

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

Emily
Ryan-Davis

All the Secrets
in *Pearl*

All the Secrets in Pearl

Emily Ryan-Davis

Sequel to All the Trees in Pearl, All the Women in Pearl and Interlude in Pearl

Five years ago James Carver traded small-town secrets for the scandalous nightlife of Victorian Paris. He went looking for answers but discovered a taste for a man's hard body and a talent for spinning erotic tales.

Now he's being framed for crimes he didn't commit and hunted for secrets he doesn't want to reveal. He could run again, but private investigator Maxwell Simon has other plans. James soon finds himself on his knees, breaking vows and enjoying very unconventional hospitality.

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All the Secrets in Pearl

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ALL THE SECRETS IN PEARL

Emily Ryan-Davis

Chapter One

Chicago
Winter 1872

The words wouldn't come anymore. Huddled close to the fireplace in a bustling street-side café, James Carver dipped his pen for the fifth time in as many minutes. However, ink was not the problem. The public notice he'd passed that morning at the bank...*that* was the problem.

He was a wanted man. The fact that the drawing of his face bore a different name, that of Harold Livingstone, didn't matter. Livingstone was a name that had fed and clothed him over the course of the last three years. That the name might now cost him freedom—or worse, his neck—was purest irony.

And it was more than “might”. Livingstone would not step up to right the misunderstanding even if he were still in Chicago. If he'd known Livingstone funded James' well-appointed quarters with the illicit gains he acquired as a minor Chicago crime boss, he would have found another way. No, he wouldn't have found another way. He'd wanted the luxury to write without worrying about the cost of ink, paper or bread and he'd been willing to buy the luxury with his cock. James dropped the pen and clasped his ink-stained fingers behind his neck.

He had to go home.

The prospect tied a knot in his gut. The lies he'd left behind in Pearl—the secrets he hadn't wanted to know, let alone keep—they would still be waiting for him. *Hell*. Maybe he should just turn himself in. He'd reaped the rewards Livingstone's influence this long. Perhaps this was how he would repay the other man's sponsorship.

“Writing your next book?” A man drawled, his voice deep and raw.

James blinked at the unmarked stack of paper between his elbows. “Not precisely writing.”

"Maybe I should return this to the man who sent it." The stranger moved into James' view. His legs were thick with muscle and clothed in pinstripe suiting. He dropped a letter-sized packet on top of the blank paper. Before James could reach for the package, the other man placed a sketch of James' face over top the package and pinned it with a tanned, calloused finger. "James Carver. Writing as Marietta Clark. Mistaken for Harold Livingstone."

The names were not offered as a question. James stood, unwilling to face the other man from a weak position. He raised his head and met the messenger's eyes. In an instant, his head emptied.

Hard gray eyes looked back at him, intently set on the business at hand. The man must have been the law. James wanted to fall on his knees and use his mouth to make the stranger's gunmetal eyes roll back in his head.

Hell. Not again. After a dangerous and disastrous affair with the son of a Parisian whore, James had sworn he would never kneel for another man. Surrender was too intoxicating, too addicting, and he wouldn't lose himself a second time. He'd been careful in dictating his arrangement with Livingstone. James didn't accept cock, he only gave it. Fine with Livingstone, who only wanted to take.

James looked away, down to the packet on the table between them. "The post would have sufficed," he managed, relieved that his tone remained even.

"I don't think you want the post showing up, given the rapidly spreading word of your crimes."

The back of James' neck turned to ice. Against his will, he found himself locked by the stranger's eyes.

"The way I see it," the other man said, "you can come with me or you can go back to writing that book and wait to see who finds you next."

"Who are you?"

"Maxwell Simon." He withdrew a second sheaf of papers from a pocket inside his suit jacket. "I represent Ethan Carver and Collette Raincrow."

He unfolded the papers and presented them. James stared at the pair of signatures inked at the bottom. His brother's scrawl was familiar. His sister's no longer betrayed the uncertain hand of youth. "That's a contract."

"It's a lesser evil than a wanted notice." Simon folded the contract along its crease and pocketed it.

James heard the words, even understood, but Simon may as well have kept his mouth shut. James' concern for anything had bled away after Collette's name.

"My sister is in Pearl?" Christ. His search had taken him so far away from Pearl; he'd eventually resigned himself to laying her to rest in his heart.

"You and I are to be on the train in two hours," Simon said. "Ordinarily I'd advise you to put your affairs in order, but in this case, I suggest you make the most of what you have and cut your losses."

James was already shoving everything into his satchel. "Give me the ticket."

Simon snorted. "That's not the way this is going to happen, James."

"Whatever my brother is paying you, I'll match it. You can consider your contract fulfilled." James shrugged into his coat.

"You plan on walking into a bank and standing next to the drawing of your face while you make a withdrawal?"

"This isn't a frontier town," James muttered.

"No, it isn't. The real measure of a man doesn't matter here because there are too many men to care about the character of one."

James tightened his jaw and settled his hat on his head without responding. He looked up and straight into Maxwell Simon's eyes. Invisible fingers clenched around his balls. With a growl, James stalked past the other man and headed for the street. Simon fell into step behind him, his strides measured and unhurried.

An hour later, James paced the length of the train station. Simon sat across the way, his long legs outstretched, his hat pulled low as he read a dime novel. *The*

Frenchwoman's Gunslinger by Marietta Clark. The first one James had sold, written on the long journey from France to Massachusetts.

Watching Simon thumb one page after another created an uneasy knot between James' shoulders. He published under a pseudonym for a reason. Half a dozen reasons, not the least of which being his reluctance to be connected with Marietta's fondness for a man's thick cock, lustfully described through her heroines' eyes and mouths.

Grinding his teeth so hard his temples ached, James turned on his heel and strode through the crowd of travelers until he reached a washroom.

Inside, he stripped to his shirtsleeves and splashed water on his face and neck. As he stood over the basin, watching droplets of water drip from his chin, the door opened and closed. James kept his eyes down. The other man relieved himself, whistling a low, off-key tune as he did. Cloth rustled as he adjusted his clothing. James shook the last of the water from his face and straightened, turning to retrieve his coat and hat. The sound of a cocked weapon stopped him.

"Harold Livingstone. I'd hoped that was you I spotted coming in here."

James lowered his hand without pulling his coat from its peg. The speaker nodded approval.

"Good man. Neither of us wants any sudden moves, do we?"

"Are you the law or a bounty hunter?" James asked.

The other man, older and dressed like a banker, chuckled. His mirth stirred the thick gray fringe of mustache obscuring his upper lip. "I'm a citizen concerned with the peace of the city. And you are going to slowly make yourself presentable."

"After that?"

"After that, we're going to head down to see the sheriff." He gestured with his weapon. "Put on your coat. I don't want you to die of exposure before justice is served."

Numbly, James did as instructed. As he shoved his arms in his coat sleeves, he decided this would be better than sitting across from Simon for hours while the man

read his words and learned too much about him. It would probably even be better than returning to Pearl, where he would have to explain himself to Ethan.

While James finished dressing and lining up good reasons to go along peaceably, the washroom door opened a second time. Reflexively, James looked. He met Simon's narrowed eyes.

"Train's boarding." Simon shifted his attention to the man with the gun trained on James' chest. "You're too late. I've already claimed him."

The "concerned citizen" sneered. "If you think he's leaving Chicago, you think wrong. Step aside."

To James' surprise, Simon reached over and grasped his shoulder, pushing him out of the washroom while stepping in to take his place at the point of the gun's barrel.

"Put away your weapon and stand down," Simon said. His tone was icy. James felt it down his spine.

Maybe the concerned citizen felt it too. A minute later, James heard the sound of bullets emptying from a chamber and bouncing on the planked floor.

"Good." Simon's voice hadn't warmed. "Now you'll stay here and count to one thousand before you leave."

"This isn't right," the other man said.

"Right sometimes has unseen layers." Simon backed out of the washroom. The door closed. He stood a minute, staring at the panel. "Count. Out loud."

"Damn it." The words were muffled through the door. "Forty. Forty-one."

James glanced sidelong at Simon, whose jaw was set in a tense, sharp line. When the man on the other side of the door counted off seventy, Simon turned his stare on James. Tightly controlled fury spiked in Simon's gray irises. He held a thick finger to his lips and jerked his head toward the crowd of passengers gathering to board the train.

James crossed the station without comment. Simon caught up with him and stood too close in the crowd, his tall frame coiled tight. Anger still. The tension did not ease

after they boarded. Instead, it intensified. By the time the conductor showed them to a private cabin, James' tension rivaled Simon's.

He threw himself down on the rear-facing bench and shoved aside the curtain. Out the window, he spotted his concerned citizen's mustache quivering in outrage among the thinning crowd of families waving farewell to loved ones.

The cabin door snapped shut. Simon didn't sit. James looked away from the window, eyes to belt buckle with his escort. Despite his precarious position in life, James didn't fight the awareness that rolled over him. Simon, he knew, remained standing because height afforded him a position of intimidation. Instead of being cowed, James' body heated and tightened.

Maybe Simon would punish him. Grasp his hair and slam James' face against his groin. Humiliate him by grinding James' mouth against his cock while growling orders to never leave his sight again.

"You will not leave my sight again," Simon said. "Or I will deliver you to your siblings unconscious."

Red heat rushed James' throat and face. He shifted his weight and moved the tail of his coat to hide his sudden erection.

Simon stood above him until the train's whistle sounded, announcing its departure from the station. When he finally sat, he did so directly across from James. Simon spread his knees, his boots flanking James' feet, and retrieved *The Frenchwoman's Gunslinger* from his coat pocket.

James tilted his head against the seat back and closed his eyes. Damn his ruined life.

Eventually the rumble of the train lulled him to a doze. Simon's voice jerked him from the edge of sleep.

"Who is Harold Livingstone?"

How to reply? James lowered his chin and opened his eyes, meeting Simon's. He looked lower, studying the sepia cover of *The Frenchwoman's Gunslinger* propped open

facedown on Simon's thigh. A few inches to the left, Simon's trousers stretched across an impressive erection.

James examined the book more closely. Simon had reached approximately the halfway point. "Has Felicia visited Mr. Chung's shop yet?"

"Livingstone," Simon repeated. "Who is he?"

"If she hasn't, you should keep reading. She purchases an ivory cock and —"

"Livingstone," Simon growled.

James shrugged and raised his eyes to hold Simon's. Anger didn't darken them anymore. Lust did. Simon's visible arousal determined James' reply. "He *was* my lover."

Simon's throat flushed and his Adam's apple bobbed. James held his gaze defiantly, secretly amused that Simon's contract kept him from bolting into the passage. He might be aroused but he —

"Get on your knees and relieve this," Simon commanded calmly, aborting James' line of thought.

James blinked. He looked down to find Simon's heavy erection already in hand. Moisture glistened atop the thick head. The promise he'd made to himself no longer seemed to matter. After so long with Livingstone, who wouldn't permit James' mouth and hands anywhere but his ass even if James had allowed himself, the prospect of stretching his lips wide and swallowing deep brought him close to a dangerous edge.

Without speaking, James shed his coat. He checked the door while removing his vest, unsurprised to find the lock in place. Unhurriedly—they were hours from Denver—James unbuttoned his shirt and set it aside. He'd left his clothes behind and a distant slip of social conscience reminded him it just wouldn't do to reunite with his sister while wearing Simon's release on his collar.

Simon showed no inclination to likewise disrobe. A shame. James would have enjoyed rolling Simon's balls with his tongue.

He knelt between the other man's splayed legs. Simon released his cock and clasped both hands behind his head. Free to proceed at his own speed, at least for now, James studied Simon's flesh.

Simon's cock speared from a thick nest of dark hair. Thin skin, darker at the root and lightening toward the head, hid only the smallest veins. James' tongue would have no shortage of textures to explore. The broad head mushroomed away from the shaft. Simon's thickness would hurt as it pierced James' ass. He ducked his head and smiled. Perhaps he would experience that pain firsthand after Simon read about Felicia's adventure with Mr. Chung's dildo.

"Are you going to suck it or draw it?" Simon muttered.

In response, James flattened his tongue at the base and licked a path to the head. Simon's thigh jerked. *The Frenchwoman's Gunslinger* slid to the bench seat at his side.

Savoring the musk scent and salt flavor of Simon's cock, James licked an identical path up the left then the right side of the shaft. He braced himself against Simon's knees, reveling in the erratic twitches of muscle that betrayed Simon's enjoyment.

He could make Simon come this way, but the process would take time. It would also leave Simon believing he had some measure of control over himself. Better, despite James' desire to linger, that he render Simon grunting his orgasm sooner rather than later.

Aroused by the hot, hard flesh under his tongue and the secret, stolen measure of control, James opened his mouth wide and sucked Simon's cock deep. He'd heard a woman's mouth was different from a man's. Slow, sensual, tentative instead of fast, aggressive and unapologetic.

James fastened his lips around the base of Simon's shaft. He held the entire length in his mouth, the flared head worked up tight against the open back of his throat. No urge to gag. The Frenchman had desensitized that muscle reflex. James sucked hard and swallowed. Simon jerked. Heavy hands fell upon James' head, pinning him in

place. James inhaled, Simon's scent powerful in his nostrils, and repeated the suck and swallow. A hoarse curse sounded above his head.

Shifting his weight, James straddled Simon's extended leg and ground his erection against the other man's shin. Pleasure bolted to the base of his skull. Maybe if he pushed Simon far enough, he'd earn this in his ass before they reached Denver.

James loosened his mouth and slid upward, dragging his tongue to Simon's cock head. He pressed the thick bulb between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. Salty fluid leaked from the slit, rewetting James' mouth.

As though he read James' mind, Simon growled, "Bare your ass."

James' balls drew up tight. He thrust harder against Simon's leg.

The other man jerked on his hair. "Do you want to come in your pants or in my hand? Bare your ass."

The scorn in Simon's low voice keyed into James' deep, secret desires. Desires to surrender, to be used. James had hidden the darkest of his needs from Livingstone. Would Simon... Slapping himself away from emotional fancy, James worked his mouth down to Simon's base and fumbled with his belt and the fastenings of his trousers. His cock sprang into his hand.

Squeezing himself hard, James moaned on Simon's cock head. The other man cursed and pulled James' hair hard enough to remove his mouth.

"On your feet and present your ass," Simon ordered. Command came to him easily.

Thrilled to be dominated, James turned to the window and braced his hands above it. His trousers bunched at his feet. Behind him, Simon's clothing rustled.

"You will have to make do without lubrication to ease the way," Simon said.

James shuddered. He curled his hands into fists above the window. He didn't mean to speak but the confession stole past his lips. "I like it dry."

Simon's thumbs spread his ass. Hard fingers gripped his hips, holding him still as the thick head he'd held in his mouth pressed against his tight pucker.

James rested his forehead on the window frame. Outside, western Illinois passed in a blur of gray and white. There would be snow on the ground in Pearl too.

He didn't want to think about home, about all the secrets in Pearl he'd chosen to leave behind. Willing Simon to hurry and chase the demons from his head, James stroked himself. Soon, he'd have to face the past. Soon but not yet. "Do you need help?"

"No." The wool of Simon's suit scratched James' bare back and buttocks.

James tensed. Simon spread him again, repositioned. James steadied himself with one hand and rolled the head of his cock with the other. Simon breached him ungently. With only Simon's arousal and James' saliva to ease the way, Simon's size pulled and stretched delicate tissue. He hissed through the pain, embraced it, cursed when Simon withdrew.

The other man grasped James' cock. He worked the foreskin roughly, smearing droplets of arousal fluid up the shaft, over the head, onto Simon's palm. James' knees shook. Orgasm edged up on him, intensifying the sensation of Simon's thick cock head lodged just inside his passage.

"Move," James grunted, pushing back.

"Unless you want to be torn in two, hold still." Simon bit James' shoulder and cupped his balls with his free hand.

The world outside blurred more gray than white. James jerked, his entire body a tight twitch as he ejaculated. Simon caught some of the fluid and withdrew behind him. Before James stopped shaking, Simon's cock popped past his loosened rim of muscle and kept going. The mushroom head rode over some deep spot and James' vision went black.

Simon swore. He surged strong and deep, leaving a stinging stretch in his wake. James groaned. He spread his legs until he could feel Simon's sac swing and slap his own empty balls. The world narrowed down to small things. Smacking flesh. Gasping breath. Rocking train. Stroking cock. Pulsing nerves. Tightening skin and... "Fuck," James shouted as he came a second time, dry and nearly painful.

Simon's closed fist pounded the wall beside James' shoulder and he came too.

They parted without tenderness. Fine. James didn't expect hugs or praise from the men he fucked. In silence, they both tidied themselves, making use of a rough blanket James discovered in a compartment. He dressed and Simon righted his clothes.

Soon, they sat across from each other as before. Simon spoke first. "Did Livingstone rob that bank and frame you, or did you rob it using his name?"

James scowled. "I am not a thief. When a tip drew the authorities to Livingstone's home, they found the place cleared of belongings. According to a servant I tracked down, a woman described me to the sheriff's artist. The servant couldn't tell me where the woman went. Probably with Livingstone."

"Framed then. You have anybody who can back your claim?"

James shook his head.

"How long has it been since you last saw him?" Simon crossed his legs at the ankle.

"I'm going to sleep," James muttered.

Simon snorted. "Do you expect to dream up something to tell the authorities when they catch up with you? Which," he added "could be as soon as Denver if your friend in Chicago decided to wire news of your destination."

Slouching low, James closed his eyes. He should be more relaxed than this after two bone-jarring climaxes. He would be more relaxed if Simon weren't hounding him. Thoughts of Denver, and Pearl beyond it, made him surly. Flatly he said, "Maybe I'd rather the sheriff than you."

"You'd rather hang than find out what Ethan wants?" Simon's tone rang with incredulity.

"I know what Ethan wants. He isn't going to like what he gets and I'm not going to like delivering it. So yes, maybe I would rather hang."

Simon snorted a second time. "Too bad for you then. I'm delivering your neck unbroken. As hard as you've been trying to avoid Pearl, its people are the only ones who can identify you as anybody besides Harold Livingstone."

Chapter Two

The sheriff was not waiting for them in Denver, but a blizzard was. Instead of taking a room at the nearest hotel, Simon insisted on taking James to his home. They crossed half the city by hired wagon and what seemed like the other half on foot. James couldn't feel his feet by the time Simon veered off the street and into a small yard. A tall, narrow structure loomed behind blowing swirls of snow.

Knowing the snow wouldn't keep him from Pearl forever, James reluctantly followed the other man into the house. Warmth stung him within seconds of entering. James blinked and wiped melting snow from his eyes. A high, feminine squeal called Simon by his given name and as he watched, the man he'd taken in his arms mere hours earlier opened his arms and caught the slight, slender figure launching at him from the stairs.

"Oh," she gasped, grasping Simon's face and pulling his head down to hers. "You're home. I am so glad."

James looked away from their kiss. He shifted his weight awkwardly and focused on his clothes, which dampened layer by layer as the crust of snow and ice thawed. Low murmurs of sound came to his ears. He tried to block them but could not miss all the love words.

"I only just went up to ready for bed." The woman, who must have been Mrs. Simon, lowered her voice. "Now you can help me undress."

James cleared his throat.

"I brought a guest, love," Simon said.

From the corner of his eye, James observed as Simon disentangled himself from his wife's clinging arms. A cloud of dark blonde hair hid her features but didn't hide that

she was small, easily obscured by Simon's larger body. When she stepped into view, James blinked in alarm.

"James Carver. You found him." Big, dark eyes stared at him in surprise. They held him an instant before shifting to Simon. A pink flush crawled over her cheeks and somehow James knew what she was going to say as she opened her mouth. "Maxwell. James touched my breasts when we were younger."

"Really. And what did you touch of his?" Simon shrugged off his coat and hung it from a coat tree inside the door. His unconcerned reply startled James out of explaining.

Lucy Morgan—no, James realized, Lucy Simon—wet her lips with her small pink tongue. "I touched his penis."

"So did I," Simon said. "Come here."

Lucy shot James a curiously sharp look as she returned to Simon's embrace. She held James' gaze, tilting her chin back for Simon's lips, which skimmed a line down her throat and fastened over a patch of pale skin just above the collar of her dress.

"Is he to be our guest?"

"There's a blizzard outside, Lucy. Would you have it otherwise?" Simon held her carefully in deference to the distended round of her expecting stomach, which James finally noticed with no small measure of shock. Her condition was not visible from a frontal view, but when she stood in profile, he could clearly see the evidence of her advancing pregnancy.

Softly speaking to James, she said, "He wants me more than he wants you."

"I can see that." James rocked back on his heels. Instinct told him to leave, but Lucy's eyes froze him to the spot.

She brushed her lips along Simon's jaw as he raised his head. "Not really," she said. "Not yet. But you will soon. Won't he, Maxwell?"

"Lucy." The quiet word, spoken by Simon, finally relieved James of her steady examination.

She raised her chin and met her husband's eyes. "I want him to know. And I want you. Right now – where he can see."

"Are you wet already?" Simon rasped. He bunched the fabric of Lucy's skirt in his fists.

James braced his shoulder against the door at his back. Lucy, shy when he knew her last, shook him to his foundation. Did Maxwell Simon transform her into this stranger? He clenched his jaw as she turned to face him, Simon at her back.

"Touch me and find out." Lucy raised her arms and linked her hands behind Simon's neck. Her back arched, thrusting heavy, large breasts toward him. James balled his hands into fists.

Simon growled against her hair. He bunched her skirt high, baring her legs, and gathered the fall of fabric in one hand at her hip. He kept her belly hidden but displayed her bare thighs and golden thatch without concern for modesty. Lucy's or anyone else's.

He should close his eyes, refuse to participate in this game Simon and his wife played, but the darker imprint of Simon's hand coasting down Lucy's white thigh held him rapt. Long fingers gently grasped her leg and urged her to spread her feet. Lucy obliged.

Simon drew a fingertip down Lucy's slit, widening the space between her lower lips. Pink flesh glistened in the crease, visibly wet with cream. Behind her, Simon groaned. James' cock drew up painfully. He remembered that sound. It had come from Simon before when James sucked him deep into his throat.

"James," Simon said. "Come here and lick my wife's breasts."

He cleared his throat, off balance and confused by Lucy's draw. He understood his attraction to Simon. Lucy, however, belonged to another man, bore the physical evidence of Simon's claim. Her showing pregnancy alone should have cooled his interest. Instead, the round shape of her stomach commanded his eyes. "I don't think –"

"You liked it before," Lucy said, aborting James' protest. Her lashes drifted, shadowing her eyes in response to Simon's fingers between her legs. "Don't you want to please my husband?"

Her question shook him. How did she know? James glanced at Simon, but the other man had no attention to spare him. His focus rested entirely on the woman he held. Long fingers played in her wetness, drifted up to caress the place where his child rested, down again to a spot that made Lucy jerk.

He swallowed. He had little knowledge of women. A few whores. Lucy, when they'd both been too young. Men aroused him. Hard flesh instead of soft. Dominating commands instead of pleas. But...he hesitated. Lucy's plea held an edge that stiffened him even though she wasn't a man.

"James." Simon's voice, a whip crack over the sound of Lucy's quickening breath.

Finally aware of Lucy's game, James discreetly tried to adjust his trousers. Her lips curved. She'd noticed the movement.

"Lick me first," Lucy said. "Then you can stroke your cock."

Before he knew his feet were going to move, they planted him in front of her. She raised her chin and arched her throat. Her breasts strained the buttons of her woolen winter dress. James touched the top button. She bit her lip. He freed half a dozen buttons before he found her breasts, the tops creamy pale between the spread halves of her dark blue bodice.

"I believe he's unsure how to proceed, love. Why don't you help him?"

She lowered her arms from Simon's neck and tottered. Alarmed, James grasped her shoulder to steady her. Simon snarled. "You touch her where you are instructed and nowhere else," he said, low and dangerous. Possessive.

Understanding possession, James lowered his hand. Between them, Simon and Lucy had his balls drawn tight and his cock high. He struggled to breathe past the knot of excitement in his chest. Christ. A *woman*. And his body responded.

Unconcerned with the byplay between James and Simon, Lucy loosened the remainder of her buttons. Dark, large nipples stood out behind her cotton chemise. She loosened a ribbon and panels of cloth fell aside, bringing the pair of globes into view. Delicate blue veins traced spidery patterns just beneath her skin. Her nipples tightened and beaded. The dusky color reminded him of Simon's cock head when arousal engorged his member.

Remembering Simon's warning, James thrust his fists behind his back and bent his head to take one of her nipples into his mouth. Lucy gasped. "Harder," she cried.

Unsure whether the command was for his mouth or whatever Simon did to her, James worked to oblige. He rolled the stiff peak behind his teeth, against the roof of his mouth. Her flavor was different from Simon's. Pale and lemony instead of dark and salty. Greed surged, guided his tongue to harder possession. She whimpered and James released her nipple, quickly transferring his attention to the other peak.

"Maxwell," she whispered. "Come inside me while he watches."

James shuddered. He buried his face between her breasts, licking the warm skin he found there, and delicate fingers sifted through his hair.

"You can't see anything from there," Lucy said.

"I'm not sure I want to see." James raised his head. Lucy's eyes were dark with desire and unrelenting in their command. He backed away from her. She wrapped her fingers around Simon's wrists and pushed his hands away.

"You should stroke yourself." She tilted her head, examining his groin. "Show me."

Reluctance and good sense departed in company. James opened his pants and presented his cock for her approval. Lucy hummed a low sound in her throat. "You are not as large as Maxwell. You might fit better in my mouth."

James lost control of his knees. He dropped to sit on the straight-backed wooden chair beside the door. Lucy's lips curved in a small smile, widening when she turned her attention on Simon, who'd already liberated himself from the confines of his trousers and swiftly divested himself of his damp jacket, vest and shirt.

"I want you behind me," Lucy said. "In my bottom. The way you took him."

Simon's eyes flicked to Lucy's stomach. "No."

"But—"

"No. My decision is unrelated to anything I've done with James. You know that."

Lucy's bottom lip edged out. "But I want..." She trailed off, throwing a glance in James' direction, and clamped her teeth together.

Whatever she wanted, she didn't want to share it with him. James narrowed his eyes. That was more of the girl he'd known. She didn't give him another glimpse though. Instead of arguing, she carefully lowered herself to her hands and knees on the floor. Simon snatched a pillow from the sofa and positioned it beneath her stomach. Lucy spread her knees. She braced herself. And as Simon knelt behind her, pushed her skirts to her waist and sank his cock into her sheath, she stared at James.

Soft moans. Feminine. Her unfettered breasts hung heavy, the nipples dragging back and forth across the pillow beneath her as Simon rocked into her sex. He may have been smaller than Simon but size did not sway Lucy's interest. Heavy-lidded eyes watched his hand as he worked his cock. Habit whispered in James' ear, prompted him to look at Simon, but Lucy commanded him completely. Her pleasure. Her loosening jaw, slack as Simon reached between her thighs and worked her flesh. Her tightening throat, rigid as she tried and failed to contain the sounds of release.

James came with her, catching his fluid in his palm. Behind her, Simon continued to thrust. His head hung over the small of Lucy's back. His thrusts were shallow, his balls swinging and slapping against her lightly, almost silently. James remembered Simon's strokes being more powerful, stronger, but Simon restrained himself out of care for his wife. Lucy was right. Finally, James looked away. He hadn't denied Lucy's claim but he hadn't believed it bone-deep either. The proof was incontrovertible though. Simon *cared* for her. Before he could decipher the sting of emotion that followed his realization, Lucy spoke.

"James, come here."

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. Lucy pitched forward, braced on her elbows, her hips shoved high for Simon, who continued to silently strain inside her body.

"Help him," she pleaded, breathless. "He won't come inside me deep enough."

His erection revived instantly. James slid from the chair and knelt beside them. Simon plunged into her but stopped himself short of satisfying depth. His flesh glistened with her wetness to the halfway point and no farther. Eager to please Lucy, just as eager to see Simon's climax, James wrapped his fist around the base of Simon's cock. The other man groaned and threw his head back. James' palm quickly grew slippery between his semen and Lucy's arousal. She seemed to respond to the sound of Simon's pleasure, her sex flushing darker, her thighs quivering as she bunched her body backward and arched up for Simon's claim. James wanted to taste her.

The realization shocked him. His fingers reflexively tightened on Simon's flesh and the other man bucked, driving James' fist against Lucy's tender folds. Orgasm rocked Lucy's slight body and plucked at Simon's, jerking him over and over again as if he'd been tied to a puppeteer's strings. Her strings.

With dismay, James realized he'd somehow become ensnared as well.

* * * * *

Lucy served a late supper for him and her husband. When Simon vanished upstairs to wash, she showed James to a bedroom on the first floor. A quilt frame took up one half of the room and a modest bed occupied the other half. She leaned against the doorjamb and watched him. "Where did you go when you left Pearl?"

"I spent a year in France."

"What about the other four years?"

"Travel takes time. I returned to the States a little less than three years ago."

"Maxwell found you in Chicago?"

James nodded cautiously. "Why?"

Lucy lifted one shoulder. "Curious. I've read your books."

His first thought was that she shouldn't have access to such trash. One glance at her showed she guessed at the thought. Her lips quirked at the corners and she toyed with a button on her bodice. James flushed. Stories wouldn't corrupt her any more than Simon had.

He frowned. "How long have you been married?"

"Two years. I was visiting Aunt Emma and – oh." She smiled fully. "You remember Mickey Lowe?"

James nodded. Mickey had been part of his family's ranch as long as James could recall.

"He and Aunt Emma married." Her smile caught a little wicked edge and she winked. "That makes you and me practically family."

His breath stuttered in his chest. Lucy teased but the words were more apt than she knew.

She must have caught something in his expression. She laughed lightly and retreated from the door. "Spend more time with Maxwell. You won't be so stiff anymore. Good night, James."

Lucy left without waiting for his reply. *Spend more time with Maxwell.* James snorted. He knew nothing of Simon prior to Simon's contact with Lucy, but suspected he'd been wrong in his initial assumption that Simon had changed her. Maybe Simon had brought about some change, but James would put money on the notion that Lucy had always secretly harbored this sense of mischief. Simon provided an outlet for her improper edge.

After stripping from his damp clothes, James reclined on the bed and cushioned his head on his forearms. Simon was good for her. Her laughter drifted from another part of the house, underscored by Simon's deeper voice. Pangs of longing stung his chest. He didn't want a wife and a child on the way, but he regretted that he would never have either. Between the people who sprang to life inside his head without warning and

the tastes he'd developed over the years, he didn't have enough room inside for anybody else. Writing and perversion consumed him. Lucy might not reject his proclivities but she was not his. He wouldn't find another like her either, especially not in a man.

Distant voices quieted eventually. James slept in fits. During waking periods, he rose and set up his portable secretary. Words fell off his pen as if they were being driven off a bridge. By morning, he'd accomplished what he'd feared wouldn't happen again. He'd begun a new book.

The warm, strong aromas of coffee and cinnamon coaxed him back into the previous day's clothes and drew him to the kitchen. Lucy bent over a hot, open oven, reaching for a pan.

James quickly intercepted. "Let me."

She stood aside and he retrieved her baking. Sugar bubbled atop a pan of biscuits. James' mouth watered. "This looks illegal."

Lucy laughed. "From what Maxwell tells me, you would know."

James slid the pan atop the stove and closed the oven. Heat continued to spread out in waves, warming the kitchen and inviting him to stay. "I'm afraid I don't have equal knowledge of you."

"There's little of me to discuss." Lucy moistened her lips. "And he's been away some time. Six weeks. When he saw me last, I was sick and pouting. Hardly a story to relate to anyone."

"Had I known about you, I would have... I wouldn't have..."

"What?" Lucy canted her head and studied him. "You would have denied Maxwell when he commanded you to suck his cock? I don't believe it."

James put the worktable between them. "I wouldn't encourage unfaithfulness."

"My faith in him goes deeper than his flesh, James. He's a man and his work sometimes takes him away from me. I would not ask him to suffer physically when he already suffers inside for our distance."

"What about you?"

"I am well tended during his absences."

James frowned. Manners gave him pause, silenced his question before he asked it. Lucy must have seen his curiosity, however, for she raised her eyebrows and said, "We are longtime friends, James. What do you want to ask?"

He cleared his throat. "What of other men?"

"Good heavens, no. Not other men. Please, do not say as much in Maxwell's hearing. He and I... You might think us strange but we do love one another and suffer the problems that come with love, including jealousy and possessiveness." Lucy's gaze shifted, focusing behind him. "Mary. Good morning. Is Maxwell still sleeping?"

"He woke wondering where you'd gone. I promised to find you and report back." The woman who replied stood just out of range of James' peripheral vision. He turned to see her, expecting an aging maid, surprised to find a woman of similar age to Lucy. Brown hair fell around her shoulders, tumbled as if she'd just come from bed. Hell. Maybe she had. She wore a shawl wrapped around her upper body. The hem of a nightdress revealed sock-clad toes.

"The morning after a blizzard deserves fresh baking," Lucy replied lightly. "Go back, tell him where I am."

"I have found where you are," Simon said over Mary's shoulder. He nodded to James and focused on Lucy. "Come back to bed where I can see how skilled Mary's tongue has become in my absence."

"Not so much more skilled," Mary murmured. "Her energy has only recently returned."

Lucy's nipples tightened, the raised tips visible through the layers of her dress. She met James' eyes. Her brow arched. "Would you care to join us?"

Remembering her lemon flavor, he nodded.

Mary bit her lip but offered no objection. She led the way to the Simons' bedroom. Halfway up the stairs, James hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Lucy asked, turning back to him.

He spoke carefully. "Your household is different."

"Not in so many ways. I have a husband and family. Maxwell is a law-abiding man and he values me above any other."

"You... Your maid... What of your neighbors and community?"

"What of them?" In the dim light of the stairs, her expression hardened and she drew herself tall. Protective, James realized. She was preparing herself to defend her family. Before James could explain himself, she added, "I do not ask what happens in their beds."

From upstairs, Mary called Lucy's name. James watched Lucy turn decisively and ascend the stairs. This was not the close-minded, insular Colorado he remembered. Brooding over the realization, James resisted the lure of Lucy's bedroom until he heard a high exclamation of pleasure.

No, he decided, it wasn't the same, but part of him wanted to return to *this* Colorado. If only Pearl didn't come with it.

Upstairs, he pushed that lurking subject from his mind.

Chapter Three

The Simons' bedroom was larger than the room in which James had slept. An enormous bed dominated the room, hung with rich burgundy drapes and ruffled coverings. A long, narrow bed crossed the foot of the larger piece of furniture. If James hadn't seen the feather pillow and twisted blankets, he might have mistaken it for a chest or bench. He could not ignore that it had been slept on, however. By whom was not a mystery either. Mary's shawl spilled over the side of the narrow bed, as did her nightgown. Nude, she knelt in the center of the larger bed and spread Lucy's thighs.

"James, sit here." Simon's directive rolled low and rich as the room's appointments. He occupied a wide-seated chair drawn close to the bed and pointed to a second chair beside him.

Mary bent over Lucy. From where he stood, he saw little of the other woman besides her spread and raised knees. Mary's long, smooth back, flared hips and plump ass concealed the rest of Lucy's form.

Cock hard, whether from Simon's command or the sight and sounds of the women, James was unsure, he took the seat as instructed. From this angle, he saw bared breasts. Lucy's large and pillowy, Mary's small and pointed. He could take all of Mary's breast into his mouth if he wanted. Right then, watching her push her hair back and dip her tongue into Lucy's slit, he wanted.

"Lower your right leg, Lucy. You're hiding from me." Simon, who'd only put on pants and left his chest bare, released his buttons.

James looked away from the women, down to Simon's fist wrapped around his own stiff flesh. Lust swam between James' ears. Part of him wanted to offer his tongue for Simon's pleasure. Another part of him wanted to see what would come of the female tangle upon the bed. Reluctantly, he looked back to the women.

As the night before, Lucy's breasts and sex were exposed. Her stomach remained covered, this time by a swath of blanket. Somehow knowing Simon chose to maintain sole possession of at least one part of his wife eased James' anxiety.

With Lucy's leg lowered and outstretched, James could see the long, glistening pink of Mary's tongue. She licked delicately back and forth along Lucy's slit. The muscles of Mary's upper arms flexed as she held Lucy still for her mouth.

Higher, Lucy restlessly squeezed her own breasts and plucked at the stiff nipples. Her hands were too small and creamy flesh overflowed her grasp. She lay with her face turned toward James and Simon. No, he amended, just toward Simon, who returned her stare with intensity.

Relief surprised James. He relaxed in his chair and clasped the arms. He was not the focus of this scene. Nothing was yet expected of him except his eyes. Simon gave the instructions. He, Lucy and Mary were there to receive.

"Mary tasted my bottom," Lucy said breathlessly, speaking to Simon.

"Mary. Is this true?"

The other woman raised her head and looked to Simon. "Yes, Master. Mistress speaks truth."

Master. *Mistress*. Another layer peeled away. Blood rushed James' groin. His balls were too tight, too full.

"Show me, Mary," Simon said.

Carefully, Lucy rolled to her side, facing away from the men. Simon stood and rounded the bed, where he touched Lucy's face and reconnected with her eyes.

Struggling to ignore that intimacy, James focused on Mary. She supported her weight with one hand and used the other to lift Lucy's upper cheek. White flesh gave way to a rosy crevice, a darker indentation. Mary licked her lips and lowered her head. Her well-trained tongue touched Lucy's pucker and Lucy whimpered.

"Push inside," Lucy demanded.

Obedient, Mary stiffened her tongue and wiggled the tip, burrowing into Lucy's passage.

On the other side of the bed, Simon grunted. James glanced up. Lucy's small hand clutched her husband's cock. She rubbed her thumb across the head. Simon's stomach was rigid, each line of muscle defined. James wanted the right to touch him the way Lucy did.

Hard to the point of pain, James hoarsely asked, "Can I— What can I do?"

"Fuck Mary," Lucy replied without hesitation. Her delicate hand pulled until Simon knelt on the bed. She rose on her elbow, climbed to her hands and knees and seized the thick length of Simon's cock with her lips.

Mary. Shaking, nervous at the prospect of breaching the strange woman who'd given no indication that she accepted or refused Lucy's demand, James released his cock. Mary stabbed her tongue into Lucy's glistening rosette, quick and shallow, and Lucy moaned around Simon's erection.

Badly wanting to be part of the tableau, James crawled across the foot of the mattress and knelt behind Mary. The maid lifted her hips without prompting. Between widespread knees, her sex shined with arousal. Abruptly, James recognized like spirit in the maid. She craved command and use as much as James craved them.

"Where?" he asked quietly, the question for Mary. In answer, she slipped one hand between her legs and inserted three fingers into her sex. Moving quickly, before she could withdraw her hand, James angled forward and breached her sheath. The underside of his cock rode over her fingers, room enough in her well-used body for both fingers and cock.

Mary moaned.

"Deep and hard," Lucy gasped, raising her head and looking over her shoulder along the chain of naked flesh linked to her. "Mary likes it deep and hard. Put your fingers in her ass. I want her to climax before you do."

The body beneath him shuddered, sleek inner muscles rippled around his shaft. In front of Lucy, Simon reclined with his back against the bed stand. He watched them all with glittering gray eyes, long fingers stroking Lucy's hair as she bent her mouth back to his cock.

Unsure how much longer he would last, James slicked his fingers through Mary's juice and touched her anus. Her fingers slid from her sheath, vanished between Lucy's legs. James tunneled hard into the maid, slapping his balls against her flesh as punctuation to each stroke. When he reached the first knuckle with one finger, he worked a second alongside it.

Mary gripped him hard from both passages. James twisted his fingers and felt her spasm hard. Ahead of him, Lucy jerked and cried out, her back arching. Simon splayed his fingers wide across the back of her golden head, holding her mouth in place. Tendons strained in his neck. Abruptly, James knew the order of release.

Lucy first. Always Lucy first. Mary would be next. And Simon would watch it all, holding back until everyone else in his bed achieved satisfaction.

Mary began to tremble beneath him. She raised her head and threw her hair back, baring her throat as she jolted on his cock. Sleek muscle locked tight around his fingers. For the first time since she replied to Simon's inquiry, Mary spoke. Her shouted "Oh!" snatched away James' control. He pumped into her hard, his entire body pulsing with the force of release. At the head of the bed, Simon grunted and bared his teeth.

Lucy pulled away from Mary and James. She curled close around Simon, kissing his throat, stroking his chest. Mary fumbled for James' wrist and crawled from the bed, pulling him along after her.

"We leave now," she whispered as she led him from the room.

James stumbled after her, unsteady on his feet and awkward with his clothes in such disarray. Mary seemed unconcerned with their state of dress. She closed the door gently and braced herself against the wall in the corridor, eyes closed and breathing rapidly.

"Are you well?" He touched her shoulder.

A smile curved her lips, rendering the previously unremarkable woman pretty. "Master is home and Mistress is happy. She has shared her happiness with both of us. Of course I am well. Aren't you?"

James opened his mouth to reply but closed it when he realized he had nothing to say. He wasn't well though. His body was drained but the specter of Pearl reformed in the back of his mind, muddled by the unexpected tangle of relationships and he'd found in Simon's house.

"Come," Mary said. "We will both bathe and dress and have coffee."

Silent, James followed her to the kitchen. He helped Mary fill a copper tub with melted snow and they took turns washing. Mary found clean, simple clothes for him—Simon's no doubt, as they were loose on his thinner, shorter frame—and warmed the coffee Lucy made earlier.

Mary sat at the scratched, well-used table and stirred sugar into her cup. "Where are you going when you leave?"

"My brother's ranch in Pearl." Outside the kitchen window, snow had stopped falling but a fierce wind blew the ground fall into whipping, swirling clouds. He had a few days before travel would be possible. A few days hidden away in the Simon household.

"But not by your own choice if Master had to fetch you home."

James frowned. "Why don't you use his name? You're not a slave."

Spots of color appeared on her cheeks. "I prefer to call him what I do."

"Did he tell you to call him that?"

Mary stood abruptly, her gaze direct. "Your questions aren't polite. Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know that you have a choice to leave if you decide to go. I've encountered...situations...like this one before. People like you sometimes aren't

allowed a choice." James frowned, recalling one particular Parisian pleasure house that attracted individuals with a craving for humiliation and turned out creatures enslaved by more than physical bonds.

"As you've said, I'm not a slave. I'm not stupid either. I know a safe arrangement from a dangerous one, and I've never been anything but safe here. I choose to call him Master and her Mistress because even though they've brought me into their home, they're the ones who made it. They deserve their places of authority and I want them to have authority over me." She cocked her head, the hard, defensive set of her mouth softening. "You haven't found anybody you want to have authority over you. But you've looked, haven't you?"

Mary's knowing question reminded him of his earlier insight, his conclusion that she wasn't so much different from him. He cleared his throat. "I don't want to be a servant."

"She isn't here as a servant," Simon said from the door.

Deliberately, James watched Mary instead of looking to Simon. At the sound of the other man's voice, her smile reappeared and emotion deepened her eyes. Her posture changed too, drawing straight and confident. "Our bathwater might still be warm if you'd like to wash?"

Trust and affection bolstered her voice. Not love, James noticed curiously.

"I'll heat fresh and take it up to Lucy for when she wakes," Simon said. "James will help me. You should find something warmer to wear and something to eat. Lucy might not be coming down before midday."

James frowned. "Is she unwell?"

"She underestimates her need for sleep right now," Mary said. "Nothing to do today but nap and mend linens, given the snow. She'll benefit more from the nap."

"Snowmen," James said. "That's something to do today."

Simon snorted. "If you decide to brave your skin out there, tie a rope around your waist so you'll find your way back. Mary, have you received any deliveries from the agency?"

"I put everything on your desk as it arrived." Relaxing in Simon's presence, she reclaimed her chair and her coffee.

"I'll be seeing to it. If Lucy wakes, please let me know." With that, Simon retreated.

James lingered in the kitchen another minute, but Mary had either chosen to ignore him or had turned her thoughts inward. Uneasy with the silence and without a purpose for his presence, he muttered a good day and returned to the room Lucy'd assigned the night before. His new manuscript awaited, but instead of beginning a new page, he unearthed a thick journal from a pocket worked into the lining of his writing case.

Purchased in New York prior to boarding the ship for London, the journal had been his only companion on the long voyage at sea. Long nights swaying in a narrow berth, followed by longer days staring at the rolling water, had lent themselves to putting his thoughts on paper. The first pages of the journal boasted uncertain penmanship. The motion of the sea had made his hand erratic until he'd become accustomed and adjusted slant and pressure to compensate. The first pages also contained the confusion, self-loathing and familial hatred he'd never dared put to paper before he left Pearl. Soon he would have to bring some of those matters to light. Not all of them though. He'd keep some secrets. Or maybe he would share them with members of this curious household. Mary had seemed interested before he insulted her choices.

Some secrets...some only Ethan and Collette should know. He'd promised his mother he would never tell, but even before the search for her and Collette, he'd come to the realization his mother had been unfair to ask his confidence. He'd been a child. Her "little man", but still a child. Striking out to find Collette, the reason he'd given Ethan for his cowardly retreat into the night, had only been a foil for his true purpose. He'd been after her, their mother. He'd wanted clearance to remove himself from

responsibility. At nineteen, he'd carried the secret of Collette's paternity for eleven years.

The hell of it was, he couldn't place full blame upon his mother. He'd discovered her affair with Ellis Morgan, Lucy's uncle, quite by accident. Spying, he had not realized at the time, brought with it greater danger than being caught. Spying also brought unnecessary knowledge of people.

Christ. What irony had delivered him into Lucy's home? Her bed? His cock stirred at the memory of guilt-free abandon. He'd not known it possible to enjoy the sex he preferred—dirty, improper, servile—without coming away heartsick and guilt-ridden. He had enjoyed it though, and only recently.

He could not partake again. He only intended to confess his burden to Ethan, an abbreviated version to Collette, but since Lucy's family was linked to his secrets, it didn't seem right to leave her in the dark while availing himself of her...hospitality.

James ran his fingertips over the journal's binding and scowled at the snow. Abstinence might prove an easier vow than practice.

Resolutely, he returned the journal to hiding and put the matter of secrets out of his head. He numbered a new page in his manuscript and soon lost himself in the tale.

Hours later, the stirring household lured him from the illicit activities of his latest heroine's bedroom. Evangeline Trevalier dropped her quill pen atop her butler's quivering stomach and James dropped his pen atop the growing stack of pages.

He stood and stretched before making his way to the kitchen. The room was vacant but warmth from the stove claimed it hadn't been empty long. The lingering aroma of cinnamon left from Lucy's predawn baking roused his stomach to a growl. He found the sweet bread and ate it with cold, bitter coffee.

Upstairs, feminine voices murmured in conversation. Simon's lower tones did not join in. He must still be seeing to affairs in his study. Recalling his own affairs, James explored the lower story of the house until he found a masculine, book-lined room that

held a lingering odor of pipe tobacco. The door stood ajar. James raised his fist to knock but movement inside stopped him.

Maxwell Simon lay sprawled on a long backless chaise, face half-hidden by his bent arm. A fire burned low on the west wall of the room. The flames cast a burnished sheen over Simon's naked skin—the forearm that flexed and relaxed with slow, rhythmic strokes, the cock that glistened with smears of arousal fluid. Despite his recent excess of sex, James hardened in an instant. His earlier resolve to distance himself from the carnal activities of the household fractured.

He should have backtracked without drawing attention to himself. Instead, he cleared his throat. "You had a package addressed to me."

Without raising his arm or changing the pattern of his strokes, Simon said, "It's on the desk blotter."

James pushed the door open wider and crossed to the desk. He had to walk the length of Simon's supine body to do so. As he passed, he recognized the scent of Simon's musk. He had already become too familiar with the man.

"You were an elusive target," Simon said. "Until I saw that wanted poster and realized the similarities between you and your brother, I strongly suspected you were dead."

"I was hiding." James found the package where Simon said he would. He loosened the string that bound the brown wrapping. The bundle included notice of funds wired from his publisher to his bank, along with letters from readers. "When did you start looking for me?"

"Almost two years ago."

Not immediately after he'd left. Not even *soon* after he left. "What made Ethan hire you then?"

From the corner of his eye, James saw Simon stiffen and stop moving. The other man tucked himself back into his clothes and sat, swinging his sock-clad feet to the

floor. He didn't answer immediately but when he did, the words were careful. "As I understand it, he and your sister have family news they want to deliver."

The cautious way he replied aimed a bolt of cold at the base of James' skull. "What news?"

Simon rubbed his jaw. "We'll leave for Pearl as soon as weather allows. Your brother would prefer to answer your questions."

"Is it in your contract to refuse to answer?"

With a curse, Simon raked his hands through his hair and stood. He poured whiskey at a sideboard and placed one of the glasses on the desk within James' reach.

James ignored the liquor. "Death."

Simon grimaced. "Your sister returned to Pearl."

"But my mother didn't." He studied the whiskey. "She's why I left."

"Drink it, James."

He picked up the glass. Maybe whiskey would thaw the ball of ice at the back of his neck. "This is all tied to Lucy's family too, you know. It started with her family."

"I think you'd better stop and think about what you're saying before you say anything else," Simon said, his voice devoid of the pity it had held a minute earlier. "I brought you into my house because my wife insisted you be treated like the friend she considers you. I won't hesitate to remove you if you threaten the security of her home."

James shuddered. He swallowed the whiskey in a burning gulp and carefully sat the glass back on the desk. "You should've left me in Chicago."

Chapter Four

"Why has Maxwell forbidden me from speaking to you?"

James jerked his head up to find Lucy peering at him over the top of the fat candle that centered her dinner table. To Lucy's left, Mary shifted in her chair and lifted her wineglass to her lips as if she hadn't heard anything. The man in question offered no such pretense.

"Lucy," he said neutrally.

She frowned at her husband. "I asked and you wouldn't answer. I want to know why."

"I recently received bad news," James said. "He doesn't want my upset to affect you."

Lucy heaved a sigh. "Maxwell told you, didn't he? I am sorry, James. But perhaps it's best you know now, before you're surrounded by things that might remind you."

"Perhaps," he muttered before filling his mouth with seasoned potato, hoping she would heed Simon's directive. He had no desire to speak of his mother.

"Since you know now —"

Simon broke in. "Leave the man be, Lucy. I heard *Señor* Tomas earlier. How did he find the roads?"

"*Señor* said the city has already trampled the snow into mud. He was glad for an opportunity to leave his house. Less glad when I confessed Mary and I conversed in English all week instead of practicing our Spanish."

Simon quizzed the women about their language studies and James closed his ears when the women began reciting the vocabulary they'd expanded during Simon's recent travel to Chicago. If Lucy's tutor spoke the truth and the snow hadn't debilitated

Denver, he could leave soon. Preferably, he would take a room at a boarding house for a time before traveling north to Pearl. Simon wouldn't allow that, however. The other man seemed determined to keep James in his sights and execute personal delivery of him.

As soon as polite, he excused himself and stepped outside to smoke. Snow crunched beneath his boots, not deep enough to prohibit travel. Behind him, the kitchen door opened and someone else emerged. Expecting Simon, seeing Mary's slight silhouette surprised him.

"You should leave soon," she said.

James nodded. "I had concluded the same."

"I heard what you said earlier about the Morgans. I don't want to know what you were talking about but I know Miss Lucy and her aunt couldn't be involved in whatever you think they're involved in."

No, the Morgan women had never done any wrong. "I spoke out of turn."

Mary tucked her shawl more securely around her face and hugged herself. She glanced over her shoulder at the house. Inside, someone snuffed a candle and the kitchen window darkened. "Are you going after we're asleep?"

"I am."

"Will you come back someday?"

"I don't believe the invitation's to be extended."

She hummed noncommittally. A loose board on the porch creaked beneath her shifting weight. James finally struck the match he'd been holding and lit his cigarette.

"I belong to Lucy," she said, "not her husband."

James choked and coughed. Recovering quickly, he croaked, "Pardon?"

"I belong to Lucy. She's why I'm here. She and I were children together. Our fathers were business partners. Even then, I resented the summers when she traveled with her mother to visit Miss Emma. I was so jealous of everyone in Pearl. She and I should have

been together.” Mary edged away from the house. She lowered herself to sit on the top step, huddled over her knees for warmth. “I loved her. Love her. When her father sent her to Pearl to stay, after she’d embarrassed one of his associates by refusing an offer of marriage, I thought I’d die, it hurt so much not to have her near. Have you ever belonged to someone?”

“Slavery—”

“It’s not slavery,” Mary said, low and fierce. “You’re deliberately misunderstanding. I’m not talking about ownership by contract. I’m talking about *belonging*. A...a rag doll lying on the side of an old road doesn’t belong to anyone. It just is. It exists but it’s not part of a life. It may as well not even be, for all anybody cares about it. But when it belonged, it was loved. Cared for and treasured.”

James studied the young woman curled over her knees in the cold, examining her fisted hands with a frown creasing her forehead. For the first time since she’d appeared in the kitchen to call Lucy back to bed, he noticed how small and thin she was. He could have tucked her beneath his arm and hidden her, her shoulders were so narrow. Illuminated by the reflection of moonlight off snow, her face was pale, her features tight.

Not denying her accusation, he extinguished his cigarette and approached the porch. “You’re freezing. Let’s go inside.”

Mary licked her lips. “After Lucy was sent to Pearl the last time, I became very ill. My father summoned a priest to give me last rites. Papa said to me, ‘You’re not ours anymore, you belong to God now’. Except God didn’t want me. I didn’t die. Since I didn’t die, I didn’t belong to anybody. I was just like a doll lost on the side of an old road.”

Something wrenched at his memories. He refused to acknowledge the twinge of pain. While Mary stared at her hands and shivered, James climbed the steps. He pulled her to her feet and pushed her into the warmth of the house. The kitchen was dark but still heated by the cooling stove.

"You should go up to bed," he said.

"I can't." Mary turned to him and tilted her head back to meet his eyes. "Lucy needs to belong to someone too. Maxwell wants her more than he wants anybody."

James nodded. "So I've learned."

"I'd hoped I could rest with you for a while before you leave."

He tensed. "I'm not – that is, you're a pretty woman, but –"

"But I'm not built the same way *he* is." Mary laughed, ending his fumbled refusal of her. "I only want to sleep. I don't have the same drive Lucy has. Or the same excuse for napping whenever the urge strikes."

Reluctantly, he agreed to her request. Mary proved little trouble. She covered herself with a blanket and lay facing away from him, uncomplaining as James burned a candle for light to write by. After a time, the soft rhythm of her breathing rocked him into a place as distant as dreamland.

Sunlight filtered between wood slats, illuminating dust motes and bits of hayseed stirred up by the breeze through the hay door. James crept forward on his stomach and, quiet as he could, cleared a space on the floor of the loft. Through a knothole, he saw his sister sitting on a pile of fresh hay in one of the horse stalls, her blonde head bent over her lap. One of the mousers kneaded her skirts with outstretched claws. Collette drew the gray cat's tail through her fist. A pair of booted feet came into view, attached to a bigger boy's legs. From his vantage, James couldn't see who'd joined her.

Collette turned her head and lifted her chin, looking up at the other boy. James squinted into the knothole. She didn't look like Mr. Morgan. She looked like him and Ethan. When they all three stood in front of their mother's looking glass, they matched. Collette was his. His and Ethan's and Ma and Pa's. She wasn't Mr. Morgan's at all.

"He's wrong," James whispered to himself. Satisfied, he started to rise up on his knees and go back to his book. The other boy moved, however, and James hesitated. While he watched, John Raincrow crouched down beside Collette and kissed her on the mouth.

Anger burst in James' chest. He reared back, breathing hard and clenching his fists. She was his sister. His! She belonged to him and Ethan, not anybody else. And Ethan would make sure John knew it. Fighting off furious tears, James waited until John and Collette left the stable. After they were gone, he ran to find Ethan.

The creak of a board jerked James from the past. He forced his fingers to relax on his pen and glanced over his shoulder to check on Mary. She hadn't moved. Simon, however, filled the open door. Bare-chested and barefoot, he waited until James nodded a greeting before he stepped into the room. Without speaking to James, Simon woke Mary with a hand on her shoulder. The touch was curiously impersonal. James set his pen aside and turned to watch the pair.

"Lucy wants you," the other man said after Mary rolled to her back. "She didn't mean for you to be down here tonight."

Mary sat. She looked to James, an apology in her eyes.

He shook his head. "No need."

Simon steadied her as she stood but let her go without following her. Together, they watched each other and listened to Mary's soft footfalls ascending the stairs.

James spoke first. "I don't understand this."

Simon tensed. "My family?"

"Why you brought me to be part of it. You had to know Lucy would recognize me. Why bring me here? Because of Mary?"

"Lucy asked me to bring you to her when I found you."

"What did she plan to do? Add me to her collection of..." He hesitated but recalled Mary's earlier words. "Of dolls?"

"I suspect she wanted to welcome you home and express her sympathy for your family's loss." The other man leaned against the wall beside the door, forearms folded across his naked chest. "Do you want to know about my wife or do you want to know about me?"

James gripped his knees. "I don't want to know about either of you."

"Liar," Simon accused quietly.

"I'm not a slave or a pet."

"No? You certainly take instructions without much resistance." Simon raised one dark eyebrow.

Even as he stood to the challenge, James knew he shouldn't. The other man was baiting him, luring him deeper into his tangled household. The way was too easy to walk. James wanted to be drawn in, pulled closer, entwined irrevocably. But not like this. Not like a stray in need of shelter.

"I'm not," James said. "You won't rule me and I'm not broken the way Mary is. If that's what you thought you'd get when you decided to step over the line you crossed on the train, you were wrong."

"Why don't you tell me what I did get?"

Hot anger burst in his chest, no different from the anger he'd experienced when John Raincrow kissed his sister in the stable. As James lunged across the small room, he recognized the emotion as aggression. A drive to dominate and master, to prove himself strong enough to go in swinging and come out on top.

Simon caught his fist before it connected with flesh. Using James' momentum, he flipped them both and shoved James against the wall. Simon's eyes flashed with arousal. James recognized that. Snarling, he wrenched his arm free. Simon blocked his second swing and pinned his forearm against the wall.

"No hitting," Simon said. "Not even in pleasure games. There's no hitting here."

James sneered. "Is that one of Lucy's rules?"

"No. It's one of mine."

"Trying to keep everyone below you on the ladder?"

Simon's grip on his wrist tightened. He stepped closer, bare feet between James' boots. "I don't ask for worship and I don't behave like a king. I do take responsibility for every life under my roof. No hitting. Ever. Do you understand?"

James jerked a nod. He couldn't speak past his awareness of Simon's thick erection pressed against his stomach. Aggression redirected itself, taking root in desire and twisting it. Holding himself still, James raised his eyes to meet Simon's.

"I'm going to fuck you," Simon said. Firm lips touched his, each word a stroke.

"No." James shook his head slowly, deliberately maintaining contact with Simon's lips. "I'm going to fuck you because I like to possess just as much as Lucy does. And I want to possess you."

He pressed forward, chest to groin against Simon. Woman and whiskey flavored the other man's mouth. Licking deeper, James pulled free of Simon's grip and touched bare, hot skin, flexing muscle down a broad back, a hard ass.

Simon stood taller but James claimed dominance. He fisted his other hand in Simon's hair and held him still while searching out every last note of Lucy's flavor. Undirected, Simon reached between them and found enough space to unfasten James' pants. Rough, calloused fingers and Simon's work-worn palm wrenched a groan from his chest. Reflexively, James arched closer, riding Simon's hand. His head rocked against the wall behind him and he closed his eyes, breath exploding from his chest on a gasp.

Simon's teeth closed over the tendon beneath James' ear. His body jerked, bowing away from the wall, following Simon's strong, sure strokes. Thoughts of proving anything fled as the head of his cock bumped the other man's stomach, dragged along the inside of his wrist, vanished into his entire-hand grip. His sac drew tight. James gritted his teeth, unwilling to finish this way.

"Stop," James rasped. He opened his eyes, tried to focus on the feminine details of the room behind Simon. Anything to soften the silent roar of urgency vibrating through his legs.

Simon worked his cock once more, a second time, before releasing him. He raised his head, eyes hot and glittering. "Are you sure you're able to fuck me, James?"

He stiffened. "Get on the bed."

Simon backed away. His clothing was a minor matter, quickly divested. James inhaled. Dark hair shadowed well-muscled limbs, devoid of scars. The other man's cock jutted thick and hard, crowning heavy testicles. James remembered the salt flavor of Simon's seed. He wanted it on his tongue again. Simon let him look, unashamed of his body or his arousal. When James exhaled, he finally moved, turning to mount the bed on his hands and knees.

"I won't take you the way you took me," James said, slowly crossing to stand at the edge of the mattress. "Turn over on your back."

"If you want a woman, you're in the wrong room," Simon said. He rolled over anyway, affecting a relaxed position. His head fit in the indentation Mary had left on the pillow. He linked his hands behind his head. Taut muscles betrayed his confusion, however. He didn't know what to expect. Oddly satisfied by the hole in Simon's experience, James unbuttoned his shirt and threw it over a straight-back chair. Boots followed, dropping on the floor one at a time, heavy thuds that incited a tic below Simon's jaw.

"I don't want a woman. I rarely do." James stepped out of his pants. "Spread your legs and raise your knees."

Simon's cock twitched. The long muscles of his thighs tensed and his lips pressed into a thin line. James watched him levelly, waiting. He'd allow a refusal. Roughness excited him but brutality never had, not as a recipient and certainly not as an aggressor.

Simon didn't refuse. He bent his knees and planted his feet wide, revealing the full weight of his sac and the expanse of flesh below. Slow and deliberate, James placed two fingers in his mouth to wet them. He regretted leaving the bulk of his belongings in Chicago. Scented oil would have eased his passage and his lover's discomfort. Pushing regrets aside, he climbed onto the bed and knelt between Simon's feet.

Arousal glistened at the tip of Simon's cock. James removed his fingers from his mouth. Leaning forward, he dragged his tongue across Simon's cock head, back and forth, aware of tensing muscles and a strangled sound of appreciation. As he drew the spongy bulb into his mouth, James positioned a wet fingertip against Simon's opening. The other man's cock jumped and he jolted, forging deeper into James' mouth. Relaxing his throat, James accepted the thrust but wasn't distracted by it. He pushed persistently until he breached the resistant ring of muscle and heard Simon's strangled curse.

Memory of his first penetration guided James. He loosened his mouth and licked a long trail up the underside of Simon's cock, raising his eyes as he did. Simon's throat was tight, the tendons standing out in stark relief.

"Your nipples are going to tighten up," James said. He pushed deeper, stroking the strip of flesh above Simon's anus with the pad of his thumb. On cue, the flat brown discs beaded into hard little points. James flicked his tongue across Simon's head, probed the slit that centered the crown. "In a minute, you're going to have gooseflesh all over your body."

"James. Christ," Simon muttered. He gripped the quilt beneath him, no longer pretending at calm. "Do it."

Gently as he could, James worked his middle finger alongside the first, fascinated by the ripple of muscle across Simon's stomach as his body resisted before accepting. Watching Simon writhe beneath him lured James back to the edge he'd earlier evaded. He positioned himself closer, angling his legs beneath Simon's and aligning their cocks. Grasping both in one hand, James rocked himself slowly along Simon's shaft. Friction built into sharp sensation. James hung his head, focused on the slide and rub of hard flesh. He caught clear drops of semen in his palm and worked the fluid down both their lengths until they were each wet and sticky and flushed with need to release.

Simon shoved his head into the pillow, his throat tight and strained. His thighs clamped around James' ribs, almost painful in their strength. "Now."

"It's going to hurt," he whispered, scissoring his fingers against tight inner muscle. "You're going to like it though."

At Simon's growl, James withdrew his fingers. He loosened his hold on their cocks and aligned himself. Braced on both hands, his arms locked straight, James surged forward. Simon breathed a ragged groan and palmed his own dick. The sight brought James closer to the edge. He clenched his teeth and sank deeper, Simon's tightness an intoxicating mix of agony and pleasure.

"Hell," Simon bit out. "I'm going to come."

James nodded. He understood firsts. Doubting his own ability to last beyond Simon's orgasm, he inched back and thrust sure, driving himself past resistance. Simon shouted, his hips angling sharply off the bed. James stretched above him, covered Simon's mouth, tongue deep as his cock. Release claimed the other man without any other warning. Between them, Simon jerked his fist in short, hard strokes, splashing hot and wet on James' stomach. Simon's orgasm latched on to James' cock, pulsing and contracting, and James groaned into his mouth as climax seized him.

The candle guttered and burned itself out as James collapsed on top of Simon.

Chapter Five

Later, in the dark, James turned his face toward Simon. "Why did you make this more than a contract?"

Beside him, Simon stiffened. James closed his eyes, figuring he'd been better keeping his mouth shut. Simon surprised him by replying.

"I thought I'd learned about you. I've been tracking you since the end of '69." Simon cleared his throat. "Ethan's wife read that first book of yours and recognized promises made by the gunslinger to his lover. She compared them to letters you wrote in Ethan's name and I followed the lead to your publisher. That first book of yours—it was part of my investigation. Research. Lucy didn't discourage me. She was fascinated by my reaction to the stories you wrote."

"Those books have nothing to do with me." The response was immediate, long-cultivated habit. Except...he thought of the growing stack of pages on the little table across the room and swallowed. The response was a lie.

Simon snorted. "You were born and raised on a ranch in Pearl. You didn't learn anything about your subject matter there."

"You're wrong." James sat. He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "You're just wrong."

"Tell me what I'm wrong about."

James lowered his chin to his chest and stared at his feet, planted on the floor and poised to lead him from the bed. He swallowed and gripped his knees as if that would anchor him. "Even a place like Pearl has secrets."

Simon touched him, a brief stroke across his back. James exhaled and said, "They're not mine anymore. Ethan and Collette. They belong to other people now."

"Ah. You've been talking to Mary."

James shrugged. "The more I think about the way she looks at the world, the more I understand about myself."

"You're not like Mary."

"No, not exactly. I don't need to be possessed. I do need to possess though, and nothing in Pearl has belonged to me for a long time. Nothing except the secrets."

"What about your brother and sister? They still think you belong to them."

James breathed past the knot in his chest. "Collette's not... She might not be ours. What if she and Ethan find out what I know?"

"Seems to me you know more than a man should know about his family's ghosts." The bedstead creaked as Simon shifted his weight. Instead of rising, he brushed his lips over James' shoulder, eliciting a shiver.

"I didn't want to know." James laughed bitterly. "But it's my fault I do. If I'd been more interested in the horses than the people, maybe everything would have been different."

"Have you considered the possibility that things important a decade and a half ago might not matter anymore?"

"Is Ellis Morgan still in Pearl?"

"The only family Lucy has there is her aunt."

James nodded, rolling that information over in his head.

"I want to know about the Morgans," Simon said.

I promise I won't tell. "My mother had an affair with Ellis Morgan. More accurately, my father shared her with him."

"Hell of a thing for you to find out."

"I didn't care except Ellis Morgan tried to claim Collette as his daughter. He said she looked just like Brewster Morgan's little girl."

"Lucy."

"The only similarity is they're both fair-haired. Ellis had no grounds to try to take her name away. She didn't look like Lucy. She looked like me and my brother."

"That's when your mother took her away," Simon deduced.

"Afterward, Ellis tried to tell me I could have been his too," James finished, miserable. He stood and felt his way through the dark, locating his pants and another candle. Simon was quiet as he partially dressed and struck a match. James turned to Simon's pensive expression.

"You're the only person Lucy and I have brought into our bed besides Mary," he said. "I didn't tell her I was going to invite you in. I didn't know for sure until she included you. She's always insisted though, that if we did bring in a man, I'd be the only one who touched her."

"She loves you," James said.

"She does," Simon said slowly. "But she... Well. Lucy doesn't have the kind of single-destination devotion most women have. Her heart's too big, her wants are..."

"Greedy," James said with a quick grin when Simon trailed off.

Simon smiled wryly. "That word's as good as any. But I'm not the same way she is. Not usually. Mary doesn't interest me the way she does Lucy. I care for her, but not the same way my wife does. I don't want anybody the way I want Lucy. I didn't think I'd ever really share her interest to see me with another man.

"She always knows her wants, however, and despite my disinterest, she wanted me to promise anyway that I wouldn't ask her to accept another man inside her. Now I wonder how much she knew about her relative."

"And my father," James said.

Simon nodded.

"Don't ask her."

"I won't. We believe in speaking freely but we also believe in privacy."

Uninvited, a hollow space opened up inside James' chest. He stared down at the stack of manuscript pages he'd written since crossing Simon's threshold less than two days ago. James understood the need for privacy. He was a solitary man, and except for a strange, quick affection for members of Simon's household, he generally preferred his own company to anyone else's. But he wrote what he knew even if he did twist it into shapes hopefully not recognized by the sources of his inspiration. *The Curious Household* would, if he continued, violate the privacy Simon held so dear. Before he consciously decided to do it, James crumpled the topmost page in his fist.

"What are you doing?" Simon stood beside him, protecting the remainder of the written pages.

James glowered. "It's the wrong story."

"Why? Because it's about us?"

Indignation stiffened his back. "Did you read it?"

"No. I'm no idiot though. You looked like a starving man desperate for a handout from your pen when I found you in Chicago. Since you got here, you've barely stopped long enough to see to your needs. I'd be blind not to notice whatever you didn't have there, you've found here. Leave it be. Let us read it when you finish."

"That won't be for a while."

Simon grasped his chin and turned James' head to meet his eyes. "You have somewhere to be besides Pearl?"

"Maybe jail," James said with a grimace.

"I told you I'd help you take care of the Livingstone issue. We'll do it today. I've been collecting thieves and murderers out of Denver for years. My word's good with the law."

"There's still Pearl." He still didn't know how to answer the questions his brother and sister would ask. He'd kept his secrets for so long, taken them away so they wouldn't come to light, that he didn't believe it'd be right to reveal them now.

"Maybe there is." Simon's eyebrows drew together. Without warning, he lowered his head and kissed his way into James' mouth, hard and possessive and over before James' body had a chance to gather itself and respond. While he tried to regroup, Simon said, "But after Pearl, I want you again. Finish that book here."

"Here," James echoed.

"Denver has boarding houses and more permanent accommodations for let just the same as Chicago. I don't figure you'll find much inspiration in Pearl." Simon winked. "Do you?"

James shook his head. No. Pearl might shelter his family and host his past, but even at nineteen he'd known it didn't hold his future. Maxwell Simon might not be offering a future either, but James had learned long ago that he didn't see the world in terms of years and decades. Maybe Ethan and Collette would understand that Pearl didn't have anything for him besides them.

"I'll come back," he said, cautiously promising himself he'd keep to his word.

"I know you will." Simon dropped his hand and stepped back. His mouth tilted wickedly. "I'm delivering you myself, staying until you're finished and not going anywhere near your cock until we're on our way home again."

"Torturer," James muttered, but without real accusation.

"Looking after my interests. You might not have noticed, but you've been one of my interests for a long damn time."

About the Author

Emily Ryan-Davis lives in Maryland with her loving husband and hateful guinea pig. On any given day, you can find her shopping (online or in stores), chatting/writing (the pair go hand in hand, can't have one without the other), knitting (or buying yarn) or mocking her husband's comic collection (while parenthetically wondering why comics haven't upgraded to the ebook age; imagine all the extra space she'd have). Occasionally she picks up her mandolin, but mostly she just ignores it. You won't find her paying attention to current events or the latest celebrity gossip because writing stories is her way of pretending it doesn't matter that she doesn't know how to use the television remote.

Emily's favorite authors are Megan Hart, Terry Pratchett, JR Ward and Orson Scott Card. She loves sexy, magical, funny and intense stories, but especially enjoys immersing herself in the breathless intensity of a "with feeling" love scene. She can't pick a genre (decision-making issues!) so writes in whatever setting calls to her at any given time: contemporary paranormal, historical western, medieval Europe, Gothic France – if she can imagine a strong emotional attraction existing in a particular place or time, chances are she'll write the story.

Emily welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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