned anything about leaving Whiskey Hill?"

"Yeah," Blaze said, a bit of frost on his words, "he told me the whole thing. Whiskey Hill will be nothin' but a ghost town soon, so you should be real proud of yourself. As for Jude and the others, we'll be leavin' at first light tomorrow mornin'." He tipped his hat. "It's been a real ple...a real experience meetin' you."

"You don't under..." Her words faded when she saw Jude walk up behind Blaze.

"What in hell are you doin' in here?" Jude said.

"I'm just talking to Blaze. Why?"

“Woman, ain’t you got a brain in your head? This is a fuckin’ saloon. Ladies like you don’t come into a saloon.” He took her by the arm and escorted her out. “Now, what do you want?”

She jerked her arm out of his grasp and turned around. “Don’t you know how to do anything but manhandle women? I came in here to tell you that I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I’ve decided that I don’t want you to leave.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Whiskey Hill is your town, and I want you to stay here and run the Pink Palace.”

“What the hell, are you serious?”

“Look, I don’t want to hurt you or anyone in Whiskey Hill. If it’s important that the Pink Palace stay open, then someone has to run it. I certainly wouldn’t know how to do it, so I’d like to put it in your hands. I think it’s what my father would want.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you ain’t gonna change your mind later?”

“If you’re worried about that, I’ll have a contract drawn up immediately. You’ll have a free hand, and you’ll be paid a handsome salary, of course. Is this agreeable with you?”

“I guess I’d be a fool not to take it. All right, you’ve got yourself a manager.”

“Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m very tired.”

“Oh, sure,” he said and stood aside so she could pass.

As Lorraine crossed the dusty street to the hotel she could hear the excitement in Jude’s voice when he yelled out, “Drinks are on me, gents!”

Chapter Seven

“Good mornin’, Miss Garvey,” the stagecoach driver said as he took her ticket. “You didn’t stay long.”

“No,” she said. “My business was concluded sooner than I expected.”

“Well, I hope you’ll come back soon.” The driver extended his hand and helped her up to the seat. “I’m expectin’ a few more passengers, and the horses are being watered, so it’ll be a couple of minutes yet.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Although she could never admit this to anyone, she had learned a startling fact about herself. She’d learned that she was attracted to men like Jude and his gang. When she compared them to the men in Boston, the poor slobs didn’t stand a chance. But to be fair, she must remember that Jude and those like him were of a different breed. Their ways were wild, so much so that they shocked her sensitive Boston upbringing. As a result, they clashed, and a sky full of lightning couldn’t compare to the sizzle of electricity she felt when she was close to them.

Was she a fool for leaving all that behind?

Just then she felt the stage shift while the other passengers came aboard, and the driver took his place.

When he pulled away from in front of the hotel, he cracked his whip and called out his loud “Haaaw!”

The horses began a slow *clip-clop*, but by the time they reached the edge of town and turned onto the northern road, they had caught their stride.

Where was Jude this morning? she couldn't help wondering as they passed the Pink Palace. *Was he already on the job, or was he with one of the girls in the privacy of her bedroom?*

Suddenly she felt something hit her face and gave a quick swipe across her cheek.

What was that? Flying grit? A gnat?

When her finger came back wet, she knew.

It was a tear.

* * * *

Jude knocked softly on her door, but when no one answered, he became concerned.

"Ms. Garvey?" He waited. "Lorraine, are you in there?"

When he still didn't get a response, he stepped back, and gave the door a swift kick with his booted foot. The sound carried down the hall as it slammed open. Jude ran in, but the room was empty. The bed had been perfectly made, and the atmosphere was cold and still, empty of life. With a chill dancing up his spine, he yanked out dresser drawers and looked in her closet, but found nothing. She was gone. He quickly turned and ran down the stairs to the hotel clerk.

"Jason," he called out. "Have you seen Ms. Garvey?"

"She checked out. I believe she planned to leave on the two o'clock stage."

"What?" Jude yelled. "Where did she go? Back to Boston?"

"I assume so. I didn't ask."

"And you let her leave?"

Jason's eyes widened. "Well, it wasn't my place—"

"No, it was mine!" Jude yelled and turned and ran outside. "I turn my back for one minute, and she's gone. What the hell am I gonna do with that woman?" He kicked up dust as he ran toward The Lucky Lady Saloon and dragged Sundog out of a card game.

"Hey, what the hell is this? I was winnin'."

“Lorraine’s gone.”

“Huh? Where? What do you mean?”

“She’s on the stage and on her way back to Boston.” He looked around. “Where are the others?”

“You mean she didn’t tell you she was leavin’?”

“Not a word. I guess she thought with our business taken care of there was no reason to stay.” He gave Sundog a hard look. “And with you guys givin’ her the cold shoulder, I’m sure she didn’t figure she’d be missed.”

“Hell, Jude, don’t blame us. She was closin’ down the Pink Palace. You wasn’t too happy about it yourself.”

“Find the others. We got some ridin’ to do.”

* * * *

As the stage bumped along, Lorraine was idly watching the hot, dusty countryside when she heard a lot of yelping and guns blasting.

“Indians!”

“Oh, God!” she breathed.

“Get down!” one of the men shouted.

Lorraine, along with the other lady, quickly slid out of their seats and sat in the space on the floor. The men drew their guns and hung out the windows, looking for any sign of a pack of wild Indians.

Within only moments the stagecoach stopped, and Lorraine could hear voices. “They sound like white men,” she said to the other woman.

“Do you have any valuables with you?” the woman asked Lorraine.

“Nothing much, just a little jewelry.”

“They’ll probably take it...that and any money you have.”

Suddenly, the door burst open, and the ladies screamed when they saw a scowling face covered with a bandana.

“Everybody out!”

The other three robbers held their guns on the passengers as they stepped out, the men surrendering their guns and holding their hands high.

As soon as they were all out, the leader nudged his horse, galloped toward Lorraine, grabbed her around the waist, and hoisted her up. She struggled and screamed, but the robber ignored her.

“C’mon, boys!” he yelled.

As quickly as they had come, they were leaping back upon their horses and riding away, leaving the driver scratching his head when the strongbox with money, important papers, and jewels was left undisturbed.

* * * *

The horses kicked up dirt and rocks as they turned and rode toward a cave in the side of a mountain. The horses climbed, finally reaching the plateau where a craggy fissure yawned open, the inside resembling the mouth of hell. The leader quickly jumped down, pulling Lorraine with him, and then led her toward the darkness.

She struggled against him shouting, “Get your hands off me, you ape!”

“Hey, hold it down,” he yelled. “Nobody’s gonna hurt you.”

Finally escaping his tight grip, she whirled around and saw him standing there with his hands on his hips. His big, burly presence caused a stab of fear to cut through her, but she stood her ground.

“I insist you tell me what this is all about.”

He stood looking down at her, his hat shading his eyes when suddenly he chuckled. “You gotta be scared clear to the bones, but you still got that mouth on you, ain’t you?”

The voice, she thought. I’ve heard it before.

Curious, she quickly reached up and yanked his bandana down.

Jude Bonner!

Seeing the amused smile on his face as he looked at her messy upsweep and her wrinkled dress, she shouted. "I suppose you think this is funny!"

"I think we've done this before."

With anger prickling at her neck, she turned and began walking, her feet stumbling on the loose rocks.

"Where the hell do you think you're goin'?"

"I don't know, but anywhere you're not is fine with me."

"Boston's in the other direction," he said, teasing her.

"Fine," she said and turned. "Write sometime, Mr. Bonner, so I can have the pleasure of tearing up your letters."

"I guess you're gonna make me do this the hard way," he said, walking toward her and sweeping her up in his arms. "Blaze, find a nice dry place in the cave for the horses, and, Sundog, see if you can scare up something to eat. Shiloh, you'll need to start a fire." He looked down at the bundle in his arms. "I'll take care of the little she-devil here." While carrying her toward the cave, he looked up at the sky. "Looks like rain comin'."

"If you think I'm going to spend the night with you and your gorillas in this cave, you're crazier than you look."

"You don't have a choice. We'd never get back to town before the rain, and I ain't ridin' in the rain for nobody. Besides, you might catch a cold."

"My, how touching, Mr. Bonner, but my health is none of your concern."

"It ain't only your health I'm worried about."

"Oh? And what is that, as if I even cared."

"In case you ain't noticed, you're a crabby woman, and as far as I'm concerned, there's only one thing worse than a crabby woman, and that's a crabby woman with a red nose."

"Crabby? How dare you?"

By that time, he had reached the cave. "This is where you're sleepin' tonight, so you might as well make yourself comfortable."

She looked up at the low ceiling and round, craggy, bowl-like structure and sighed. She had begun to feel the cold and rubbed her arms. "How can it be so cold here when it's so hot in town?"

"Lots of reasons. First off, we're farther north about twenty miles out of Whiskey Hill. This is a place they call Devil's Hole. It's a small hilly area made up of rocks and caves that eventually run into each other, forming a kind of maze. It's always colder here, especially with a storm comin'." Jude reached down and picked up his horse blanket and attempted to put it around her shoulders.

She wrinkled her nose and pushed it away. "What is that? It stinks."

"It's a horse blanket. It'll keep you warm until Shiloh gets the fire built."

"A horse blanket? No, thank you. I'd rather be cold."

"The horse don't mind it," Jude quipped.

"Then let him wear it with my compliments," she answered, and walked away.

As Lorraine paced nervously, she watched the men busily set the cave up with fire and a homemade spit for cooking food, and saddles and blankets were laid beside the fire for a makeshift bed. Still rubbing her arms for warmth, she wandered over to the mouth of the cave and looked out. She moved to go out but was hit with a big gust of wind, forcing her to step back in. Apparently, the wind was picking up, and she could smell moisture in the air. Suddenly, she felt someone behind her and whirled around.

Seeing Jude, she said, "I insist on knowing just what you think you were trying to accomplish by abducting me off the stagecoach and bringing me to this godforsaken cave. Kidnapping is against the law, you know, and I fully intend to press charges."

* * * *

“Why don’t you tell me why you were leaving before our business was finished?”

She turned her back on him and gazed into the storm. “To be honest, I’ve had all of you I can stand, Mr. Bonner. As far as I am concerned, our business is finished, and there’s no reason to stay. Besides,” she said sadly, “all you wanted was the Pink Palace, and now that you have it—”

“I don’t have the Pink Palace. It’s still yours.”

“Mr. Bonner,” she said, turning around to face him, “I think we both know that, for all intents and purposes, you are the new owner. That’s what a silent partner is, someone who has no say in how the business is run. They just collect their share of the profits.”

“Ms. Garvey, you’re a woman—”

“Well, what an astute statement. It has exactly nothing to do with what we are discussing.”

“And I’m a man.”

“My, you’re just full of obvious information, aren’t you?”

“Why don’t you just shut up and listen to what I’m tryin’ to say?”

“You’re a no-good—”

Jude suddenly grabbed her and put his hand over her mouth. “Now maybe you’ll listen. What I’m trying to say is that a business run by a man is incomplete. It would be the same with a woman.”

She struggled to get out of his grip. When she finally did, she slapped his face. “Don’t you ever do that again!”

“You little hothead,” he said, rubbing his jaw. “If I was any kind of a man I’d slap you back.”

“You beast!” she said, backing up.

“What do you want? You want me to just stand here and let you pound on me? Well, think again, sister. What you need is a good spanking!”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, no?” As quick as lightning, Jude grabbed her wrists, and held them tight behind her. While his gaze held her captive, he

clenched his teeth, and said, "If you think I'm going to stand here and take your insults, as well as your pounding, you're wrong. We can make this a spanking party if you want, but I don't think a Boston iceberg would be up for that."

He could feel her body trembling in his arms. Was it fear, or anger? Guilt began eating him up, and it seemed the only way to erase it was to kiss her, so he ravished her lips hungrily, not allowing her to break loose until she melted against him.

* * * *

When he let her go, their eyes met and sizzled making her realize why her relationship with Jude was so stormy. Jude Bonner was a man. He wasn't one of her Boston pansies she could order around. He was a son of the Wild West. A feeling she couldn't describe whirled inside her as she tried to continue.

"N-Now to get b-back to what we were talking about. First," she said, cutting her eyes over to him, "you must consider what kind of business it is."

"All right, dammit, so it's a brothel. The problem is, anyone can tell from a mile away what it is. I think we need to consider the women who live there. Sure, me being a man know what I like, but I ain't a woman and can't give it that woman's touch. I'm just sayin' a nice, tasteful place to spend their time might make their stay a little more enjoyable."

"Are you saying I should stay and redecorate the Pink Palace for a bunch of...?" She bit her tongue, stopping the flow of insults.

"Don't you think it needs it?"

"I'm a silent partner. What I think makes no difference."

"Off the record, then."

She gave a slight nod. "All right. Yes, I'd say it needs a woman's touch."

“You’re a woman with taste. I can’t think of anyone who would do a better job.”

“But it would take time, Mr. Bonner.”

“My God, woman, can’t you call me by my given name? It’s Jude, remember?”

“Mr. Bo...Jude. It would require more time than I had planned on giving it.”

“Plans can always be changed.”

“Again, your wisdom is just staggy—”

He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Would you just quit with the sarcastic remarks and put your hate for me away for the moment and listen to what I’m saying?”

“Hate?” she yelled in his face. “I don’t hate you. It takes too much energy to hate someone. You mean nothing to me, absolutely nothing.”

“Maybe I should tell you how I feel about you.”

“Of course. Do your worst...Jude.”

* * * *

He glanced down at her dress and then up at her dismal upsweep. Seeing her hat sitting precariously on her head, he reached up and removed it along with the pin that held her hair up.

“The first time I saw you, you were a mess.” He smiled. “Kind of like you are now. Anyway, it was hard for me to see past your hair that was falling down in your face, but when I finally got a look at you, you took my breath away. You were...are so beautiful it’s hard to look at you sometimes. Beauty like that has to be respected, and I respect you. Not only because you’re a lady, a woman with such high morals, but for so many other things. I know I let it slip a lot, but I find myself watching my language around you, and I never did that before. I seem to want to put you up on a pedestal, but instead I seem to offend you in everything I do.”

"I never meant for us to get off to such a bad start, but we did, and somehow I can't fix it. I don't even know how. I know I'm not what you're used to. I'm a brute, a rough cob of a man, but I'm afraid that'll never change because I'm a man of the West. I can't do things any different. I just don't know how. Right now I'd like to ask your forgiveness and ask if we could make another start. Hell, you're...I mean, damn...What I'm tryin' to say is you're the first woman I've ever seen that looks good even when her hair and dress are a mess."

A small smile played at Lorraine's lips as she seemed to enjoy his little boy attempt to speak his mind.

"When you're all put together, you're a beautiful woman. You've got a smile that makes me feel all warm inside and eyes that remind me of a beautiful Western sunset." He lowered his gaze to her lips. "And those lips ought to be outlawed as dangerous to men."

* * * *

"Really?" she whispered. "Well, Mr. Bon...Jude, you certainly do know how to get out of trouble, don't you?"

"Trouble?" he said, full of innocent charm. "Am I in trouble?"

She chuckled. "You and your men kidnap me from off the stage and you don't know you're in trouble?" She turned and looked at the others, who were tending the fire. "You're so different, all of you, and I know I've had a problem adjusting to you, but we come from such different worlds it's hard to understand each other."

The warmth of the fire was beginning to spread, giving the cave an intimate feel, making her not only sexually aware of Jude, but his men as well. Normally, she would have moved away, but she wanted him to touch her and boldly looked up at him.

He must have seen the invitation in them because the next thing she felt was his hands reaching up and lacing his fingers through her long hair, her remaining pins falling to the ground. She watched his face come closer, his eyes full of desire and his lips ready to ravish

her. She moaned, her body arching against his, her breasts flattening against his muscled chest. The feel of him sent sharp tingles throughout her body as he brutally pushed her against the wall of the cave. His movements became frenzied as he kissed her face and her lips over and over again. His body was hard, the feel of his muscles thrilling her so deeply she could feel herself becoming wet, hot and wet. In this cave, in the nighttime shadows, while the rain and wind whipped past the mouth of the cave, she wanted him. She'd never wanted anything or anyone quite so badly before.

She felt like a brazen slut, but who cared? She was trapped in a dark cave with four sexy cowboys who had wrapped her in invisible warmth. When Jude began to pull at her clothes, she gasped and then saw the other three coming toward them. She knew what they wanted, and her insides jangled with excitement. The very air around her became electrified. All at once, her dress jacket was off, and the front of her blouse was open, exposing her breasts. She could feel cool air laced with warmth caressing her skin, cold drops of water sprinkling against her body, and when Jude's lips touched her nipples, she felt a delicious shudder. His mouth opened hungrily and madly sucked while his tongue deliciously tweaked her nipples, causing her senses to leap to life.

While her arms were around his neck, he swept her up and took her to a bed of animal skins and laid her down. He continued tugging at her clothes and his until they both lay naked beside the flickering flames, nothing between them but the hot, sizzling air that tickled her skin. He placed himself between her legs and sat with his knees bent, his calves beneath him. With strong, gentle hands he brought her hips upward and over his thighs until his cock touched her pussy. She gasped when she realized her knees were even with his shoulders and she was sinfully exposed.

Suddenly, Shiloh, Sundog, and Blaze were on either side of her, loving her breasts with their hands and mouths. While Jude pressed his cock just inside her, she felt a warm, deep sensation flood her

cunt, spreading up and into her stomach. She looked around her and saw Shiloh's cock, hard and long. It was so beautiful. She wanted it and clasped it with one hand. And then suddenly she felt a deep penetration and cried out with delight. As she squeezed Shiloh's cock, he leaned over her and kissed her, his tongue delving deeply into her mouth. His sweet-tasting tongue and Jude's cock made her writhe.

She rolled her hips, wanting more and more. As they caressed her, her heart seemed to rush to the spot that each of them touched. Heat ran rampant within her. Her eyes opened to shadows on the cave walls and watched little trails of smoke that took carnal shapes. She felt the warmth of the room of rock, each surge of heat enveloping her in its hellish embrace.

Where was she? What was she doing? She'd never experienced desire like she knew it now. She felt like a wanton, wanting, desiring, and knowing that anything these cowboys desired of her she would give.

Before she knew it, Sundog and Blaze were stroking her endlessly in places she never knew she had sensitivity. Their lips, their hands, and their cocks started fire after fire in her, making her moan out her delight.

Suddenly, she felt Jude's creamy, hot substance flood her. He was quickly replaced by Sundog, who mounted her, his cock delving deeply as his mouth devoured her breasts one by one. She clung to him, her hands scratching his back. He bucked, plunging over and over into her cunt, raising sensation after sensation as she screamed and went with him. She could feel herself climbing, his raw, sensuous nature thrilling every part of her. To feel his rough skin against hers exalted her, and the fire he touched her with ignited her and spread throughout her body, all the way to her fingers and toes. After a long ride of sheer pleasure, she savored the feeling of the hot tides as they broke upon them, causing them to clutch each other almost desperately. The twin bursting of sensations whirled crazily within them until at last it was complete.

Sundog left her arms and gave his place up to Shiloh.

Almost immediately she felt Shiloh stroking her breasts, and then suddenly there was Blaze licking playfully at the insides of her thighs. The feeling caused her to soar into a place she'd never been. Before she knew what was happening, she felt Blaze's tongue licking her pussy, nudging it at first. Finally, the stiffness of his tongue tweaked her cunt over and over again, pulling moan after moan out of her as his movements got frantic. She was slowly being coerced into a hot, burning place where she shattered again and again.

While she floated in a euphoric state, Blaze and Shiloh took turns with her, each stroking her up and down her body, their lips, their tongues sucking her flesh, from her breasts to the small mound of her stomach. They finally, one by one, emptied themselves inside her while she moaned and rolled her hips until she was so exhausted she could hardly move. Her heartbeat throbbed against her ear as her breathing slowed, delivering her into a cocoon of carnal warmth, her body aching from being loved so completely.

A small smile played at Lorraine's kiss-bruised lips as she lay quietly listening to the rain and wind as it continued to blow outside. She snuggled down beneath the animal skins that covered her, finally feeling the blessed warmth of the cave that seemed to have finally penetrated her bones.

Or maybe the warmth came from her feeling of complete happiness in the circle of her cowboy lovers.

Chapter Eight

Staying a little longer. Stop.

Will be home soon. Stop.

Don't worry. Stop.

Lorraine.

While the telegraph operator was sending the wire, Lorraine questioned her decision to stay. Suddenly, it was as if she could hear her Aunt Harriet's voice.

You're being a fool, Lorraine! That cowboy only wants one thing. He'll use you until he's had his fill and then throw you away. That's the way they are, you know.

She thought of the night in the cave—of his moving speech. She felt like she'd seen a piece of his heart. Surely that couldn't have come from a swindler, a cheat, or a liar. He must have been sincere. As she was walking back from the telegraph office deep in thought, she saw Jude coming toward her from across the street. The very sight of him made her heart do a flip-flop.

Oh God, don't let it be true. Don't let him be like all the others.

"Hi, darlin'," he said as he walked up.

As Jude hovered over her, enclosing her in muscle and strength, she felt herself melting. His head moved toward her, his lips coming closer and closer, but just as he was about to kiss her, she whispered, "Jude, should we be doing this on the street?"

Jude stopped dead still and furtively slid his gaze around. "I'll be damned. I forgot where we were." He gave her an appealing lopsided smile. "No, I guess not."

“Well, there is my room.”

“You mean the room where that squeaky bed is?”

“Soft, bouncy and private,” she replied seductively.

“I do like the way you think.”

While they climbed the steps together, Lorraine wanted to feel his arms around her again but still had the same misgivings she’d felt earlier and wondered if she was doing the right thing. The day had grown late, and darkness was slowly creeping in, carrying with it the soft twilight of the day. Lorraine went to light the lamp, but Jude gently placed his hand over hers.

“Not now,” he whispered as he stood behind her, the two of them surrounded by the room’s intimate darkness. The only light they had flickered up from the street lamps and the Lucky Lady Saloon.

* * * *

He needed the darkness to mask the fury of his desire. It seemed to flow through his veins like his life’s blood. Slowly, he put his arms around her waist and pulled her to him. His breath blew hot and moist against her cheek as his passion rose. Finally, he turned her around, crushed her to him, and showered kisses along her responsive neck. To his delight, she responded, lifting her hands and lacing her fingers through his hair. To him this was an invitation for more, but when he began undressing her, she suddenly began fighting.

He pulled away and looked down at her. “What the hell’s wrong? Isn’t this what you want?”

“I don’t know. I...It’s what I want, but you’re—”

“I’m what? I’m the same as I was in the cave. Remember?”

“But that was like an erotic dream. The rain, the wind, the fire...and you, and the others. Now you seem...so real.”

“I was real then, too, dammit.”

She looked up at him, at his rugged look and handsome face. “You’re so...oh, Jude, you’re so big and...hungry.”

“Lorraine, you’re not a fuckin’ virgin.”

“No, but the men I’ve had were...sort of, well, tame compared to you. You’re like a wild tornado, an animal, Jude. You’re so big and rough...and untamed. Oh, Jude, I want you, but I think...I think I need time to get used to you.”

“Time? There ain’t no time! I’ll be the same hungry bastard a year from now that I am today. The problem is you. You want to be cold all your life? Because that’s what you are. You’ve been had by men that do nothing until they have permission. You need to know right now that I ain’t one of ’em, sweetheart. I take what I want. This country’s full of lusty men and women that don’t go by some stupid Boston rules. We live hard and love hard. With bullets blastin’ all around us, none of us know if we’ll have a tomorrow, and every minute counts. I’m a man with carnal needs, and I want a woman that can fill those needs. If it ain’t you, then it’ll have to be somebody else.”

With that, he turned to leave, but stopped when he felt Lorraine’s hand on his arm.

“Don’t go,” she whispered.

He turned back to her. “I ain’t changin’ my ways for you or no woman. I don’t want you to be afraid of me, dammit. I want you to be as hot as I am. I may be rough compared to other men you’ve known, but there’s one thing for sure, lady. By the time I’m through, you’ll know you’ve been well loved.”

* * * *

Well loved, she thought. That’s exactly the way I feel every time I’m with Jude.

It was something she’d missed in her life. The men she’d known thought only of themselves, leaving her still wanting. She’d never had love like Jude gave her, and whether he was using her or not, she wanted him.

A sense of urgency drove her as she whispered, "Teach me, Jude. I want to learn how to be a woman."

His stormy blue eyes raked boldly over her, stoking a gently growing fire within her as he reclaimed her lips with his own. When he released her, her mouth burned with fire, a fire that burned hot within her, making her anxious for his hands, his lips, his cock.

Just then a hot wind drifted through the window, and Lorraine could feel him tugging at her clothes. With every piece of clothing that dropped to the floor, the hot wind caressed her naked body with cool, wispy fingers of lust. Each stroke sent a series of thrills running through her, at last exploding in the dark netherworld of her groin. Her rigid Boston body was responding to him like a cat in heat. She felt her old rules turn to mush and a new and more daring set of rules take their place.

And then, like the cowboys she had read about, Jude swept her up in his arms and took her to bed. Through half-closed eyes, she could see his magnificent body as he laid her down gently and crawled in beside her. It seemed as if the soft squeak of the bedsprings were crying out with delight as his welcome body mounted hers.

Leaning over her, he pulled her roughly, almost violently to him and smothered her lips with demanding mastery. She could feel his kisses sending the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl that swept her up in a carnal fire. Her natural instinct caused her to melt into him and open her mouth against his. The feel of his rippling muscles, his hard body, and warm heaviness on hers was as much an aphrodisiac as his kisses. She had to have more and opened her legs wantonly. At that moment, her fine Boston upbringing seemed to fly out the window with the hot summer wind. What was left was a woman with a need as wild and untamed as the man she held in her arms.

Her breath stopped as his hands covered her breasts, the heat of his palms singeing her nipples. A surge of desire swelled within her, and her body seemed to arch naturally. His body touched her everywhere, his cock throbbing as it lay between them. She'd never

known such a lover before, and just remembering how it was in the cave caused a thrilling ripple to spear through her. She wanted it again. She had to have it, even knowing it would be so exciting it would be like a trip to the moon. She just might die getting there.

His lips grazed along her neck, making a path downward to the swollen peaks of her breasts, and she couldn't resist calling out his name. His mouth sucked hungrily while holding the swollen globes with his teeth, his tongue flicking them delightfully. A sizzling heat ripped through her, followed by a low moan while her cunt tingled with delight. His hands, rough from the work of a Texas rodeo rider, moved along her body softly, sliding ever downward until he caressed her abdomen and then her pussy. Her female juices, growing hot with want, hid within its folds, waiting for an invasion.

She opened her legs wider in anticipation, in wanting, her body arching, begging for the harsh feel of his strength.

As if anticipating her desire, Jude whispered in her ear, his moist breath hot on her face. "Take it, Lorraine. Take it in your hand and let it pleasure you."

His words were tantalizing. Slowly, she lowered her hand and grasped his cock, feeling the hardness, then length, and knew the pleasure it would give her. She could feel her cunt growing warm, the juices escaping down her thighs.

"Oh, God," she whispered as she pressed his cock against the folds of her pussy, her heart fluttering, her desires raging. Her hot juices flowed as if her cunt were begging for his cock to take her quickly, now!

"Do it!" he whispered.

And then suddenly the forceful movement of his hips made her gasp as his cock plunged in quickly.

"Ohhh!" she cried, being bathed in the most erotic sensations she had ever felt.

A dark, desirous want took over her body and made her hips immediately push forward to meet his. The fullness she felt was both

frightening and wonderful. He was madly plunging into her, over and over, bringing out of her the wickedest and the wildest sensations she'd ever known. His large, hard cock deliciously stretched her as they shared feelings she was sure no one had ever shared before. She moved her legs upward and circled him possessively. She clung to him, her fingers grasping the skin of his back as he continued his heated plunges, taking her to a netherworld of sin she never knew existed.

He rained kisses on her face, her neck, and squeezed her butt as he pushed his cock in and out in a frenzy to take her with him to paradise.

Very quietly the door opened, and Shiloh, Sundog, and Blaze came in. The room that seemed large before suddenly became small with the presence of these big, rough cowboys and their lusty appetites.

The small room smelled of sex, heated breath, and the hot summer wind that fluttered the curtains. The squeaky springs cried out in delight as the two lovers bounced up and down rhythmically until Jude finally reached the summit of his desire and his seed spewed lustily.

Jude looked around and called, "Shiloh."

Shiloh stepped forward.

"She's one hell of a female. Looks like she's still going, so take her as far as you can, and then give her a blast she can write home about."

"Oh, God, Jude, don't stop now," Lorraine pleaded.

"It's okay, baby, Shiloh's here."

Shiloh quickly slipped in, taking Jude's place. "Do not fret, my beautiful *señorita*," he whispered. "I am here for you."

A thrill speared through her at the sound of his exotic accent.

"Shiloh, oh, God, Shiloh," she moaned and quickly reached for his hard, long cock. She could hear his calming whispers in her ear, feel his hot breath and magnificent body as his flesh pressed against

hers. Shiloh had just started when suddenly Blaze and Sundog were there, one on each side, fondling her breasts like masters. Their lips, hot breath, and teeth grazed along her skin, causing her to buck and moan.

She continued to writhe as a pair of lips moved from her breasts all the way down her body until they came to her thighs, where she could feel them gently sucking and biting. Suddenly, she felt her legs being lifted, and as Shiloh moved away, Blaze's stiff tongue entered her cunt. His tweaking of her clit made her moan out his name.

"Deeper!" she cried out as she writhed her hips. "Go deeper, Blaze."

His tongue seemed to grow, twitching, rubbing, and teasing her until she thought she would go mad. When she was ready, Blaze laid the head of his cock at the entrance to her cunt, pulled at her flesh, and entered her. He fondled her cunt for several seconds, causing her to moan, and then with a master's touch, he plunged in, over and over again, hard and fast, making her scream with delight.

She was reaching for the summit of that ultimate climax when she felt Blaze fill her with his creamy substance.

Suddenly, Sundog pushed him away and whispered in her ear, "I'll get you there, baby. You just go along with me, and we'll get there together."

Sundog had begun plunging into her when, suddenly, she felt the wild throbbing of her heartbeat in her ears. Her reaction to Sundog's primitive gyrations was swift and violent. She grabbed him and clung, feeling his cock push and pull, taking her to the edge of a hellish fulfillment. Her quickened pulse was racing toward an end when it suddenly happened! She at last tumbled over the edge and into the most euphoric moment she had ever known. It was a heat that swirled on and on, and then upward until she felt a blast of pure pleasure. The more Sundog plunged in and out of her, the more of those moments she experienced until she felt empty and could do nothing but lay back in ecstasy.

She lay wilted like a limp dishrag when she felt Jude crawl in bed beside her. He gathered her close as if she were a precious thing he didn't want to abuse or lose. His kisses were sweet and peppered her face, ending on her lips with such a deep kiss she felt herself becoming aroused again.

She raised her hands and stroked his naked chest as he pressed his cock inside her once more. She could feel a coiling desire rise and fill her cunt, again spreading her womanly juices within her as he slowly took his pleasure. The feeling was so intense and pleasurable she almost lost her breath.

"Jude, oh, Jude," she whispered with her mouth against his. "Love me again. Take me to paradise with you."

Instead of mounting her, he pulled her over on top of him and grasped her hips, holding her steady while he pushed himself in and out.

"Ohhh," she moaned, her hips instinctively rolling, her breasts bouncing so close to Jude's mouth he caught them and began biting as if he were eating a succulent fruit.

It caused a jolt of joy to spear through her, and she became wild in her gyrations. As she continued to ride the dirty cowboy throughout the night, she finally felt Jude's release inside her and followed with her own. When it was complete, she lay down over him, hearing the rush of his breath while she tried to catch her own.

* * * *

As Shiloh watched her ass move seductively, his cock began to harden with a fierce want. He wanted her ass and reached down to rub himself when he was reminded of how his big cock might feel when he entered her beautiful little ass. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small vial of Schaeffer's Oil and lathered himself with it as his hungry eyes stayed on her. Its perfect roundness called to him. When he was so hard he had to have relief, he quickly

pulled away from where Sundog and Blaze sat in the shadows and went to the bed. The quiet in the room made the squeaking springs seem louder as he straddled Lorraine, pulled her butt up, and began stroking her anus intimately with the head of his cock. As he became more aroused, he reached around her and squeezed her pussy, inserting his fingers as his lathered cock entered her from behind.

Lorraine moaned loudly, her butt twitching like the devil's own whore as Shiloh plunged in and out of her, his movements becoming frantic and his breath coming hard and fast.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" Lorraine moaned.

Before he knew it, Sundog and Blaze had joined them again, waking the sleeping tiger in Lorraine once more and then taming it until they were all completely spent.

Chapter Nine

Sadie sat at a writing desk just inside the doors that led out onto the veranda of the Pink Palace. She was trying to make up her mind whether she should tell Lorraine the truth about her past or let it lie. While she fanned herself, an occasional breeze drifted in, but not enough to dry the sweat that beaded on her forehead. Lorraine was certainly old enough to be told, but Sadie thought when the time came that Reno would be here with her. She'd never felt as alone as she did at this moment, facing a daughter she didn't know.

She'd only seen Lorraine from a distance and knew that this girl wasn't her daughter. She couldn't be. Her manners were too proper, her speech too soft and correct, and her clothes much too expensive. She might have been born just outside of Whiskey Hill, but she hadn't grown up into the rough-riding Texas cowgirl she would've been if Sadie had raised her. Instead, she had become a Boston belle who lived on The Boulevard of Mansions. For that reason, Sadie simply couldn't tell her the truth. If she'd seen just a tiny spark of the girl that she and Reno had borne, maybe she would've taken the chance. But that girl was gone, and in her place was the kind of lofty, uppity, condescending bitch that Sadie had learned to hate.

Tears filled Sadie's eyes. Why did it have to happen? She and Reno knew it might, but to have it thrown in her face after all these years was heartbreaking. No, Sadie would stay out of her life and let her go back to Boston not knowing. Her concern now was for Jude. As part owner of the Pink Palace and a good friend to Reno, he had become very dear to her. For his own good, he needed to know all about Lorraine before he became more involved. She'd heard him talk

about “the gal from Boston” from the moment she’d arrived and knew he was feeling more than friendly toward her.

Now, after scribbling down the last word, she folded the note and sent it to him by one of her customers. She knew she was taking quite a chance in telling him, but Jude needed to know the truth—even if it meant he would hate her for the rest of his life.

* * * *

Jude’s horse kicked up dirt as he galloped toward the Pink Palace as fast as he could go. When he had received Sadie’s message, it was marked urgent, so he left his bull, Killer, without a rider.

He slammed in, calling Sadie’s name. “Hey, Sadie! I’m here!” Just then he saw her coming out of the kitchen with a tray of tea and whiskey.

“Care for some ninety proof tea?”

“Now you’re talkin’. So, what’s on your mind?”

“First, let me put it on the table here.” After they sat down, she tried to pour the tea, but the teapot shook dangerously in her hands.

Jude quickly grabbed it and said, “Here, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you,” Sadie said, leaning back and closing her eyes while she blotted the sweat on her forehead with her hankie. “Maybe tea wasn’t a very good idea. A cold beer might be better.”

After he put the teapot safely down on the table, Jude looked at her, knowing something was up. “You got something on your mind?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“If it has to do with the Pink Palace, me and Lorraine have decided to redo the whole place.”

“She’s staying?” Sadie said. “In Whiskey Hill?”

Jude shrugged. “For a while, at least. She’s already wired her aunt. Why?”

“What kind of woman is she, Jude?” Sadie asked curiously.

Jude smiled. “She’s passionate, that’s for sure.”

“Passionate?” Sadie asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she’s passionate.”

“You mean she believes in certain things with a passion.”

He leaned over and with a suggestive whisper said, “I’m sure she does, but what I’m talking about is under the sheets.”

“You mean you and she have...?”

“Not only me, but Shiloh, Sundog, and Blaze.”

“Th–Three...with her?”

“Not the first time. The first time was just me and her, but it seems the more we do it, the hotter she gets.”

“I see,” Sadie murmured. “Was she a virgin?”

“No. Why?”

“Just curious,” she said as she began pouring the tea.

“You okay?”

Sadie forced a smile. “I think I can handle it now,” she said and laced it with whiskey. “The reason I asked you here has to do with Lorraine mostly and with the Pink Palace...indirectly.” She handed Jude his cup. “There, that’s a man’s drink.”

Jude took a drink and said, “Now that’s a cup of tea. I wonder if they’ve got anything that good in Boston.”

“Your mind’s kind of on Boston these days, isn’t it?”

“Well, sure. At least where Lorraine’s concerned.”

“Tell me, Jude, why would you be impressed that she’s so passionate?”

“Well, she seems so cold on the surface, but once you get beyond the bloomers, the corset, and that monstrosity called a chastity belt, you’ve really got a hot one on your hands.”

“Your speech, the way you talk about her. It seems vulgar. Since you’ve slept with her, have you lost all respect for her?”

“No, not at all. I’m just surprised, that’s all. Pleasantly surprised, I might add.”

“Jude, what if I asked you if you respect me? I mean, me and my girls here. What would you say?”

Jude seemed uncomfortable. "Sadie, what're you askin' me questions like that for?"

"Because I want to know. I think you had a thing for Tempest at one time. Is that fire still burning, or has another, brighter fire taken its place?"

"I don't think Tempest and me have a future together."

"Why? Because she's a whore?"

Jude looked at her impatiently. "Look, what's goin' on here? Why're you askin' me all these questions? Has Tempest said something?" Suddenly, his eyes grew wide with panic. "Oh, my God, she ain't pregnant, is she?"

Sadie felt a chill crawl up her spine. "What if she was? What would you do?"

"Look, she ain't savin' herself for me. It could be any number of men."

Sadie looked at him angrily. "She's not pregnant, so you don't have to worry."

"Thank God," he said as he put his cup down and jumped up. "Sadie, if the only thing you brought me over here for was to scare the living hell out of me, you've done it. Now I've gotta get back over to the fairgrounds. There's a bull waitin' there with my name on it."

"Jude, don't leave now," she said, her voice full of urgency. "The truth is, I'm scared to death, and I need your help." She hesitated. "But first I have something very important to tell you about Lorraine."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Jude asked as he sat back down.

Sadie looked up at Jude with fear in her eyes, and then with a trembling voice, she whispered softly, "I'm her mother."

Chapter Ten

Suddenly, Jude let out a loud guffaw. “Oh, man, that’s a good one! Her mother. You won’t get very far with that one, Sadie. I already know that her mother died in childbirth. Nice try, though.”

“Her mother didn’t die, Jude. I’m right here.”

The smile on Jude’s face fell immediately.

“You’re serious?” Jude whispered as he looked at Sadie’s made-up face, her whorish clothes, and her bright red hair. “You expect me and everyone else to believe that you’re the mother of that goddess? Why, she’s not even from this earth! She’s untouchable! Pure! A Boston belle! She eats and drinks tea with her little finger stickin’ out! She’s educated, well-bred. She’s not forward. She’s reserved, even bashful, for God’s sake. Sadie, she protects herself with a chastity belt! I just don’t believe it! It’s not possible!”

“I understand,” Sadie said, tears shimmering in her eyes, “and it’s okay.”

“But how did you know she was Reno’s child? I mean, there must have been, I don’t know, hundreds at least.”

“There was no one. Only Reno. We fell in love the first time we were together. I never took money from him after that, and I never slept with another man. Oh, I kept up the pretense, but he was the only one I wanted. When I learned I was pregnant, I stayed at the Pink Palace as long as I could, and then Reno took me to his cabin out at Willow Bend. That’s where Lorraine was born. We stayed there until I was stronger, and then I went back to the Pink Palace, and he took her to Boston to live with his family.”

“But why didn’t you keep her?”

“And raise her in a brothel? I couldn’t do that. Reno didn’t have a cent, and at that time I was just startin’ out, so I didn’t have much, either. Between the two of us, we couldn’t even scrape enough together to get a shack somewhere. It’s just as well because I would have lived in fear of my past catching up with me. I would have died if Lorraine had found out that her mother was a whore. Every time we thought about all the money Reno’s family had and the advantages Lorraine would have living there, it just seemed like the right thing to do.” She looked down into her teacup, unshed tears threatening to fall. “I don’t blame you for not believing me. It’s even hard for me, especially now that I’ve seen her.”

“Are you gonna tell her?”

“No, I don’t think so. She’d be ashamed, and who knows, it might just ruin her life. I couldn’t do that to her.”

“How do you know? Coming from you and Reno, she may be stronger than you think. Or are you not telling her for purely selfish reasons? I mean, you say you’re doin’ it for Lorraine, but ain’t you doin’ it just a little bit for yourself, too?”

“I’m doing it for Reno. She knows only that he was her father. Let’s leave it at that. If I tell her, there’ll be questions. I couldn’t lie to her, so the truth about Reno would come out. Rejecting me is one thing, but if she rejected Reno, I simply couldn’t stand it. He doesn’t deserve her rejection. He had the very best intentions for Lorraine when he—”

“Turned his back on her?”

“That’s not the way it was, Jude.”

“Maybe not, but I have a feelin’ you’re afraid that may be the way Lorraine will see it.”

“Well, wouldn’t you? Do you think she’ll thank either one of us for shoving her aside like we did?”

“So you admit it.”

“I admit nothing. Do you honestly believe she would have been better off scratching out a living in this godforsaken town?”

“With a mother who loved her and a father that thought she was the sun and the moon? I could think of worse fates.”

“You paint a pretty picture, Jude, but it might not have turned out that way, you know.” Sadie got up and began pacing and then whirled on Jude. “For years I worried that some of myself would show up in her, and now you come in here and tell me how *passionate* she is. Well, that may be good enough for you and most of the cowboys in this town, but she’s my daughter, you know. It just reinforces the fact in my mind that me and Reno did the right thing. If she’d stayed here, she would have probably ended up right here in the Pink Palace. You seem to be taken with her. How would you feel about her if she slept with every man that came through the door, was snubbed by the townspeople, and grew old before her time? Her life would have been ruined, and you know it. For my money she’s better off being a Boston snob than a whore.”

Suddenly, Sadie broke down and began to cry while slowly sinking back down into her chair. “I couldn’t let her end up here,” she sobbed. “She had to have a chance at something better. The only thing I had to give her was a whore’s love, and Reno, with him on the run from the law most of the time...” She looked up at Jude. “Don’t you see? Giving her away was the only answer.”

“Well, thank God I’m not your judge, Sadie. Maybe it was the right thing, and maybe it wasn’t. I don’t suppose either of us will ever know just how deeply the claws of the Boston upper crust are imbedded inside her.”

“How about you, Jude? Now that you know, do you hate me?”

“No, Sadie,” he said, laying his hand over hers and squeezing. “How could I?”

Sadie expelled a deep breath and caught his hand in hers and held it for a moment. When she found her voice again, she said, “Thank you, Jude.”

* * * *

Jude stood hovering over a tall bottle of whiskey and one shot glass when Sundog pushed into the saloon and saw him. Walking over to him, Sundog said, "What the hell is wrong with you? If your face gets any longer, we're gonna have to pick it up off the floor."

"I just got some bad news."

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"No, I don't think I can share this, Sundog. It involves someone else. It's a can of worms, for sure. You can believe me when I say you wouldn't wanna know."

"What've you got there?"

Jude looked down at one of his most prized possessions. "It's a picture of old Reno."

"You ain't had that out in quite a while. What's the matter, you start missin' him?"

"Reno gave me this when he knew he was gonna die. Told me not to forget him, and to—"

"Buy me a drink, cowboy?" a soft, sweet, feminine voice asked.

"Sorry, I'm just leavin'," Jude said and then looked a little closer. "You new here?"

"Just started today. Name's Molly." She smiled. "Remember it for when you come in again." She winked and then walked away.

Jude watched her as she gave the same spiel to another cowboy and saw the cowboy buy a bottle and take her to a table and sit down. Suddenly, Molly was gone, and it was Lorraine with the cowboy, filling his ears with lies, saying anything she could think of to separate him from his money. For the first time, he knew what the word "cheap" meant, and he didn't want it describing Lorraine. He remembered being in her arms and sharing her passion—a passion that surprised him, a passion that came out of nowhere, a passion that any man would pay big bucks to experience. Thank God she hadn't been schooled in a whore's ways. Her passion was real.

Like mother, like daughter.

He didn't like what he was thinking and turned to Sundog. "If you need me, I'll be over at the hotel."

He pushed through the swinging doors and hurried outside. As soon as he felt the hot sun on his shoulders, his gaze shifted upward to Lorraine's windows, and he felt a warmth in his gut. He didn't know what love felt like, but this would do. He hurried across the street and skipped up the steps two at a time until he was at her door and rapped on it softly.

"Lorraine, honey, it's Jude."

He heard her moving around inside, and finally the door opened slightly, and she peeked through. "Hello, Jude."

"Hey, what's wrong? Let me in."

"Uh, well, I've got company."

Feeling a spear of jealousy stab him, he pushed the door open and saw a cowboy standing beside her bed. "This room is too crowded, cowboy, so I suggest you leave."

"I think that's the lady's call."

Jude put his hand on his gun. "Maybe, but I'm makin' this one."

The stranger looked at Lorraine. "How about it, Lorraine? Is he the boss here?"

Suddenly, Jude drew his gun and cocked it. "You get out of here, or tell me what you want written on your tombstone."

When the cowboy stood his ground, Jude said, "This gun's got a hair trigger. If I was you, I'd be headin' for that door before my finger starts to itch."

"This ain't over," the cowboy said as he slowly paced toward the door. When he finally made it, he yanked the door open and left.

Jude rushed over and locked it and then immediately whirled on Lorraine. "What in the hell are you doin' invitin' strange cowboys into your room?"

"He delivered a note to me and stayed here in case I wanted to answer it, that's all. What's wrong with you, anyway?"

"Where's the note?"

“Right here,” she said, holding it up.

Jude grabbed it out of her hand.

“I beg your pardon,” Lorraine said and grabbed it back. “The note is addressed to me.”

“Have you read it?”

“I haven’t had time. As soon as he gave it to me, you came bursting in with your threats.”

“All right, see what it says.”

“Please, it’s addressed to me. I’ll read it when—”

“Read the damn note!”

“All right,” she said angrily.

Jude could hear each rattle of the paper as she unfolded it and impatiently raked his fingers through his hair.

Finally, he said, “So what the hell does it say?”

As she read the note, Jude noticed a frown appear on her face. He knew something was wrong, so he quickly snatched it away, and read it.

Secrets of your past are floating around the Pink Palace.

Ask Sadie.

“Oh, God,” he breathed.

“What does it mean?” Lorraine asked.

“Nothing. Don’t pay any attention to it. Someone has a sick sense of humor, that’s all.”

“May I have it?” she asked. After taking the note back, she looked down at the words and then back up at Jude. “Who’s Sadie?”

“She’s nobody. I’m tellin’ you, this note is the work of a crackpot. Don’t pay any attention to it. Someone is just havin’ fun at your expense, that’s all.”

“Apparently I’m not going to get any answers from you.” After pushing it down into her drawstring purse, she walked over to her mirror, where she put on her hat and gloves. “Now,” she said, turning to Jude, “I would appreciate it if you would leave. I have an errand to run.”

“If you’re thinkin’ of goin’ over to the Pink Palace, I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Why? This is the second note I’ve received. You talked me into ignoring the first one, but this one concerns me, and I’ve got to find out what it means.”

“It probably means that you pissed somebody off while you were there the other day. Whoever wrote it is just trying to get even. It’s the work of a childish mind. Ignore it.”

“I’m going, and that’s that.”

“All right, so go, but I’m going with you. After all, I’m responsible for you while you’re here.”

“If you think you can behave, that’s fine. Talk about childish minds, yours could fit into a...” Suddenly, her words stopped.

“Go on. A what? I wouldn’t want to deny you the opportunity to be mean to me again since it seems to be the only pleasure you have.”

“Nevermind.”

When they got outside, Jude extended his arm like a proper gentleman, and she took it.

She’s learning, he thought to himself, *and maybe I’m learning a little, too.*

Chapter Eleven

For Jude, each step he took up the long walk of the Pink Palace was like going to the gallows. Why didn't he let her leave when she wanted to? She was on the stage and on her way back to Boston, shortly to be deposited safely back into her family's loving arms.

But he couldn't let her go.

Call it love, desire, or stupidity, but he couldn't let her pass out of his life so quickly. He asked himself over and over what he saw in her. It wasn't only her beauty. It was many things.

Her frosty attitude was melted by her passion.

Her lofty status was defeated by her kindness to strangers.

Her smile, her frown, every curve of her body, and even her constant criticisms lost all their sting in the face of her fairness.

There was one other thing. She knew what was important and was accustomed to the finer things. Because of all these, he couldn't help but think that if she ever had his child, she'd be an excellent mother.

Is that love? If not, it's a good substitute.

* * * *

"Lorraine, I'm askin' you one more time. Don't do this."

She turned to him, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

"Go back to Boston now. I'm sorry I shanghaied the stage and got you off. I was nuts. I didn't know what I was doin'. The note, forget it. Whatever it is, just let it lie. That way no one will be hurt—"

“Jude, you’re hiding something.” She turned and looked up at the Pink Palace, at the veranda, strangely vacant. “What is it you don’t want me to know?”

“Nothing. I thought you should know, but now—”

“You know what the note meant, don’t you?”

“Lorraine, don’t hurt her. She meant it for the best. They both did.”

“Jude, what are you talking about?”

Just then Lorraine looked back at the Pink Palace and saw a buxom red-haired woman standing on the veranda. Behind her was a dark-haired woman who brazenly came walking out in her shimmy and bloomers.

“Who’s the brunette?” she mumbled to Jude.

“Tempest. She’s one of the girls.”

As Lorraine looked at her, she was reminded of Eve in the Garden of Eden as she slowly ate the apple in her hand and leaned back against the frame of the door with a sly, scheming smile on her face.

“Come in, Ms. Garvey, Jude,” Sadie said. “I’ll be down shortly.”

Lorraine jerked out of Jude’s hold and hurried the rest of the way up the walk and onto the portico.

Jude hurried after her. “I’m asking you one more time. Don’t do this, Lorraine.”

“Do what? You’re leaving a good portion of that request out, you know. Besides, all I’m doing is trying to get to the bottom of this. I’ve received two cryptic notes. One trying to scare the hell out of me, and the other saying something about my past. Now, I don’t care if it harelips the entire town of Whiskey Hill. I’m going to find out just what they mean, and if you don’t want to help me, then get out of my way.”

“Oh, hell, I guess it was bound to happen,” Jude said. “All right, if you think you have to do this, you need to know that you received that note from someone who is trying to hurt you. The only problem is, other people will be hurt as well. If, after you hear the truth, you can’t

accept it, please be the lady I know you are and leave her with her dignity.”

“Her?”

“I can’t say anymore.”

“Fine,” she said, turned, and walked to the door.

The moment Lorraine reached the door, it opened.

“Hello, dear,” Sadie said from the other side and stepped back to let her in.

“I couldn’t stop her,” Jude said. “I tried—”

“It’s all right, Jude,” Sadie said softly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“How do you do? I’m Lorr—”

“Lorraine Garvey.” Sadie smiled. “Yes, I know who you are. Everyone does.”

“Everyone?”

“Everyone in town. You’ve caused quite a stir among our town, or didn’t you know?”

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t.”

“I’m not surprised, of course, since you’re as beautiful as a sunrise.”

Lorraine noticed the way Sadie was looking at her. “Well, thank you, but I don’t think I’m any more beautiful than you, Ms....”

“I’m Sadie.”

“Oh, Sadie,” Lorraine murmured, remembering what the note said.

Ask Sadie.

“Then I suppose you’re the one I should talk to.”

“Oh? And what shall we talk about?”

“Sadie, the games are over. We both know why I’m here.” Lorraine opened up her drawstring purse and pulled out the note.

Sadie took it and read it. “Ms. Garvey, this is the work of a very disturbed young woman. If I were you, I wouldn’t pay any attention to it. Let me wish you a very safe trip back to Boston.” She gave the note back to Lorraine.

“Why is everyone trying to get rid of me all of a sudden?”

“Well, I know from talking to Jude that your business has been taken care of, so I assume you’re in a hurry to get back home. Frankly, I’m surprised you stayed this long.”

“Well, I would have been gone before now if Jude hadn’t kidnapped me off the stage. I think he regrets it now,” she said, smiling over at Jude. When Lorraine turned back to Sadie, she noticed the way she was staring at her. “Sadie, what is it about me that you find so interesting?”

“Oh, was I staring?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I’ve never seen anyone else with eyes that color before, except for your father.”

“My father’s eyes were like mine?”

“Yes. Did you know your father?”

“Not really,” she said as she looked around at the gaudy decorations. “Did he spend a lot of time here?”

“Only when he was in town. Jude looked after things while he was away.”

“Did he travel a lot?”

“Oh, well, you know how it is with cowboys. They’re restless.”

“Being raised in Boston, I’m afraid I know nothing at all about cowboys, and I’ve often regretted not knowing my father. As for my mother, well, there are times I wonder about her. She died in childbirth, you know.”

Just then a tray full of tea, sweet biscuits, and whiskey arrived.

“Are you hungry, Ms. Garvey?”

“No, not very. The biscuits do look good, though.”

“You may have all you want. They’re fresh.”

Lorraine picked one up and bit down into it. While eating it, she looked over at Sadie. “How well did you know my father?”

Suddenly, the teapot and the cups began rattling. Lorraine quickly put her biscuit down and grabbed the tray. "Sadie, you're shaking. What's wrong?"

"N—Nothing. I just—"

"There, there," Lorraine said as she put the tray down and then lovingly began rubbing Sadie's hands. "Is that better?"

Tears rushed into Sadie's eyes. "Are you always so kind, Ms. Garvey?"

"Please, call me Lorraine."

"A—Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, most people don't want to associate with women of my reputation."

"You mean because you're a..." Lorraine blushed slightly. "Well, you know."

"Isn't that reason enough?"

"No, not at all. What those people don't realize is you're still a human being with feelings. People tend to look only on the outside and don't stop to consider what's on the inside." Lorraine smiled. "What I see before me is a beautiful woman, a kind woman, and a very astute businesswoman."

"Businesswoman?"

"Well," Lorraine began, looking around, "you've kept this place going for years, haven't you? I'd say that takes a woman with a lot of business sense." She turned back to Sadie. "You also talk very eloquently. If I were making a guess I'd say you learned more in school than just your ABCs."

"I might have learned one or two things."

"You're to be admired, Sadie."

Sadie was silent for a moment as she looked closely at Lorraine. "I must say you are not exactly what I thought you'd be, either."

“We’re two women that think alike, Sadie, and probably smarter than any man around.” She cut her knowing gaze over at Jude and then back to Sadie.

Sadie laughed and then leaned forward. “Let me tell you a secret. Men are better when they’re just a little bit dumb.”

“Are you serious?” Lorraine asked.

“How is Jude in bed?”

Lorraine’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God!”

“The same could be said for Reno, but he did start this business and—”

“Sadie, come on. Maybe I don’t know much about my father, but I do know that he couldn’t add two and two. He was smart in a lot of ways, but he was not a businessman, and yet this place grew and paid off. I knew there had to be someone behind the scenes that did all the work.” She smiled sweetly. “Now I know.”

Sadie lowered her head. “Oh, God,” she murmured, “this is hard.” She looked back up at Lorraine. “Your kindness matches your beauty, Ms. Garvey. I hadn’t counted on that. I had thought that perhaps, being raised in Boston, you might be a little stuffy and overcritical of those beneath you. I’m afraid your kindness makes it twice as hard for me to tell you the truth.”

“You’re talking about the note now, right?”

“Yes, the note.”

“You know what it means?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Would you please tell me?”

“I suppose I have to,” Sadie said and then lowered her head as if in prayer. When she finally looked up, Lorraine noticed a worried look on the older woman’s face. “You mentioned your mother died in childbirth. Did anyone ever tell you anything about her?”

“No. Actually, she was kind of a mystery. Sometimes I would dream about her, but she was always in the shadows. I never saw her face, but I always felt her love. Even when I was awake, it seems she

was always there watching over me.” Lorraine smiled. “From heaven, maybe.”

“She isn’t in heaven, Lorraine,” Sadie said, her words obscure and cryptic. “B–But she is s–somewhere very c–close.”

Chapter Twelve

“Not in heaven? But—”

“Lorraine, I’m your...” Suddenly, Sadie crumpled in tears, and Jude rushed up from his chair and ran over to her. “I can’t, Jude. I just can’t. Please, get her out of here!”

“It’s all right, Sadie. I’ll take you to your room.”

“Is she all right?” Lorraine asked. “She was about to tell me something, and then she just seemed to crumple.”

“She’s not feeling well. I’ll be right back. I’m just—”

“Please don’t take time to explain, just hurry.”

By the time Jude came back down, Lorraine was pacing and wringing her hands. When she heard him coming she whirled around, grabbed the balustrade, and looked up.

“Is she all right?”

“She’s a strong woman. I think she’ll be all right.”

“What happened? Is she sick?”

“Sadie’s got a lot on her mind right now.”

“Jude, I want to stay here and look after her. I don’t know if it was something I said or what that might have made her sick, but somehow I just feel I need to be close to her now.”

“Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Of course I do. I like Sadie. She’s a very wonderful woman, and if me being here somehow caused this, I couldn’t live with myself. I want to help her.”

“But this is a damned whorehouse! You’d be livin’ in a goddamned whorehouse.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be as if I were taking customers. I’ll rent out one of the rooms just like I did in the hotel.”

“Rent? You’re the owner. Why would you pay rent?”

“Well, I’m sure Sadie could use the money.”

“Whacky females,” Jude said under his breath. “All right, I’ll go over to the hotel, check you out, and get your things.”

She smiled, circled his neck with her arms, and kissed him. “Thank you, Jude. I knew I could count on you.”

“Not fifteen minutes ago you would have applauded while I hung from the highest tree branch, and now you’re kissing me. Can’t you make up your mind whether you love me or hate me?”

“It depends on what mood I’m in.”

“Oh, I see. A woman and her *moods*. I should’ve known.” He gently gathered her to him and kissed her deeply, slowly sinking onto the steps.

Lorraine welcomed his lips on hers. Feeling his kiss get deeper and deeper, she didn’t resist, but gave in to it, welcoming a floodtide of erotic emotions as he guided her into a lush, warm, erotic place. His gentleness soothed her until she felt his hands begin to loosen her clothes. Suddenly, he was someone else, his cock pressing and painful, his chin scraggly and unshaven. He pushed into her, his grunts and groans ugly, his filthy breath smelly, and his slobbering kisses forced upon her. She looked up, her lazy eyes seeing several long red, purple, and gold stripes around her. Like a merry-go-round, she spun faster and faster.

And then he was Jude again, and she melted into him, his lips open and searching while his breath warmed her skin. His body imprisoned her in a web of growing arousal. Even though she was excited at his presence, every time she closed her eyes, it seemed she saw herself standing in a garish room, her appearance that of a loud and gaudy woman with makeup that resembled a clown. She heard raucous laughter and felt rough and rowdy hands clawing at her

clothes. She began to struggle, the man laughing, his beard scratching her face, his lips drooling and smacking as they sought to kiss her.

Suddenly, she heard a scream and realized it was her. The next thing she knew, Jude was yelling at her as she fought him.

“Lorraine! Lorraine!” he called out as he struggled with her. “It’s me, Jude!”

Suddenly, she collapsed in his arms. He picked her up, took her upstairs to one of the rooms, and then sat her down on the bed. “What happened?” he asked after getting her some water.

“I don’t know. Suddenly I was in...” She lifted her eyes and looked around. “It was a room much like this one. A man...some man...I didn’t know him, was pawing me.” She covered her face with her hands. “Oh, Jude, it started out as you, but somehow you changed into this ugly, slobbering man. It was so awful. He was making love to me.” She held her head. “I’m...I don’t know. I’m confused. He was dirty and smelled. Oh, God, what an awful dream!”

“Lorraine, I don’t think you should stay here.”

“But I have to, Jude.” She gave a derisive swipe of her hand. “That was only a dream. I’ve had them before. It was nothing.”

“You’ve had those dreams before? I mean, with the man, the room?”

“Yes, I have. Not always the same man, but the same type, you know? I don’t know where they come from, or why, but they’re just dreams. I think they come mostly when I’m overtired.” She frowned. “The only thing about this one is I was awake.” She smiled nervously. “Odd, isn’t it?”

* * * *

Jude looked at her worriedly, wondering if on some plane she could be having Sadie’s experiences. “I tell you what, why don’t you just lay back and relax while I go see about Sadie?”

“All right, but don’t forget my things at the hotel.”

“No, I won’t. You just rest for a while.”

When Jude left, he was immediately stopped by Tempest.

“Hi, baby,” she said seductively. “Quite a show you put on. I bet them steps ain’t had a workout like that since last New Year’s Eve. What’s the matter? Lil’ ol’ Tempest ain’t good enough for you anymore? You takin’ your fuckin’ with a wedge of lemon now?”

“Not now, Tempest, I’m pretty busy.”

The smile fell from Tempest’s face. “Busy doin’ what? Whatever it is, I bet it has somethin’ to do with that cheap blonde from Boston.”

Anger prickled along Jude’s neck. “She ain’t cheap. I don’t want you talkin’ about her that way.”

“Why? She made of gold or somethin’?”

“Get out of my way, Tempest,” he said, shoving her aside.

“Why, you bastard! I’m fine when you want someone to fuck your dick, but when it comes to that cheap blonde, you act like a schoolboy with his first hard-on. Well, after what I saw on the steps, I know she ain’t no lady! She ain’t no better than me or any other girl here.”

Jude’s head indicated toward Lorraine’s door. “What do you think you know, Tempest?”

“I know everything,” Tempest said with a cunning smile. “Sadie’ll never tell her, you know. She’ll never tell her that the beautiful blonde from Boston is really just a whore’s daughter. Sadie’ll stay dead in Lorraine’s mind...but not for long.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if none of you can tell her, I can.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You’re all afraid of her just because she’s got a little starch in her backbone. Well, this kid ain’t afraid of that cheap slut.”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Why? That’s what she is, ain’t it? Have you made her scream when she comes? Has she called out your name and let you come in her mouth? Have you climbed on her back and took her in the ass? If

you have, what makes her any different than me? Because I take money, I suppose. Is that it?" Suddenly, her beautiful face grew old with years of hard living. "It doesn't matter. Somehow I have a feelin' that whether I took money or not there would always be that dividin' line between us, and I would always wind up on the side with the sluts."

"I'm sorry, Tempest."

"Yeah, sure you are. Well, you were mine until she came along, and somebody has to pay for that."

"So what you're sayin' is she has to pay."

"Why not her? You're all so careful not to hurt her tender little feelings. Let's see just how strong she is." She gave a cunning smile as she turned toward Lorraine's door. "I'm gonna love this."

"Stay right where you are, Tempest!" Sadie called out.

Tempest froze.

"You won't tell anyone, Tempest."

Tempest turned slowly and laughed. "Well, I'll be damned if it ain't the mother swingin' a gun around like it's loaded."

"It is loaded," Sadie hissed.

Tempest laughed. "You can't fool me, Sadie. I know you never put bullets in that thing. You just wave it around to threaten the troublemakers. It's a sick habit if you ask me."

"I'm warning you, it's loaded this time, Tempest, so don't make me use it."

"You won't use it. You're a fool, just like that daughter of yours. That slut took my man, Sadie, and I ain't gonna stand here and let it happen. I'm gonna tell her the truth. If it's a truth she can't handle, then that's just too damned bad!"

"I'm beggin' you, Tempest, don't do it."

"Hey! Blondie!" Tempest called out as she grinned at Sadie. "Want me to tell you a little sec—?"

Before she got the damning words out, a burst of fire leapt from the gun, the bullet hitting Tempest in the chest. Tempest lived only

long enough to gaze at Sadie with a look of shock on her face, and then she fell to her death.

“Oh, my God, Sadie!” Jude cried out.

“Jude,” Sadie whispered as she leaned wearily against the door, “do they hang women?”

Jude stood there staring in stunned silence until he found his voice. “Sadie, what the hell. What made you do—”

“At least now she’ll never know,” Sadie whispered as she lowered the smoking gun.

A surprised gasp came from a nearby shadow.

Chapter Thirteen

The blood drained from Sadie's face when she looked toward the sound and saw Lorraine standing in a pool of shadows. "Oh, God," she gasped as she slid to the floor. "What have I done?" When Lorraine ran toward her, Sadie looked up at her with love and mumbled, "Forgive me." Suddenly, her eyes closed, and the gun fell out of her hand.

Lorraine cried out, "Sadie! No! Don't go." She looked back at Jude. "Jude, help her, please!"

Jude rushed over to Sadie and listened to her heart. When he was sure she was still alive, he lifted her up and put her back on her bed. He quickly wet a cloth, put it in Lorraine's hand, and said, "Keep this on her forehead and try not to worry. I'll get the doc."

"Hurry!" Lorraine urged.

* * * *

As Lorraine gently stroked Sadie's face with the wet cloth, she searched the older woman's features in shock. Her mother? Sadie? She looked closely at her, and in spite of the lines, she was still beautiful. She could see much of herself in Sadie and wondered what the truth was. What was it that had ripped her from her mother's arms? Why had Aunt Harriet told her she was dead? Although she knew her aunt had done the best she could for her, she had always missed a mother's love—a mother's soft, caring arms. What was the secret that lurked deep in Sadie's memory? Was it because Sadie was a whore?

The years that had been cruelly snatched away from her were such a waste. No secret could be bad enough to keep Lorraine from her. Now that she had found Sadie, she wanted nothing more than to erase every one of those worry lines and replace them with soft lines of contentment.

Slowly, Sadie opened her eyes. When she saw Lorraine, she quickly turned her face away. "Oh, God, Lorraine," she whispered, a sob catching in her throat. "What must you think of me?"

"Shhh, it's okay," Lorraine said.

Sadie turned back, slowly. "How much...how much did you...?"

"Enough."

"I didn't want you to find out this way. I wanted to tell you, but when it came time, I...I just couldn't."

"It's okay," Lorraine whispered, tears swimming in her eyes. "Don't worry about it. The important thing is to get you well."

"But you must feel cheated. Maybe even angry."

"Right now I have so many emotions running around inside me it's hard to tell just what I feel. Before I blame someone, I'd like to know how all this came about."

"Jude. Where's Jude? I need Jude."

"He went to get the doc. He'll be back soon."

"There's nothing wrong with me that a little backbone couldn't fix," Sadie said as she slowly sat up.

"Are you sure you should be sitting up?" Lorraine said, afraid.

"Don't worry, dear. I'm a tough old bird. It's not easy—"

Suddenly, Lorraine's reserve broke, and she began crying. "Oh, Mama, how could this have happened? Why?"

"My baby," Sadie whispered. "I've waited a long time to hear you call me that."

Lorraine lifted her tearstained face to her. "Why didn't you and Daddy tell me?"

"We never got the chance, honey. Harriet found out about me, and when we tried to get you back, she wouldn't hear of it. She said if we

didn't stay away she would get full custody. We knew no court would give you to a couple like us—"

"A couple like you? What do you mean?"

"I mean...not married."

"Oh God," Lorraine said. "You mean I'm..." Lorraine looked down at her fidgeting hands, "illegitimate."

Sadie grabbed her hands. "No one cares about that, Lorraine. I know it doesn't help, but this is the west, untamed country. A lot of kids are born out of wedlock. Maybe in Boston it would be a big deal, but here, well, things happen."

"Are there any other things I should know about you and papa?"

"How much do you know about Reno?"

"Only what Aunt Harriet has told me."

"Well, when Reno first came into my life, I was just one of his girls. He was a hard-ridin', fast-talkin' con man that knew how to charm the ladies, and I fell in love with him. Unfortunately, so did some of the other girls. By that time, me and Reno was committed to each other, and I refused to sleep with anyone else. It caused a lot of jealousy between me and the other girls, especially Phoebe Nichols. She caused so much trouble Reno finally had to throw her out. She left, but came back one night and snuck into my room intending to kill me. I was just lucky she wasn't too good a shot. When Reno heard the commotion, he came running in and saw what was happening. He killed Phoebe to save me and became a wanted man for his trouble.

"Since his picture came out on some Wanted posters, he couldn't afford to be seen, so he hid out in a little shack in Willow Bend. Soon after that, I found out I was pregnant. Well, when you were born, we had no choice but to leave you with Reno's family. It wasn't bad, really. They had money, so we knew you'd be raised proper and live comfortably. The years passed, and Reno got in one scrape after the other and had to keep running. With all that goin' on, me and Reno never once forgot about you.

“Later, when you became old enough to make your own decisions, we tried to contact you, but we couldn’t even get near you. Her money had built a wall around you that no one could penetrate. We were also afraid that if you found out the truth after all this time it might traumatize you. So, we left you alone, just praying for the day you would come home.” She smiled. “And here you are.”

“Aunt Harriet,” Lorraine mumbled. “All these years she told me you were dead and made me afraid to meet my own father. As far as she was concerned, the West was an uncivilized land of savages and killers.” She looked over at Sadie. “She passed that fear on to me, I’m afraid. I’m so sorry. It’s a miracle I’m here now. If Papa hadn’t died I’d still be in Boston and still living under Aunt Harriet’s thumb. Believe me, if I’d had any idea you were here, I would have come sooner.”

Sadie smiled and held Lorraine’s hands. “You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

“What now, Mama? Where do we go from here?”

“Would it be too much to ask that you stay in Whiskey Hill?”

“I could, or you could go back with me.”

“Darlin’, I’d never fit into your life there in Boston. I’d stick out like a sore thumb. Besides, there’s your Aunt Harriet to consider. She’d never allow it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Lorraine said sadly. “But I don’t know how to live any other way.”

Sadie gave her a mischievous look. “Ever thought of becoming a cowgirl?”

“A *what?*” she gasped out.

“It’ll take some learnin’ on your part, but if you like horses, and guns, and—”

“G–Guns?”

“No more finger sandwiches, tea in a china cup, and pretty little hats and shoes.”

“B–But...”

Sadie began laughing. "I'm just teasin' you, honey. You can be just as much a lady here as you can in Boston. Hell, maybe you can teach me a thing or two. Why, I'll bet the ladies here in Whiskey Hill would love to learn what you can teach them."

Lorraine laughed. "I could teach them, and they could teach me, right? It'll be a learning experience for all of us."

"Then you'll stay?"

"But where'll I live?"

"There are spreads for sale around Whiskey Hill, or—"

Just then Jude walked in. "Doc's out at the Wilson farm deliverin' a baby." He looked down at Sadie. "Should you be up?"

"I'm fine now," Sadie said. "Jude," she added as she continued to gaze lovingly at Lorraine, "do you believe in miracles?"

Lorraine looked up at Jude. "Jude, if I stayed in Whiskey Hill, how would I go about finding a place to live?" She turned and looked back at Sadie. "For me and my mama."

"You mean you know?"

She turned back to Jude. "I know everything."

"And you ain't mad or anything?"

"Actually, I'm very happy."

A sudden smile broke out on his face. He shot his hat up in the air and shouted, "Yee-haw!"

Lorraine laughed. "You approve, then?"

"Hell yes I approve! I been tryin' to figure out a way to get you to stay." He laughed. "It looks like Sadie here found one."

"There's just one thing," she said as she looked around at the gaudy decorations. "What about the Pink Palace? What'll happen to it?"

"You're right," Jude said. "She usually gives Reno the credit, but Sadie here is the real glue that keeps this place together."

Lorraine got quiet and turned to Sadie. "I guess I have no right to ask you to give it up."

“Lorraine, you’re my daughter. If you don’t have the right, who does?”

“Sadie, I can’t come in here demanding that you change your life up just for me. It would be unfair to you. Don’t you see? It would have to be your decision.”

“All right,” she said, looking up at Jude as if she’d made up her mind. “Jude, it looks like you’re gonna have to get yourself a new madam. I just quit the business.” Giving Lorraine a sweet, motherly smile, she said, “Baby, your aunt Harriet might have done a lot of things wrong, but she sure knew what she was doin’ when she raised you. I ain’t never seen such a purebred lady in my life, and I wouldn’t take that away from you for anything. I’m damned proud of you.”

“And I’m proud of you.”

“Well, if you two proud ladies will listen, I just happen to know about a spread out at Jackson Hole. Me and my men have been thinkin’ about buyin’ it.”

“But I thought you lived in town.”

“You mean at that little hole in the wall? Not really. That’s just a temporary place I stay at when I’m in town. It’s a place me and my men go when we’ve drank too much or if we’re workin’ on a project in town. Hell, I wouldn’t live there.”

“Your men?” Lorraine asked, a smile starting. “You mean you and Shiloh, Blaze, and Sundog live together?”

“Well, sure. They’re like my right arm. I can’t do without them. I hope that ain’t a problem.”

Lorraine smiled, thinking about all the lovely, sultry nights she’d had with them. “Well, if it was just you, maybe I’d say no, but with all of you—”

“You little hot head. You ain’t about to say no to me or my men.”

Lorraine smiled naughtily. “You’re right.”

“We’re usually on the go and don’t get home but about once a month, but with you ladies there givin’ us homemade meals and a

warm bed, who knows? You probably won't be able to shake us off with a stick."

"Let's just get one thing straight," Sadie said. "I ain't givin' nobody a warm bed no more."

"I didn't mean you, Sadie."

"Oh, I see," she said, cutting her knowing glance toward Lorraine.

"It has to have a creek nearby," Lorraine said.

"Yeah, it does. It also has some nice shade trees."

"Does it have a front porch?"

"Sure does."

Lorraine looked at Sadie. "It'll be a nice place for Sadie to sit and play with her grandchildren."

"Do you have anyone in mind, sweetheart?" Sadie asked.

"Maybe," Lorraine said as she slid her gaze over to Jude.

* * * *

Lorraine was helping Sadie get her things together when Jude took her aside and said, "Lorraine, before I ask you to hook up with me, I need to tell you a few things about myself."

Hook up with you.

The minute she heard the words, everything else flew out of her mind. At that moment, she felt a mixture of elation and dread—elation because it meant Jude loved her, but dread because she knew what she had to do. It was time. Time to tell him the one thing that might make a difference in his feelings for her. It was something no one knew but her and the man she had been with. She'd been dreading her big confession, the uncovering of past sins, sins that might cause her to lose Jude just when she'd found him, but it had to be done. She opened her mouth to begin when one lone word managed to blow her other thoughts away.

"He's a gunslinger—"

Gunslinger.

“Gunslinger?” she repeated.

“Yeah.” He reached down into his pocket and drew out a folded-up paper and showed it to her. “The sheriff just gave this to me. It’s a warnin’ from the sheriff up at Cimarron that Kit Kiley is on his way.”

“Kit Kiley. Where have I heard that name before?”

“He’s famous all over the West. He’s heard of me and is comin’ down here to kill me.”

Lorraine’s eyes widened in fear. “K—Kill you? Why?”

“It’s what gunslingers do. They hear of someone, and before you know it, they’re challenging them to a gunfight.”

“But why? Have you ever done anything to him?”

“No, of course not.”

“It’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard. Just because someone mentions your name in a saloon somewhere, Kit Kiley decides he wants to kill you? It doesn’t make sense, Jude. There must be more to it than that.”

“Lorraine, it’s the way of the West. That’s all I can say. He’s just trying to stay number one, and when he hears that someone might be better than him, he seeks them out.”

“Are you better than him?”

“I doubt it. But my reputation around here might have gone on before me. That’s probably how he got wind of me.”

“Jude,” she said urgently, “we’ve got to stop this.”

“We can’t, Lorraine. First of all, if I don’t come face-to-face with this bastard, I’ll be branded a coward, and that’s a tough name to live down.”

“So you’d rather die than suffer a little humiliation?”

“You don’t understand. A man like me has nothing but his name, and I’ve almost ruined that. I’ve been tryin’ to live down a bad past, but the people of Whiskey Hill don’t forget. Now, if I don’t meet this gunslinger, I might as well dig me a hole and crawl in it.”

Lorraine looked at him as if she expected him to say more. Finally, she said, "That's it? That's your big confession? You have a bad past? What did you do, steal candy at the General Store?"

"Big confession? What are you talkin' about?"

"Nothing," she said guiltily and tried to turn away, but he caught her arm and turned her back around.

"Look, I can tell something's botherin' you. What is it?"

She looked up at him, at his irritating, innocent charm, and said, "Jude, haven't you wondered about...I mean since I wasn't a virgin when we...didn't you...?"

"Sure, but it wasn't any of my business. I figured if you wanted to tell me, you would."

"That's true. At least it was then, but now..." She hesitated and started again. "Jude, a few years ago, I had an affair. He was different from other men I had known. He came East to finish his education and set up his practice."

"Was he a doctor?"

"No, it was something else. Anyway, he was very different from the other men I had known, so different that...well, we were from two different worlds. What I'm trying to say is, our love was forbidden."

"Forbidden? What do you mean?"

"Jude he was..." She hesitated. "I think it's proper to call him...colored."

"Oh, my God, you mean you were forced?"

"No, no. I wasn't raped, but he was the one that..."

"What?" Jude asked, almost out of patience.

"He was my first," she whispered.

Jude was quiet for a moment and then said, "You're sure he didn't—"

"No, Jude. I went into that relationship with my eyes wide open. I knew it was wrong, but I was young, and that made it exciting. Since then I've grown up and realize I was playing with someone's heart. It

was cruel of me, but, well, you know how young people are. I certainly didn't count on him falling in love with me."

"What about you? How did you feel?"

"Oh, I guess I thought I was in love, but I wasn't, not really. I was in love with the forbidden aspect of our relationship. Believe me, I've agonized over it a million times."

"Are you sure this man doesn't mean anything to you now?"

"Nate is a friend, that's all. He's not to be blamed for what we did. It was all my fault." She looked at him closely. "Jude, what I need to know is, does this make any difference with us?"

"Well, it's a shock, of course, but people make mistakes, I guess. Especially when they're young. I've made a few myself."

"Oh, Jude," Lorraine breathed, thankful in her heart she hadn't lost him.

"Look, I'd better go now. I need to get together with my men and discuss a few things before tomorrow."

Lorraine's smile suddenly fell, and a deadly dread entered her soul when she heard the word...*tomorrow*.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day, late in the evening a stranger dressed in black came slowly strolling into town on a black horse. His hand lay confident on his gun that was loaded with six bullets, but he would use only one. His sharp gaze raked over the town looking for a cowboy they called Jude. His reputation had grown so that the gunman decided he wanted him out of the way. He turned his horse toward a hitching post outside the Lucky Lady Saloon and slid off. While standing beside his horse, he pulled his gun from its holster, gave the bullet chamber a spin, and then whirled the gun around his finger a few times before he let it fall nice and easy back in its holster.

* * * *

Jude was sitting with his men at a table when the swinging doors squeaked open and the lone gunman walked in. He looked up, recognizing the swagger, the confidence, and the darting eyes of the man in black.

“Get away from me,” Jude hissed at his men, grit in his voice.

“But, Jude—”

“I said get away, dammit.”

His gang slowly backed away, their hands hovering over their guns.

Kit strolled up to the bar and turned. His dark, glittering eyes scanned the room and glared at everyone there. “I’m lookin’ for Jude Bonner.”

A sudden silence fell before the crowd began to move, the sound of their gritty boots scraping along the plank floor as they hurried to get out of the way. Jude rose slowly from his chair. "I'm Jude Bonner."

The gunman's sharp eyes raked over Jude. "So you're the great Jude Bonner." Digging his thumbs down behind his gun belt, he said, "I somehow expected more. They say you're pretty good with a gun."

"Fair, I guess."

"Modesty. I like that. Well, Jude Bonner, I'm callin' you out. Tonight. Sundown. Right outside," he said, nodding in the general direction. "Don't keep me waitin'. I get irritated when I'm kept waitin'."

"Sundown? Why sundown?"

"It's fittin', I think. "The end of the day. The end of a life." He turned his back on Jude and banged on the bar. "Hey, barkeep!" he said. "Whiskey here."

Suddenly the lively strains of "Skip to My Lou" began playing on the tinny piano when the man with garters on his sleeves crawled out of his hole.

* * * *

That evening as the sun crept slowly behind the mountains, Kit Kiley rode into the little town of Whiskey Hill. It was steeped in twilight except for the streetlights that came on slowly as the gray-haired old lamplighter limped along, lighting each one. He noticed that the streets were strangely empty, the town hauntingly full of shadows that stretched, turning each building into a monstrous silhouette.

He slipped down off his horse and paused a moment to check his gun before he slid it back down into its holster. Ready, he walked into the street, found his spot, and stopped. He stood ready, his legs spaced apart, and a killer look in his eyes.

“Jude!” he called out. “Jude Bonner!”

Jude stepped forward. “I’m Jude Bonner.”

“Get ready to die,” Kit said through clenched teeth, and began walking toward Jude with his hand hovering over his gun. He had walked about three paces when suddenly he stopped.

“No, I’m Jude Bonner!”

He had just turned to look when suddenly there came another voice from the other direction.

“No! He ain’t Jude Bonner! I am!”

The heads of both Jude and Kit turned toward the voices, each one stepping out of a shadow, showing himself.

“They’re not Jude Bonner! I am!”

“No, he isn’t! I am!”

“I’m Jude Bonner!”

“They’re all wrong! I’m Jude Bonner!”

The strange thing about each of these men was they were dressed just like the man in the saloon. Each wore buckskin and fringes, with his hat sitting on his head at a certain angle, and his spurs jingled as he walked.

The gunman was confused. He’d seen Jude only that one time, and now with so many walking toward him with shadows covering up their faces, he didn’t know which one was the real one. They kept coming. Monstrous shapes closed in on him from everywhere. He began backing up. What was happening? He turned his head toward each one, and everywhere he looked, he found himself face-to-face with another Jude Bonner. It was like a nightmare. They were closing in on him. How could he be expected to fight all of them? And then suddenly he turned and ran.

* * * *

The next day, Jude stood with the sheriff and several of his friends in the Lucky Lady Saloon.

"I'm absolutely amazed at what happened last night," Jude said. "I can only imagine what Kit Kiley thought when he faced a whole town full of Jude Bonners. Hell, I was as surprised as he was when you all started showin' up on the street."

"Well, we couldn't fight your battle for you," the sheriff said, "but we could sure confuse the livin' hell out of that bum."

"I don't know whose idea this was, but I'm probably standing here today because of it. Thanks very much."

The sheriff slapped Jude on the back and said, "You oughta know, Jude, when trouble comes, we protect our own."

"But I thought I wasn't too welcome here in Whiskey Hill."

"I know what you thought, and as usual, your imagination's been at work again. At the risk of getting a little sappy, just let me say Whiskey Hill is your home, we're your people, and we care about you."

"I don't know what to say."

The sheriff extended his hand in friendship. "You don't have to say anything, but the next time you need help, don't leave it up to your men to do your talkin' for you."

Jude's eyes darted over to where his men stood. "My men? So they're the ones."

"Mighty good group. They got right to work when that gunslinger called you out."

"Well, I think the least I can do is buy you all a drink. Step up to the bar, gents."

* * * *

Meanwhile, Lorraine sat quietly at the writing desk in The Pink Palace while thoughts of a man named Nate Love flitted through her memory. Because of their past together, she hesitated to write to him, but she needed the best lawyer money could buy, and he was the best. Besides, there was no one else she could trust with the story she had

to tell. Even now when she thought of him she felt something stir inside her. Their affair had been short but fiery. Knowing their past, would he help her? She'd broken his heart, and he had broken her...

The naughty thought sat there, taunting her.

Pushing it out of her mind, she began writing. She told Nate the whole story, but when she got through, it took a lot of determination to open the envelope and put her letter in it. Finally, because she had nowhere else to turn, she crammed it in and quickly mailed it before she had a chance to change her mind.

She honestly didn't know if she would hear from Nate, but since their affair was several years ago, she hoped by now any wounds he might have suffered from their doomed affair had since healed.

Now she had nothing more to do but wait...and hope.

Chapter Fifteen

It was getting dark when Nate Love decided to quit for the day. He'd been working late, and when the shadows from the setting sun began creeping up the walls of his office, he rushed around clearing his desk. He was just about to blow out the lamp when he noticed today's mail covered up by some legal papers. Picking it up, he saw a letter from Lorraine Garvey, the woman he'd met and fallen in love with right after he set up his practice in Boston. With hurried movements, he tore into it. While reading it, he learned her father had died and she was in Whiskey Hill, Texas, to sell a place called The Pink Palace.

Since he was a lawyer, he assumed she'd be asking him to draw up papers, finalize transactions, witness signatures, as well as all the other legalities that go along with a business deal such as this one. Instead, she surprised him with a tale that held his interest until his eyes began burning. He laid the letter aside for a moment while he rubbed them, and Lorraine's beautiful face loomed in his memory.

Blonde, beautiful, and...white!

They both knew that their relationship was doomed from the start, but it didn't keep them from meeting whenever they could. She would slip out of her house and they would meet inside an arbor down by a lake that was just a few steps off the walking path. Their relationship was forbidden, but the attraction between them was so fiery it was impossible to ignore. She was beautiful and so fair her skin almost sparkled. Among his own people his skin was thought of as light, but because he knew their love was wrong, next to hers, his skin seemed as dark as midnight. He knew he was reaching for something that was

further away from him than any star, and yet he couldn't stay away. He had to admit that she wasn't the kind of woman he'd pursue normally, but what man could resist Lorraine? They continued to play with fire knowing full well that the day would come when they would be burned.

When that day came, the shadows lingered long and low in the arbor, and danger seemed to lurk in the air about them. The two of them went into each other's arms unable to stop until their hunger was satisfied. That's when he found out that Lorraine was a virgin.

"I'm sorry, Lorraine," he whispered after it was over. "I didn't know."

"It's okay, Nate. Don't apologize. I'm glad it happened."

That evening they said goodbye and he was forced to say nothing as she walked out of his life. He was in agony. He wanted to do the right thing, but he couldn't. If it came out, he would be accused of raping a white woman, and put to death.

From that moment on he nurtured his secret of a forbidden love in his heart. Many times when he passed by her house or watched her from a distance, he ached with longing, but when he touched her, it was only in his dreams.

And now she needed his help.

What would he do? After their little tryst, she had apparently gotten on with her life, but it hadn't been so easy for him. She was a hard woman to forget. If he did this for her he'd fall under the spell of those blue-purple eyes again, and this time he might not escape the hangman's noose.

Any lawyer could handle this, he thought. After all, it sounded like nothing more than a catfight that got out of hand.

Having made up his mind, he quickly picked up his pen and paper to write her a letter of refusal. He was scribbling fast and furious when he happened to glance over at the last page and saw the words, *Madam...mother...mine!*

He dropped his pen, grabbed the letter, and kept reading.

As this new information whirled in his head, he knew what he had to do. Moving quickly, he crumpled up his letter of refusal and began writing another one—and then bought a ticket on the west-bound train to hell.

* * * *

When Nate Love got off the stage, many curious people looked his way. He was a man of about thirty, with a handsome, fearless face that looked at home in the hot Texas sun. The two glittering eyes that looked out of his dark face were bright and restless. His dark hair, wavy and long, fell to his broad shoulders. His form was athletic, indicating great strength and endurance. He was clad in buckskin and a hunting shirt. He wore cavalry boots, armed with Mexican spurs, and upon his head was a hat with a curled brim, ornamented with a diamond five point star in front. On the left side of the crown was an eagle embroidered in gold, as well as a rattlesnake skin that had been made into a hat band. All around him were whispers from those who recognized this handsome, dark-skinned cowboy, but because of his cold demeanor no one had the nerve to speak to him.

His unwanted fame made Nate a loner.

He didn't invite recognition. He didn't meet the people's eyes or ask questions. Instead, he quietly made his way into the hotel to get a room and began his preliminary work in the shadowy lamplight of his hotel room. At about ten, a small tap sounded on his door, and he went to open it. When he saw her, his eyes widened, and he quickly reached for her and pulled her in.

"My God, Lorraine," he said as he looked outside to see if anyone had seen her, "what in hell are you doing here?"

"I had to see you, Nate."

"This can't be, Lorraine. You shouldn't be here. If anyone finds out there'll be hell to pay."

“No one knows, Nate, not even Jason at the desk. He was asleep when I came in.”

Nate ran to the window. “Did anyone follow you?”

“No, of course not.”

When Nate turned from the window, he gathered Lorraine in his arms. “Oh, God, Lorraine, I’ve dreamed of seeing you again.”

She stood breathless as he kissed her neck and peppered kisses on her face and laughed. “Give me a chance to breathe.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just...it’s been so damned long.”

“I know, Nate,” she said as she gently pushed him away and straightened her dress. “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see me? Is that all you’ve got to say? Hell, Lorraine, you act as if there was never anything between us.”

“Of course there was, Nate, but the past is dead. And it has to stay dead.”

“Then why the hell are you here?”

“I’m weak, I guess. I just had to see you, that’s all. I wanted you to know that I hold nothing against you.”

Nate stood over her, his face so close his hot breath was mingling with hers. “There’s someone in your life, isn’t there?”

“Yes, Nate. It’s Jude. We’re in love.”

Nate lowered his head, and suddenly he seemed very tired as he slumped down in his chair. “I’m sorry, Lorraine, I didn’t know.”

Lorraine crouched down before him on her knees. “I’m sorry, but I can’t be unfaithful. You understand. I know you do.”

Nate grasped her shoulders, slowly slid out of the chair to his knees, and held her to him. “I understand only one thing, Lorraine. I love you, and I’ll never love anyone else. I’m as sorry as hell about the color of my skin, but—”

“No, Nate, don’t apologize for something you can’t help. Besides, who knows, maybe my skin color is the one that’s wrong.”

“Maybe,” Nate whispered. “But it still leaves you there and me here.”

“I guess so,” she said, and caressed his face softly. “It was wrong of me to come here. I think I should leave.” After rising off her knees and walking to the door, she paused for a moment. She wanted to leave him with something, so with a mischievous smile on her face, she looked back and said, “If I may offer an excuse for the way I acted back then I’d have to say it was all your fault.”

“My fault?”

“Of course. You were so damned helly lookin’, Nate.” She winked. “You still are.”

When Nate smiled, she turned and left the fantasy world of their love in the past and entered once again into the real world where the mixture of light skin and dark were forbidden.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day after Nate got the whole story from Sadie, it was time to select a jury, so Nate interviewed many people. Since it was a woman on trial, he needed as many women as he could get. The problem was, the woman he was defending was a famous whore that every woman in Whiskey Hill had reason to hate. He had to make sure he chose only mothers with daughters—women whose love for their offspring would shove any resentment aside and identify with the turmoil Sadie was in. He needed women who would look past what she was and see her simply as a mother who was willing to do anything, go to any lengths to protect her daughter from a jealous whore who was hell-bent on ruining her life just because the man she wanted had rejected her.

It had been a daunting task, but at last all his notes were in order, and he was ready to begin.

* * * *

On the day of Sadie's trial, the town of Whiskey Hill had a carnival atmosphere. By this time, the news of Sadie shooting Tempest had gone out beyond Whiskey Hill's borders to surrounding towns, and many were gathered there for the trial. The hotels and boarding houses were full. Temporary betting booths and gambling dens were set up, and even a cowboy who called himself the Sagebrush Troubadour had been hired by Nate to stroll around town with his guitar singing his newly written folk song about the famous madam of Whiskey Hill who shot a whore to keep her secret from

being told. Nate made sure the tune was poignant and haunting and designed with a tear in the tune to elicit sympathy.

Word had somehow got out that Gentleman Joe was going to defend Sadie, and people began to stream into Whiskey Hill from all over Texas. Nate didn't like the label he'd been given, but knew if he could win this case he'd be known for his ability as a lawyer instead of a sharpshooter that had beat Billy the Kid to the draw.

Nate was born a slave in Tennessee, so his life really began after the Civil War, when the slaves were freed. As he grew, he learned that he had great skill in breaking horses and shooting guns. As a way of making money he entered contests. One day he met Tex O'Reilly, an author of dime novels. Tex wrote his story, giving him the name of Gentleman Joe and making him famous all over the West.

Now, while trying hard to live down that part of his life, he walked over to the Lucky Lady Saloon for a drink to help him relax. As soon as he walked in, he slapped his money down on the bar and asked for a beer. While he waited, the cowboy next to him looked his way.

"Hey, ain't you that lawyer that's been hired to defend Sadie?"

Putting the foaming mug up to his lips, he took a drink and then said, "Yeah, that's me."

The cowboy looked closely at him, and then said, "You look familiar. You from around here?"

"No, I'm from South Dakota."

"South Dakota," the cowboy said, looking closely at him. "Deadwood, South Dakota?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"My God, they're right. You're Gentleman Joe."

Nate tried to deny it, but when the man kept on and on, he finally grabbed him by the collar and got into his face. "Look, I'm here to do a job. If you're smart you'll leave me alone and let me do it."

The cowboy's eyes sparkled with excitement as he continued. "I hear you're about the fastest gun this side of the Mississippi. How about givin' us a demonstration?"

"Look, all that's past. Gentleman Joe is just a name some writer gave me when I was a kid, okay? My name is Nate Love, and I'm a lawyer, see. I'm through bein' some sideshow clown."

The cowboy gave him a suspicious look. "What's the matter? The old gun hand ain't as good as it used to be? Tex O'Reilly says you can shoot the fly off a dog's ear a mile away."

"Only stupid people believe everything they hear."

"Yeah? Then it ain't true, huh? Or maybe you're just a little rusty. Is that it?"

As Nate stood there listening to the cowboy needle him, the palms of his gun hand began to itch. He knew he could shock everyone here if he wanted to. He could put on a show for them they'd never forget.

"Tex said you roped, threw, tied bridles, saddled, and mounted a mustang in exactly nine minutes. Said you took that two hundred dollar prize away from some of the best riders there. 'Course, that was a long time ago. I can understand if you ain't as good as you used to be. Ain't no use in—"

To shut the cowboy up, suddenly Nate whirled around. "So you want a demonstration, do you?"

The crowd began to clap and yell.

Nate looked around. On the opposite side of the saloon he saw a stuffed buffalo head mounted on the wall and a globe just below it. He slowly turned his back to it and then suddenly whirled around, drew his gun lightning fast, and shot six times, one after the other. As gun smoke drifted up from the barrel, he blew it away, dropped it down into his holster, and casually turned back to his beer.

The crowd looked at him and then at the lamp. "That lamp's still in one piece. You didn't even hit it once."

"I wasn't aimin' at the lamp," Nate said and continued calmly drinking his beer.

With a curious frown on their faces, the cowboys walked up to the buffalo's face and saw that one eye had been shot out. They looked around to see where the other bullets had gone, but finally realized he had shot all six bullets into the buffalo's eye, one on top of the other.

The crowd went wild.

"Take that and shove it up your sorry asses," Nate mumbled as he made his way through all the adulation to leave. "I'd love to stay, but I have a case to defend."

* * * *

When the hour of the trial came and Sadie was led into the courtroom, a thick silence hung heavy in the air. If the jury thought they were going to see a brassy woman dressed in sequins and feathers speaking in a guttural, raspy voice, they were very badly mistaken. Instead, Sadie walked into the courtroom looking like one of them. She left her jewelry, makeup, and feathers at home, and her voice held a tear as she convinced the whole town of her remorse for what she'd done. The onlookers seemed to hang on to Sadie's every word until at last the long and terrible tale came out. Her only excuse was that she'd lost her mind for a moment when she saw someone determined to hurt her *baby*.

By the time it came for the verdict to be read, almost everyone in the court was in tears. At the direction of the judge, Sadie rose from her chair and stood very dignified and reserved before him. But when she heard the words *not guilty* come from the foreman of the jury she collapsed in a flood of tears, realizing she had just barely escaped the hangman's noose.

A celebration broke out and lasted far into the night.

* * * *

The next day, Lorraine and Nate sat just inside the hotel waiting for the stagecoach to arrive. "I think you've found a life here, Lorraine. I'm happy for you."

"Nate, thank you so much for defending Sadie. I know it was hard to come here, to be reminded of the past. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"You don't know how close I came to saying no for those very reasons, but I just couldn't. When I realized how much you needed me wild horses couldn't have kept me away."

"I did love you, Nate. If I hadn't I couldn't have given myself to you."

"Lorraine, it was wrong of me to think we could ever have a future together. A white woman, and a—"

She reached up and put her finger up to his mouth. "Nate, had I loved you enough that wouldn't have made any difference."

Nate smiled and caught her hand in his. "I know. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. After all, if we had got together you never would have met your Wild West cowboy. Are you going to tell him about us?"

"I already have."

"How did he take it?"

"Like the man I knew him to be."

"You're a lucky woman, Lorraine. Not many men would be so understanding. Better not let him get away."

"He is the one, Nate. I've never experienced love like I have with him."

Nate cut his gaze over to her, and said, "I could've gone all day without hearing that."

"Oh...I didn't mean...you were good, too." She struggled with her words. "I mean, even if he were the worst lover in the world I would still...What I'm trying to say is it's right because I love him, Nate."

He grabbed both her hands and held them in his. "Hey, it's okay. You don't owe me any explanation. I hope you'll both be very happy."

Just then the stagecoach rattled up to the hotel, and Nate rose slowly from the sofa and picked up his bag. "Well, time to leave," he said as he gazed deeply into her eyes. "I guess this is goodbye."

"Goodbye, Nate. And don't worry. She'll come along some day."

"Sure, but will she be as good as Lorraine Garvey?"

"She'll be better."

He smiled. "I doubt that, but one can only hope."

Lorraine took his arm to walk outside with him, but Nate pulled away. "No, Lorraine. Don't come out with me. We're strangers, remember?"

"But Nate—" she said, as her eyes began to shimmer with tears.

"No, Lorraine. It'll be best this way. This is your home now. You don't want to give people a reason to talk."

"If you say so," she whispered, and stood silently as he walked away. Just before he passed through the door he looked back, and she saw his dark eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Nate," she whispered as she felt a piece of her heart go with him. She knew in that moment that she would never see Nate Love again.

Epilogue

After the trial, Lorraine and Sadie moved into Jude's newly acquired ranch house. While putting things away, Lorraine made a pile of her belongings she intended to throw out when she came across something she'd forgotten about.

With a wicked smile on her face, she called out, "Jude!"

"Yeah," he said, sticking his head through the door.

She held something up and said, "Remember this?"

He laughed. "I sure do. It looks a little battle-worn. What are you gonna to do with it?"

She tapped her finger on her chin for a moment as if she were thinking, and then said, "Oh, I've got some delicious plans."

Jude stepped all the way into the room, and took her in his arms. "Well, I hope it don't have nothin' to do with me."

"No, of course not."

"Good. My head's still hurtin' from the last time I was hit with that thing."

"Makes a great weapon, don't you think?"

"Even better than that damned Derringer you carried around. I have a feelin' you've got something naughty on your mind."

"How do you know?"

"Because every time you do, you get this real wicked gleam in your eyes."

"I just think somebody needs a little payback."

Jude threw up his hands. "I don't want to know nothin'. I just feel sorry for the poor bastard that's gonna be on the receivin' end of that thing."

Lorraine laughed and then turned back to her sorting. She had intended to discard it, but as a little payback for all the years she'd been lied to, she decided to shock the pants off her aunt by packing it up and sending it back to her.

* * * *

Back in Boston, a package arrived for Harriet.

"Oh, look!" she said, excited. "It's a package from Lorraine. I wonder what it is." She quickly tore into it, pulled back the tissue paper, and gasped. After quickly reaching for her smelling salts, she fell back on her chaise and began fanning herself with her hankie.

Lying on the floor where Harriet had dropped it was the package that contained Lorraine's symbol of freedom, her torn, dented, and scratched-up chastity belt—with a broken lock!

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who is Kelly Conrad you might ask. I can certainly understand your confusion, so let me tell you a little something about myself. I'm new, so many of you probably don't recognize my name. Let me assure you, I'm not anyone special, just someone who loves to write, and I love to write western ménage romances. Why write romance, you might ask? The answer is simple. Because love stories have always been a major part of the books I've loved. Even more so, it's because I love writing romantic heroes no matter if they're the normal every day type, lusty cowboys, or the dark, dangerous "were" type you meet only in your fantasies. I write about men who sweep both heroines and readers off their feet – not to mention their authors, too!

My other love is the arts. Singing, dancing, acting. But life happens, right? One day I got sidetracked, and my love for writing kind of faded into the woodwork. And then one day fate hit me upside the head and woke me up. I realized then that dreams are good, but unless acted upon they'll stay nothing but dreams forever. So I put myself in gear and began reading all the 'how to' books I could find and even went to a writing school. Actually, I learned quite a bit. I finally got to the point that I had absorbed about everything I could, and anymore time spent reading about writing instead of writing, was time wasted. So, I did it. I dusted off my computer and began. After my share of rejections I finally hit pay dirt and hit the ground running. The rest is history.

I currently live on the East Coast. Sometimes I get a deep longing to go back to Texas, and will someday, but right now I'm enjoying the beach, and sowing my wild oats. <wink>

I hope you enjoy ***Wild Texas Heat***. I'll have another book coming out in the near future, so be sure to look for it. You may contact me at TexasBMenage@aol.com.

Thanks.

Also by Kelly Conrad

Love and Lust for Three
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