

Evernight Publishing

ASHLYNN MONROE



FALLEN  
ANGELS

**Fallen Angels**  
**by**  
**Ashlynn Monroe**



**Evernight Publishing**

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the wonderful people who have encouraged and supported me. Thank you for your love, and for being who you are. God bless you all, and also God bless everyone who reads my work. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

# **Fallen Angels**

**Ashlynn Monroe**

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## **Chapter One**

### **Sisters of the Merciful Truth Convent-1861-Texas**

“Run!” Mother Superior called to the nuns. “We need to get out of here! Hurry sisters, leave the altar vestments, we must go, *now!*”

This was the first time Mother Superior had ever felt fear standing within the church. Watching the young women under her charge flee into the street, realizing too late her mistake in allowing them to leave the building. She watched the men, holding their guns firmly as charges burst in the air, displaying no remorse over killing innocent young women and caught her sob, not allowing herself to give into the pain of what she saw—her sisters lying dead in the street. She had no idea what to do. Suddenly their place with the church, their devotion to the Lord offered no protection.

One of the girls, a novice who had yet to take her vows, whimpered, “Mother, shall I pray?”

The small question broke her heart. She remembered holding the young woman who had questioned her, rocking her to sleep as an infant. She took her cold hand as blood spilled into the dusty street and the bitter, metallic odor of gunpowder infused the air.

They had no weapons. It was time to pray.

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Justice was washing luncheon dishes in the convent kitchen with her sisters. Grace sat with her feet propped up on a chair, eating an apple while Purity and Chastity tried to work around her. Purity scowled and knocked her sister's feet out of the way. Growing up in the convent had made the daily chores second nature to all but Grace. The afternoon clean up ritual was their time to gossip and just be young women and sisters together, and while it could get tedious, they loved it.

A sudden rush of noise from the sanctuary rocked the kitchen, interrupting their work. The wooden bowl Justice was washing crashed to the floor.

“What on Earth was that noise?” Purity demanded.

Justice peeked through the small window. Men with guns stormed up the church steps, over the bodies of her beloved fellow nuns. Justice whirled back away from the window.

“What is it?” Grace sounded annoyed.

The nunnery was separated from the church by many out buildings and a courtyard of carefully tended trees, which must have insulated the sisters from the commotion of the initial attack. Justice felt the safety of her world shatter like glass, the shards cutting her soul. After the fearful days of being orphans, they had thought harm could never come to them here. But, Justice noted as she saw the red soaking into the white clothing of the novices, death obviously did not discriminate between the pure and impure. An hour earlier or later and it could have been her blood sisters laying discarded in the dirt.

Justice felt unable to answer Grace's question. It was just too horrible. Tears clouded her vision but she found her voice.

“We're under attack. We have to hide. Sisters are dead.”

“That can’t be true!” Grace protested, “No man would harm a sister, his soul would be damned to Hell for eternity. Why would anyone want to hurt any of us?”

Purity’s voice was bitter as she answered, “We might be brides of Christ, but we live in this house due to The Family’s generosity. How many times have we hidden their illegal activities, or cared for their wounded?”

“We have to hide, right now!” Justice hissed.

Purity leapt from her stool. “I will not let strangers kill our family. God will protect us. Hurry, we can help them.”

Justice watched, stunned, as her sister grabbed a large rolling pin and sprang from the relative safety of the kitchen. She glanced at her remaining siblings, Chastity clenching the broom from the kitchen, Grace shaking, terrified. Justice knew Grace was easily frightened by the world, and she felt a small measure of relief knowing that she was staying behind safely. Purity was far ahead of them and Chastity and Justice rushed to catch up to the wild woman. Purity had no fear and without intervention she would certainly be one of the many dead.

The sanctuary was eerily quiet as they entered, empty and wrong.

Violated.

The church was empty, but the sound of the rectory door slamming told Justice that the terror had moved through the sanctuary. Looking around, her heart compared the armed men with locusts. They had destroyed her hallowed place as pests destroyed a field, the destruction complete and terrible. Justice set her hand on the worn wood of the pew and felt something sickeningly warm. What she had thought was a wine stain on the white altar cloth was suddenly too red to be the sacrament wine. Looking around in disbelief, Justice realized that blood corrupted the sacred space. It dripped from a nearby statue of Saint John. Everywhere she looked blood of her sisters, sainted with untimely deaths, splattered the lovingly cared for church.

She heard a scream from the rectory and hurtled toward the sound, and suddenly tripped over something. Something soft. She caught herself against a pew and found herself looking down into the dead, sightless eyes of Sister Agnes. A scream wrenched from her throat. Justice fell back and Chastity caught her.

“Stay here,” Chastity murmured. “I’m going to get Purity and drag her back to the kitchen. Just stay here.”

Justice slid to the wooden floor of the church and knelt beside the frail woman’s body, tears choking her. Sister Agnes dead. Her younger sister taking care of her when Justice, as the oldest, should be looking out for her. Her world and home destroyed.

A gunshot rang in her ears and Justice forced herself to her feet just in time to see Chastity, her sweet sister, sliding down the wall of the rectory, a smear of blood painting red along the white wall behind her.

Without a thought for her own safety, Justice screamed. The man who had shot her sister turned, gun in hand, and grinned a rotten toothed grin that made her sick. His soft chuckle raised the hair on her arms. He aimed at Justice. The moment froze and she waited to die.

With a loud thump, the man suddenly fell forward, revealing Purity, rolling pin held high. The gun slid across the bloody floor toward Justice and without thought, Justice picked it up and aimed it at the killer. Her only desire was to protect her sisters and herself. She had never held a gun before.

“You have to turn the crank,” Purity whispered hoarsely.

Justice followed the instruction and the world slowed down around her. A line of red burst across the man’s white linen shirt and somewhere far away she heard the soft pings of the cartridges hitting the ground. For a timeless moment, Justice stood looking at what she had done and then guilt began to tear at her soul. She had committed the worst of sins. Purity was kneeling next to Chastity, shaking her, trying to revive her. Nothing. Multiple bullets had torn through her body and Chastity lay dead in a pool of her own blood. Justice



straightened her sister's skewed habit, feeling the automatic weapon dangling heavily in her other hand.

Another scream rent the air. It was Grace. There was nothing Justice could do for Chastity except save her twin. Without thought, she flew out the rectory door, into the bright afternoon sun, fully exposed to danger. Several shots fired in her direction, but she kept running. Grace screamed again, and Justice forced herself to sprint faster. Purity had obviously chosen to take the safer but longer way, through the building.

When Justice burst through the kitchen door, what she saw was nightmarish. Three men held her sister on the kitchen table, the table at which they ate and prepared food. Her habit was gone, her simple frock ripped from her pale body, her white petticoat yanked up around her hips. Justice could see blood on her thighs. A big, mole covered man was brutally ramming his cock into her screaming sister. His greasy hair frantically flew around his face as he moved. To Justice, he looked like the devil. There was no decision, no thought. Justice raised the gun with two hands and began to crank the gears. It fired into the men. The man who was raping her sister fell onto her, dead. Grace screamed, breaking Justice's trance. She leapt toward her sister and pulled the heavy dead man away. His body hit the wooden floor with a thump. Both of the men who had been holding Grace down, waiting for their turns, lay dead on the floor.

So much blood. Justice turned, fell to her knees, and began to vomit as Purity burst through the door. When she saw Grace, she swiftly hurried to her sister, tears streaming down her face. They wept together as Justice laid curled up in a ball on the floor, feeling the reality of the situation begin to sink in.

She had taken lives. She was a murderer. God would never forgive her. Chastity was dead. Justice wanted to die. She wanted the pain and fear to end.

The back door of the kitchen cracked against the wall and the women jumped. A man rushed in and Justice fumbled for the gun as Grace screamed.

“No, Justice, it’s The Family. We’re safe now,” Purity shouted.

Justice let the gun fall and just let her tears escape. Looking at them with embarrassment, the man mumbled an apology and rushed out, a rifle at his side. Justice knew that a rifle was no better than a bow and arrow compared to a hand held Gatling. Another man, also of The Family, and much more heavily armed, rushed in behind the first, not even sparing the sisters a look as he followed his associate. Justice was relieved to see the firepower. At least some of The Family had better firepower than the attackers had. Even a nun knew guns. With the mafia fighting for territory in Texas and a civil war raging, guns were more abundant than food.

Justice somehow found the strength to stand. She and Purity helped Grace back into the remains of her habit as a round of gunfire signaled the end of the attack. Silence burned her ears.

The quiet was more terrible to Justice than the loudest of shrieks. Screams would have meant survivors—silence was the sound of death. Slowly the realization that they were the only ones left overcame Justice and she wept. The three sisters held each other for support. Everywhere they looked people they cared about lay dead. Their habits stained with blood.

After the gangs had cleared the scene, leaving behind the broken windows and bloody dead, the townspeople came out to help the three remaining sisters bury their fellow nuns and their sister.

With the priest also dead from the barrage of bullets, Justice was left to lead the service over the mass grave. Between her words she could hear the women weeping, her surviving sisters, but she managed to hold herself together.

She felt as if standing before God, committing the many buried saints to him, was blasphemy. She had killed a man. God could never forgive her for that. She had killed a helpless man for vengeance. Guilt and grief battled in her heart, each trying to hurt her more. Justice let her mind shut down and numbness settled in, finding comfort in familiar words.

After it was over, she wobbled to a chair and collapsed. A woman brought her a glass of water, but she pushed it away, mumbling a weak apology. She moved to stand, to go to her sisters, but as she looked up, the blackness began to envelope her. Bright blue sky and puffy white clouds were her last sight before her eyes closed and oblivion took her.

## Chapter Two

### February 1865-Texas

Justice calmly chewed her tobacco and watched a burly bearded man pick up his fellow card player and throw him across the bar in her favorite place to get a drink in Galveston. Sid, the bartender, yelled at the angry man to take it outside and, with a cascade of curses, the man hauled the cheat off the bar and carried him out.

Justice stood and spit her chewing tobacco in a spittoon near a tall man wearing a confederate uniform who shot her a dirty look through his scraggly hair. She glared right back at him. Despite the uniform, she doubted he was actually enlisted. The rebels had taken over Galveston on New Year's Eve in 1863. Uniforms were meaningless.

She moved toward the bar and Sid immediately poured her a double whiskey. He was a damn fine bartender. Justice turned toward the stage as a round of applause started, trying to sip her drink dispassionately. The person she had come to see was about to perform.

As hard as it was for her, Justice refused to show any emotion or to turn away. Guilt was a two way street and she could dish it out as well as she had been taking it for such an insufferably long time.

As Purity stepped out onto the stage, Justice noticed many of the men seemed exceedingly more eager for her sister's performance than for those of the other dancers. Several men whistled and shouted.

Justice hated what her sister did. What the girl had become had made Justice cry herself to sleep on more than one occasion. She couldn't blame Purity, not after what had happened, but it was a knife in her heart to know the path her quiet, studious, and devout sister had

taken was because Justice had failed to protect her. Before she could focus on the ugly thoughts, she turned her attention back to her sister.

The piano player began a lusty tune and Purity shook her pasty covered nipples. Her little skirt and pasties matched perfectly. Justice remembered the crooked seams of Purity's habit and wondered if her sister's abysmal sewing skills had improved. Purity spun in time with the piano music. The men hooted loudly as she slowly pulled her skirt down over her hips, exposing her pale buttocks, covered only by a hot pink g-string. It still amazed Justice, even after all the dreadfulness she had experienced, that Purity had the courage to strip.

It was clear that part of the courage was liquid. Purity weaved as she danced. Without her skirt, Purity staggered over to the pole planted in the center of the stage and began to twirl artfully. Her experience with the maneuver was obvious. Even drunk the woman knew how to move.

Justice watched sadly as her sister titillated the crowd. She thumbed the rosary in her pocket in an unconscious nervous gesture. Purity stopped spinning and strutted to the side of the stage, where she bent over, and whispered to a whiskered old timer at the stage's edge. He happily pulled one of her pasties free, she stood and removed the other, all the men cheered, and as she bent down again he slipped a Confederate bill in her g-string. She put his face between her ample breasts and squeezed. His expression made Justice worry that his old heart would stop if her sister didn't stop first.

When the music ended Purity left the stage with a falsely cheerful wave and Justice took her whiskey and the glass of gin that Sid had handed her to the backroom, where Purity was sitting on the floor weeping. No matter how bad things had gotten between them, her sister's pain broke her heart. Justice handed her the gin and sat down with her. Purity downed the whole glass and issued a sorry little excuse for a hiccup, then looked at Justice for a moment before she burst into tears again.

Sighing, Justice put her arm around her sister, but Purity angrily shoved her away.

“I told you not to come here while I’m working! Some people make an honest living, you know. I hate you wearing those goddamn guns in here! Why do they always let you keep them on? They take everyone else’s at the door.”

“Sid wants to keep his balls attached. He knows better than to try to take my little friends away,” Justice answered her sister lightly before delving into the real issue. “I came here because I have to talk to you. I knew I’d have to wait until you were working to catch you. I never get a response when I instant telegraph you.”

“That’s because I don’t have the computing box any more. I traded it.”

Justice had purchased the computing box from the general store in Dallas. It was a beautiful machine. The large screen was framed with glided scrollwork and the keys sat on nice tray with golden legs. The machine’s parts were worth what most people made in a year. What could have possessed her deranged, drunken sister to part with it?

“What did you need so badly, Purity?” Justice demanded, hiding her hurt with anger. “You could have just asked me for it!”

“I don’t want your damn blood money! You’d never have given me money for Jimmy anyway.”

Purity’s boyfriend, Jimmy, was really her pimp. He ran Martha’s and when the stage show was over, for the right price, a man could enjoy private entertainment upstairs. Jimmy made Justice’s skin crawl.

“What in the hell did Jimmy need money for? He makes enough in one night to make the take from my last bank robbery look like pin money.”

Purity leaned forward and whispered drunkenly, “Don’t tell anyone this, but he’s been threatened. The Family has moved into the area and they want a cut of Martha’s. He could buy their protection in a lump sum or give them a cut off the top. He wanted to just buy them off.”

“Then he’s more of an idiot than I thought. If they get a large sum, they’ll just know they have a fresh fish. When they want your money, you pay or you get fitted for your pine box. What do you see in that fool?”

“Don’t talk ‘bout my Jimmy like that. He saved me from that man. I owe him my life.”

“He’s taken your life again and again, honey. You can’t tell me every time he sells your private pleasures for the night, and you know that he knows what those men are doing to you, that you don’t die a little bit inside?”

“How do you know about that?” Purity’s voice cracked as she issued the sharp demand.

“I’m not your cloistered little sister anymore.”

For a long drawn out moment, they sat in silence. Purity took the rest of Justice’s drink and downed it. Purity set the glass down and looked at her with a broken, wild-eyed expression. It made the terrible memories come rushing back and hit Justice in the pit of her stomach.

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*They ran. Justice towed Purity along behind her, knowing that her ankle could be broken, but not allowing her to stop. They had to keep running. It had been a mistake for them to go on foot without protection and now they were pursued by drunken Union deserters.*

*They had left the convent only days before, their sisters buried, their old lives over, and their only option to journey to a new town and new lives. When a group of noble soldiers had offered to escort the sisters, they had naively accepted. It was only later that they had found out what nefarious intentions the men had held. When one of the men had tried to rape poor, traumatized Grace, the sisters had run. Purity had fought Grace’s attacker like a wildcat, but when he’d kicked her she had fallen and broken her ankle.*

*Hindered by their cumbersome dresses, the sisters were no match for the deserters. They began to catch up, coming close enough for one of them to grab Purity by the skirt and swing her to face him, hitting her in the face. Justice skidded to a stop, turning back to Purity.*

*“That’s what you get, whore. Don’t you ever attack me again,” spat the man who had tried to rape Grace.*

*Justice lashed out. Her knee pounded into their attacker’s groin and he collapsed, groaning. She heaved Purity’s arm over her shoulder again and tried to run, but Purity’s limp had gotten worse. Justice couldn’t allow her to stop, better to be lame for life than dead or raped. Grace was nowhere to be seen.*

*A gunshot startled her and Justice turned. Two rough looking cowboys appeared over the horizon, riding up behind the soldiers, guns drawn, bullets flying. It happened quickly. Justice watched the soldiers fall from their horses like stones, unable to even call out before they were dead in the sand. The sisters finally stopped running. Justice helped Purity sit and began to assess the damage to her ankle.*

*The cowboys rode up beside them. Justice began to gush her thanks, but the words she heard cut her thanks short.*

*“Okay, Heath which one of them gals you want? We split the heist money, let’s split these little beauties too.”*

*Hugh’s friend looked uncertain. “I don’t know Hugh, seems wrong to just pick ‘em up and take ‘em with us.”*

*“I want the damaged one with the nice hair. It’ll be easier to keep her. I’m going south, Heath, you go north. You do what you want with the other.”*

*Justice tried to fight Hugh off her sister. He pounced before they even had the chance to run. He grabbed the hysterical Purity, pulling her across his horse, and galloping off. Justice didn’t even have a chance against his strength and his horse. Screaming, she tried to run after her sister and her captor. It was at least a mile*



*before she realized how impossible it was to catch the horse. With lack of food and water taking a higher toll than grief, her body collapsed, unconscious in the sand.*

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Purity turned away which helped Justice clear the cobwebs of bad memories. She helped her drunken sister up and together they found the dressing room. Daisy, one of the newer, younger girls was getting ready for her turn on stage. She gave Justice a dirty look. Justice's short temper snapped and she slammed her fist down on the vanity table where the woman was applying the last of her abundant cosmetics.

"You got a problem?" Justice demanded.

"I don't like lesbians and drunks in here while I'm getting ready."

"I don't see any lesbians or drunks here, bitch, so I think you need to apologize!"

"You might be in a corset, but you act like a man." Daisy sneered. "No straight girl would want to scare away men like you do and it ain't right, you robbing places and gun slinging like you do."

"I'll show you how fast I can draw these guns if you don't apologize for your filthy mind and mouth!"

"I'm ain't goin' to."

As Justice raised her fist to give Daisy a lovely shiner and ruin her made up face, a loud, barking shout made her turn. Jimmy and a very well built companion stood in the doorway, blocking the light from the hallway with their imposing bodies, darkening the room. Jimmy spoke directly to Justice, but she noticed that both Purity and Daisy cowered.

"Don't you dare mess up my product. Daisy needs that pretty li'l face to bring in the money, don't you, doll? Get out there and shake that money maker."

Daisy scurried to the door. Jimmy smacked her ass loudly as she rushed past them and Daisy gave a startled yelp. Jimmy laughed, a deep, crass belly laugh, but his companion didn't seem to find it funny. Justice stared the pimp down, hard. She had little tolerance for those that preyed upon the weak and downtrodden and Jimmy's entire business was built on the pain of others.

“What you want ‘round here, Justice? I know you’ve done right by me in the past when there’s been trouble here, but if you lay a finger on my girls I’ll kill you myself.”

“I didn’t stop the Grover Brothers for you. I did it for my sister. My business with her is a family matter. If you ever try to kill me, Jimmy, you’ll find out how quick you can die.”

Jimmy didn’t say a word, but he backed down like the coward he was, no longer grinning. The other man watched the exchange impartially. Justice wasn’t sure what it was about his level gaze that irritated her.

“Let’s go,” Jimmy said to his companion. As the two men walked into the hall, Justice heard him add— “That’s the one I was telling you about, the girl with steel balls.”

Justice scowled. She was as feminine as any other woman—she just used a gun better than most men did. Unfortunately, her skills tended to emasculate every man in her general vicinity.

“What do you want, Justice?” Purity demanded, drunkenly.

“It’s Grace. I think I might have found her.”

Purity sat up a little straighter. The news infiltrated her drunken haze, sobering her momentarily. “Where is she?”

“I think she’s in Santa Fe. I want you to come with me to look for her. If we can find her I think we should all be together.”

“I don’t care what happened to that little coward. If she’d stayed to fight, maybe we could have fought them off. We’d have at least had a chance.”

“Do you remember how scared and tore up her mind was? She wouldn’t have been any help. God works in all things. I might not be a nun anymore, but I haven’t forgotten Him. I’m just not worthy of Him anymore.”

“Bullshit, after everything, can you really be telling me to have faith? Get real, Sis. And get out of my face.”

“Please, Purity, let’s just go.”

“I don’t associate with gun slingers. Go be a hero somewhere else. I can’t stand to look at you!”

Hurt, too tired to fight any longer, Justice left her irate sister. She knew Purity blamed her for not saving her from Hugh. Because of Hugh, Purity was living such a different life than she had ever dreamed of living. It had taken her an entire year for Justice to find Purity and by then the damage seemed done. Justice could do nothing except try and reach out to the suffering woman. If only Hugh had taken her instead of Purity, she would at least have one sister left in her life. Finding Grace was her obsession. Missing the girl left a dull ache in her heart, a constant reminder that no one was safe in Texas.

Someday, Purity would come around and understand. Justice just hoped it happened before Purity lay dying of a social disease. If Jimmy’s temper didn’t kill her first, her lifestyle would certainly finish her off. Not that Justice was one to talk—her own life would certainly end in a hail of bullets. It hadn’t taken her long to come to terms with death—life was what worried her. She knew she lived with the welcome mat out for Death and that knowledge made her even more intent on finding Grace. She had let her sisters down, but hope for making amends kept her going each day.

As Justice walked down the dark hallway toward the back exit, a hand shot out of the darkness and grabbed her arm. She yelped, but she had her gun pointed into the shadows before the sound of her fear died away.

She cleared her throat. “You’d better come into the light and state your intent,” she said harshly. “I don’t kill for nothing, but if I feel threatened that’s not nothing to me, buddy.”

A masculine chuckle, sinfully sexy, emerged from the darkness.

“I’d put that down. I don’t kill women, but I hear you’re as tough as any man is and you kill just as quick.” When he spoke, his voice was rich like warm brandy and soft as velvet. It made Justice suddenly very aware that she was a woman. “I guess I could make an exception for you, but it’d be a helluva waste, Beauty, so let’s put our weapons down.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” Justice replied, hand on her gun. “I can’t see you in the darkness. How can I trust you?”

He chuckled again. She hadn’t imagined it, the man sounded like sex. Justice was still a virgin, but she had certainly heard and seen enough, running with her rough crowd, to understand the complex mechanics of the act. If done right, it could be a very nice time. She just hadn’t found a man who could touch her heart. She had held that part of herself apart from who she had become. She had also held out the hope that if she died pure of body, it might balance out the unclean life she lead.

The voice stepped forward, and Justice had to back up. Close up, the man was even taller then she had thought when he had stood next to Jimmy. Life hadn’t been soft for him, his body was a machine made of sinew and muscle and he didn’t have an ounce of fat to spare.

“Why did you grab me?” Justice demanded. Her voice sounded soft and uncertain to her own ears.

His bright blue eyes crinkled charmingly and his row of white teeth was bright in the darkness. His smile was wicked, but it made his face even more handsome. Justice was tempted to move the lock of thick dark brown hair out of his face, but she managed to restrain herself.

“I have a very profitable proposition for you. I’d like you to help me rob a train. Just the two of us, less people to split the profits with, are you in?”

“How do you think the two of us can pull it off?” Justice balked. “I’ve never been involved in a robbery with less than four people!”

“You, little lady, will be able to walk right up to the gold. We won’t even have to draw our guns.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not crazy. I’ll even buy your train ticket.”

“I’m a wanted woman. I can’t very well stroll onto a train. There are wanted posters everywhere, with my picture all over them.”

“I’ve seen those pictures, sweetness. You in that lovely hat and that lovely trench coat, with your hair up under your hat? You look like a young man in the posters, not a woman. You could easily board a train in a respectable dress and loose hair. Not a single passenger would suspect you. I’ll even buy you a nice dress. What do you say?”

“You’re not a lawman, right?”

His laugh was loud and honest.

“Honey, I’ve been called a lot of things but ‘lawman’ isn’t one of them. You’d know who I am if you went north to Montana. My wanted posters outnumber yours two to one. I’m not exactly a law abiding citizen.”

“I need to think about this. I’m no coward, but I’m no fool and it’s a ballsy plan,” Justice told him. “I’ll be at the boarding house down the street until Friday. Come see me Friday morning and I’ll give you my answer.” She ended with a curt nod. As she left the alley she realized she had never even asked Sexy his name. It made her grit her teeth at her own stupidity. How was she supposed to investigate a nameless man?

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When she arrived at Lucy’s boarding house, the matronly woman gave a quick cry and rushed over to her.

“Child, I’ve missed you something fierce!” Lucy cried, hugging Justice as though she were a long lost daughter, “You look like you need a good meal and a bath. Come in. I’ve got a nice room just waiting for you.”

Justice had saved Lucy’s son’s life when he had found himself indebted to some thugs. The men had taken him out into the wilderness to kill him. Justice had brought the young man back home alive.

Lucy had taken more than one bullet out of Justice and had lovingly nurtured her through her recovery on those occasions. Coming back to Lucy’s was as close as she ever got to a homecoming.

Justice hugged the woman back and followed her inside. Exhausted and ready for the promised comforts, Justice inhaled the clean lavender scent of the boarding house as they walked inside. It felt good to be home.

### Chapter Three

*Where was she? She couldn't remember what she had been doing before she had gone to sleep. She could feel the hard ground underneath her thin bedroll. A canvas tent was over her, dark in the dusk. Memory came flooding back in terrible, painful flashes. Her sisters were gone. She was alone. Her eye caught a strange weapon, different from any she had ever seen before, but a gun was a gun. She grabbed it off the ground just as heavy footsteps sounded outside the tent and a head popped into the flap. Shaking, Justice pointed the weapon at the interloper. She had killed the man at the rectory and she would kill this one too if necessary.*

*"Hey there, little lady." His voice was shaky, as if scared, and youthful. "I'm not like Hugh. You were lying in the sand and I thought about just leaving you, but well, my mama taught me better than that. You're safe here. I ain't a dirty rapist."*

*Justice didn't lower the weapon, but she stopped shaking.*

*"Where is my sister?" she questioned him accusingly. "Why didn't you go after her?"*

*"I'm no fool either," the man answered, "Hugh woulda killed me as soon as look at me if I went and followed him. We left the rest of the gang for a reason. We've traveled together too long. It was time we went in many directions so the law couldn't follow. Now, I'm no saint, but I'd never hurt a woman. I'm sorry but I can't help your sister."*

*"I have to get her back!" Justice cried.*

*Heath had the courtesy to look a little ashamed. "There ain't a thing we can do about it. Hugh'd shoot us both if we tried to help her. He's never killed a woman, so at least that's something."*

*It was little comfort to Justice.*

*“I assume you are a thief,” Justice said. “I guess I can’t judge you. I used to be a nun, kind of still might be one.”*

*“You’re a nun? Jesus!” He looked horrified. “Oh Goddamn! Oh, I’m so sorry for my mouth.”*

*She couldn’t help her short bark of laughter, as awful as things were it was either laugh or cry and she had never been much of a crier.*

*“It’s alright. You’re Heath, right?”*

*“Yeah, I’m Heath. I can take you back to your convent right away.”*

*“No, I can’t go back there.” She hefted the gun again. “Heath, there is something that you can do for me.” She extended the weapon. “I want you to teach me how to use this, properly.”*

*Heath’s eyes grew large and round and she heard him mutter, “Jesus” under his breath.*

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Justice shook herself from her reverie and strapped her guns on before tossing the last of her possessions in her suitcase and snapping it shut. She had tried to speak to Purity again, but gotten nowhere. Love and hate were too close kin. It made it harder for her sister to see that she wasn’t a monster.

Lucy was waiting for her by the door when she had finally finished packing and was ready to leave the safe, loving comfort of the boarding house. Tears filled Lucy’s eyes when she saw Justice walk down the stairs. Justice’s boots and trench coat were fresh after a loving cleaning by the matron and Justice wore a new corset and black leather britches. Her hat sat proudly on her head. She knew that Lucy would love to see her in a sweet calico dress and high button boots, but that part of her had died a long time ago. Justice was much more herself in her current ensemble. Hugging Lucy



briefly, Justice shoved an envelope in her hands and whispered, “Don’t open that until I’m long gone, okay, Lucy?”

The boarding house owner looked confused, but she nodded. Justice gave her a small smile. Three hundred dollars in small bills would go a long way for the woman and Justice owed her every penny for all the times in the last few years Lucy had bandaged and sheltered her. Not that she had ever asked for repayment.

Blinking into the hot, bright, morning sunlight, Justice dropped her pack and took her sun goggles out of her bag. She took off her hat, slipped the leather strap over her head and tucked her hat into her pack for safekeeping.

She patted a big stallion on the rump as she walked past a line of horses at a trough. He whinnied and snorted. He would be very unhappy in a moment when she started up her motorcycle. Fast, steam powered, gleaming, and beautiful, she tied her bag onto the back seat of her most prized possession and flicked a speck of dust from the seat. Justice hated leaving it out in the open like this. She would have to find a nice barn to hunker down in so she could clean all the sand and grit out of its parts.

She believed in taking care of what she owned and in knowing how it worked. If she found herself caught out in open desert and it stalled, she could die. Knowing how to keep it running gave her an edge in the wilderness. She was just about to open the boiler and get the bike warmed up when a tall figure approached.

Justice had almost forgotten that Sexy had a proposition for her. Almost. He beckoned her over into the shadows of the boarding house. Looking about furtively, she followed him. He looked down at her and a small smile curved his mouth. She flipped up the sun reflectors on her goggles so that only the clear glass stood between her eyes and the delicious man.

“So, Beauty, have you given any thought to my proposition? We stand to see a hundred thousand dollars a piece.”

Her mouth fell open in a very un-lady like gawk. Had he really said a hundred grand? Each? She could take the risk for that. She knew his plan was good. Who would recognize her in a dress?

“If you decide to give it a go, come find me.” He tucked a piece of paper in her hand, then took her small chin in his large, calloused hand. His eyes held warm promises when he spoke.

“I hope to see you again.”

She felt a little shudder run up her spine as he slunk away, and realized that she had forgotten to ask his name again. She looked down at the paper. No name, he'd just written an address in San Marcos. Justice sighed at her own foolishness, brought the paper to her bike, and carefully tucked it into her pack. She threw some coal into the boiler and took off running. The bike started with a glorious purr. Jumping on, she felt the wind rushing across her face, whipping strands of hair from her bun.

If she participated in the train robbery she would easily have enough money to find Grace and to save Purity. They could go live a quiet safe life and heal together. The thought of that sort of freedom buoyed her heart sweetly. She hadn't had this much hope since the day she left Heath to search for her sisters.

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*Heath looked worried.*

*She hugged him and whispered, “Thank you. You saved my life in so many ways, you'll never know.”*

*He looked uncomfortable when she pulled away. She could tell he wanted to say something, but he didn't seem to be able to speak. Justice kissed his cheek. If she had had a brother, she would have hoped the man would be just like Heath.*

*“Justice—”*

*“I'll be alright. Thank you for the gun. I'll take good care of it.”*

*“Just don’t let it get you killed. You’re a fine woman, Justice. Hell, I’d even marry you, if you’d let me. Please reconsider going out there alone. The next guy who finds you unconscious—that guy might do things to you.”*

*“I’ll never let my guard down again. I’ve learned a lot from you. With the money from our last heist, I’ll be able to search for a long while. Thank you for being such a noble and wonderful friend.”*

*“I’m a fool. Should never have let you talk me into teaching you how to shoot, how to steal.” He took a hand from her waist and shoved it into his pocket, digging something out. “Here. Take this. I might be damned but you’ve still got a chance.”*

*He shoved a rosary into her hands. It was beautiful, precious, made of rich materials, gold, jewels, and hard to find parts.*

*“I can’t take this Heath, you use this.”*

*“It was my mother’s. I’ve always felt like she was looking down on me and watching out for me as long as I’ve had it. Please take it. If you have it I’ll feel like I’m watching over you.”*

*Tears sprang to her eyes and she threw herself into his arms in an awkward embrace. He patted her back and cleared his throat.*

*She stepped back, blushing. He wanted her, it was obvious. He stepped forward and leaned down to kiss her forehead. Regret hung heavily on his words when he spoke.*

*“If you ever need me, you find me. I’d come with you, help you look for them.”*

*She shook her head. “Heath, I need to do this, for myself, for my sisters. I’ve already intruded on your life for long enough. I have to see what I’m made of. If I don’t leave now, I never will.” She took a deep breath, needing to leave things honest between them, “I care deeply for you, but not the way you want. I don’t want to stay and tie your heart to something impossible. I’m not the loving kind, not anymore. You will always be my dearest friend. I hope you can forgive me for not being able to give you more.”*

*Heath didn't look placated by her words. She finished tying her things onto the back of the motorcycle she had taken in trade for her horse. It was a fine piece of engineering and the man who had built it had taught her a few things about caring for it. The rest she was sure she would learn.*

*Heath stepped forward and grabbed her, pulling her face up to meet his lips. He kissed her, his desire washing around her like water flowing around a stone in the river.*

*The look on his face when he finally pulled back was tragic. She could see his devastation as he accepted that his last ditch effort hadn't worked and she would never want more than his friendship. He stepped back, mumbling an apology. She closed the gap between them and put her fingers to his lips.*

*"Don't ever be sorry for that. Don't ever be sorry for having such a wonderful heart. I wish I did too."*

*She began to run with the bike and it fired up. She jumped on, glad Heath had insisted, for safety, that she wear britches when she rode. She rode off at an amazing speed, ready to find her future by reuniting her past.*

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Justice blinked away the wetness in her eyes and tried to focus on meeting up with nameless and sexy. A two man train robbery. She was in.

## Chapter Four

The long hours of sitting on the wooden, albeit finely carved, seat of the motorcycle left Justice with a sore bottom. She turned the bike off and looked at her inauspicious destination. She pulled off her goggles and hung them from the handlebars, and then took the paper out of her tool pouch on the front of the bike, looking at the address again. *Yep, this is the place*, she thought crossly.

It looked deserted. If she had traveled for so many miles for nothing she was going to kill Sexy. He had obviously been playing with her, was just another one of those men who felt threatened by her skill with a gun and willingness to join them in being bad. Sighing, she flipped her leather clad leg over the bike and put the kickstand down. It began to sink in the sand, so she grabbed a wooden disc out of her pack and placed it under the kickstand. Satisfied that the bike would stay, she decided to look around the place.

A broken window and weathered exterior clearly showed this home was no longer in use, but the desolate setting lent an odd beauty to the structure. It made her want to cry. Was her childhood home as run down without a family's love? It was a question that she tried not to think about, but suddenly she couldn't help but imagine how it must look. She hoped squatters had taken it over and cared for it, but if not, she was sure it would look much like this home, like a dry skeleton in the sand. Wind whipped across her face, grating like sandpaper. She tried to shield her eyes, blink the grains away, but was forced to stand, eyes covered until the wind died down. She gasped as she opened her eyes. An imposing figure darkened the shadowed door.

"Hey, Beauty. Glad to see that you made it. I thought you might not have the guts." Sexy leered from the dark cavern.

"Oh, I've got guts," Justice retorted. "Some might even say steel balls. I want that money and I'm willing to take the risk."

He stepped forward, coming out into the light and revealing even white teeth and a more attractive face than she remembered.

“You never told me your name,” she said, before Sexy distracted her again.

He smiled. “I’m a man of mystery.”

His deep rich whisper made her tingle, but she replied sharply, “I’m going to risk my life and my freedom on your plan. Give me a name or I ride away.”

“My Christian name is Jeremiah Wallace, but the name on my wanted posters is the name that most folks know me by. Telling you my real name is me giving you my trust.” He fished around in his pocket and handed her a creased and worn piece of paper. Opening it, she saw that it was a wanted poster. The artist hadn’t captured him well at all. The poster said they wanted him for murder, robbery, debauchery, and disturbing the peace. The name listed was “Steel” Wall. She handed it back with a smile.

“Ok, ‘Steel’, I believe you’re not a lawman. How’d you end up with a name like that?”

“Day before the first time I was arrested, a fella broke his hand trying to punch me. Called me a steel wall. The older guys in the gang thought it was funny, and when we were brought in by the law and they took down our names, one of them answered for me, Steel Wallace. Guess the last part got dropped.”

“My name has always been on my poster,” Justice told him.

“Lucky for you that the artist never saw you, he certainly didn’t draw you right at all.” Steel shrugged. “Don’t ever let them photograph you, Justice. Your fine boned face would be a dead giveaway,” he chuckled, “and if they ever get color out in pictures, that hair’ll bring you in faster than the reward money.”

“If the money is really what you claim, this is my last heist,” Justice replied. “I’m looking to go straight.”

Steel nodded and beckoned her into the derelict house. It was obvious that he'd been using it to lay low for a while. The place was cleaner than some of the places she had hidden out in, but not as clean as most of them. Sand and grim coated the few windows that hadn't been broken and she could see how sand had accumulated half way to the ceiling in most of the house. He had clearly shoveled out the kitchen to make it habitable. A bedroll on the wood floor and a kerosene lamp indicated this was where he slept. Justice sat down on a low bench that looked recently repaired and the thought suddenly occurred to her—would she be sleeping with him in the house? Alone? Feeling both excitement and dread, she turned to hide her blush, the action covering her discomfort.

“I'm going to take my bike and hide it around back in what's left of the lean-to. I think it'll make a good spot to hide it.”

Once outside, Justice took a deep cleansing breath. She had held onto her virginity for far too long to be tempted to throw it away for a nice smile and a sexy voice. Whatever happened, she had to remember that it was the last vow she had left to break, the only scrap of decency she had left.

The sky was already turning pink and golden with the hues of sunset as she tucked her bike in for the evening. She grabbed her bedroll and pack from the bike and, straightening her shoulders, she took another deep breath. If Sexy thought he was going to be using his “steel” on her, he had better think again. Justice was a lot of things, but a slut wasn't one of them. Over the years, she had shot more than one grabby man in the foot to back him off. Heath had spent a good portion of their time together punching gang members for threatening her. She sometimes missed the security of being able to just go to sleep, knowing Heath wouldn't let anyone accost her. When she gave herself to a man, if she ever did, it would be because she wanted him more than she even wanted her soul. Sexy was just making her horny, and horny had nothing to do with love.

Justice composed herself and returned to the house where creepy long shadows were beginning to stretch across the run down rooms. She hoped that there weren't any scorpions or snakes hiding

in all the sand surrounding them. She had noticed signs of past animal habitation, but hopefully Steel had taken care of that.

Steel had opened a can of cold beans and she gratefully accepted a plate. Her pack didn't allow her to carry much more than dried beef, dried apples and a canteen of water. Anything else was always a treat. They ate in companionable silence, Justice on the bench, Steel on the floor. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. After they had both finished, he took her plate over to a washtub on the counter.

“Alright, Se...Steel. Let's talk details. Let me hear your plan.”

She had almost called him Sexy. She hoped he hadn't noticed her slip of the tongue.

“Well, Beauty, you are going to wear something mighty respectable and get on the train leaving Austin tomorrow afternoon. About an hour into the ride, you're going to get up and make your way to the caboose. There's gonna be a crate marked fragile, and it's going to be full of money. The war is ending, and not in the Confederate States of America's favor. Several smart investors traded in their confederate dollars for good old American money. Those men are having their funds transferred to a bank in New York City. You're going to fill up your suitcases with that money and toss them off the back of the caboose, then you're going to jump out and my horse and I will be waiting to catch you.”

“Whoa,” Justice interjected. “You're telling me you want me to jump off the back of a moving steam engine?”

“I plan to catch you.” He sounded offended that she would doubt him.

“Won't they wonder why I'm bringing empty suitcases on a trip?”

“We'll fill them with rocks and sand for weight. You'll just dump them out on the floor and fill 'em back up with greenbacks.”



Raising her eyebrow at his happy smile, she knew she was just stupid enough to go along with his plan. She sighed in defeat.

“I’m probably going to be laughed at when I get to the pearly gates and they ask me how I died, but hell, I’m in.”

He gave a loud whoop and grabbed her off her bench, swinging her around. She pushed him away and raised her chin to look him in the eye.

“Can I really trust you not to leave me on that train to be arrested, or worse, let me hit the ground when I jump?”

“You have my word, Justice. I promise not to let you get hurt.”

Justice wasn’t convinced, but the look on his face made her want to trust him.

“What about my bike, could you ride that?”

“Oh, hell no, I’m not crazy enough to get on one of those things. You can leave it hidden right here and we’ll come back for it.”

She hated the thought of leaving her bike here, vulnerable, but the money was irresistible.

“So how do you know about these men and their money?”

“I have my sources. Got some friends in high places, just like I’ve got ‘em in low places. Don’t worry. The money will be there. And if it ain’t, you just leave your bags packed up and get off the train, casual as can be, and I’ll pick you up in Dallas. Worst that can happen, you get a nice little train ride.”

He was right, the plan had many advantages, and if she pulled it off, they’d both be filthy rich by this time tomorrow.

He rolled her bedroll out next to his. She raised her eyebrow and set her hands at her hips.

“Warmth and safety, nothing more. Just go to bed, woman,” he responded gruffly.

Satisfied that he didn't have an ulterior motive, Justice turned, took off her trench coat and hat, and took the pins out of her hair. She let it tumble down around her shoulders and took her small silver brush out of her pack. Slowly, she began to brush the tangles out of her hair. She turned back to Steel when she had finished and blushed at his intense gaze on her. She quickly put the brush away and braided her hair into two plaits. Justice didn't look at him as she lay down on her bedroll. Even with her back to him she could hear his breathing and smell the masculine musk that was all Steel. Justice fell into a restless sleep.

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Something was moving on her as she slept. Her hand moved unconsciously to brush it aside but before she could move far, she felt an arm clamp around her. Someone was holding her down. Panic made her eyes shoot open, and even in the darkness, she could see Steel's face looking down at her. She was about to demand he tell her what the hell he was doing when he sprang so suddenly at her belly she issued a startled shriek. He jumped up, stomping furiously at the ground. Justice pulled herself up to sitting and realized what Steel had just done. He had saved her life. He kicked at the very mashed scorpion.

Shaking from the reality that she might have died a painful death, she rubbed her bare arms for warmth. Never in her life had she been so glad to know someone slept with his boots on. Steel, chest heaving, settled himself back down onto the floor next to her and took her into his arms.

She allowed it, feeling the rush of security. It seemed an impossibly long time since she had last felt secure. He held her for a timeless moment, then pulled back, but Justice leaned into him and pressed her lips lightly to his.

She had never kissed a man before, but the moment felt right. Steel was still and she wondered for a moment if she was doing it

wrong, but suddenly, he seemed to catch fire. He wrapped his large hand around her neck and his lips moved over hers, leaving her panting and wanting. When he finally pulled back, his voice was hoarse.

“I’d be keeping those lips to yourself unless you want this to go farther than a simple kiss, Beauty.”

Justice wasn’t sure what she wanted, but suddenly her long held pride of her virginity seemed pointless. She wanted something that she couldn’t name or understand, and she wanted it from him.

Softly, she put her hand on his shoulders and leaned in again, consenting to taking the intimacy farther. He groaned and she felt his nimble fingers begin working the stays on her corset with difficulty.

She felt his breath on her neck as he worked the unforgiving garment from her body. His soft cursing made her chuckle—clearly he didn’t undress women every day. Justice was pleased. Steel was adorable when he was sexually frustrated.

Justice gasped when he took his knife out of his boot and cut the knots he’d made in the bottom strings. Obviously, he wanted her naked. His large hands played over the angry red skin as the impossibly tight garment fell away from her body. Cool air touched her and for a moment she couldn’t hold back her doubts and fears. *Maybe I should stop this.* But her worry quieted as her corset fell open to the cool night air and she felt his calloused fingers on her nipples, pinching them into peaks of pure pleasure. He seemed to instinctively know how to drive her crazy. No one had ever touched her like that before and it made her cry out in delight. He captured her cry in his mouth, a deep low groan indicating that her innocent response enticed him.

His firm lips found the curve of her neck and she shuddered at the sensation. Justice began to awkwardly release the buttons of his shirt. She let her fingers dance across his bare chest, feeling the firmness of his hard-earned muscles. There was something heady and surreal about touching him. She slid her hands up to his shoulders, and pushed his shirt off over his arms, letting it fall to the floor.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed her body to his, deepening the kiss. She felt her breasts flatten against the wall of his body and her arms began, unconsciously, to tangle around his neck. Her fingers slid into the silk of his dark hair and she let the taste and texture of him infuse her with a passion she hadn't known she was capable of feeling. Steel pushed her back against the bedrolls and she heard the jingling of his belt as he deftly undid the buckle. Then the swish of the canvas coming off his legs. She wondered if he still had his boots on, and bit back her sudden urge to giggle. He grasped the leather waistband of her tight, black pants and began to pull them down over her hips and buttocks, and then off her thighs until finally she was as naked as Eve.

Steel ducked his face to her chest, and with a sudden flush, she felt an urge to cover her bosom. At least until his warm mouth found one of her nipples. He sucked at it, a quick bite causing her to arch her back and cry out. She didn't know what she was supposed to be doing, and so just let him take the lead, an arrangement Steel seemed perfectly content with. His mouth traveled to her other breast and she felt his large hand sliding down her body and over her flat stomach.

Sucking in a desperate breath, she felt his hand travel between her legs, where his large thumb discovered her clit. He moistened the digit with her essence and began to make languid circles around that nub. An electricity that she hadn't known spread through her body. Before she realized what was happening, her hips bucked uncontrollably. She arched her back and cried out, clinging to Steel in helpless desperation as she rode the wave of pleasure. *No wonder sex is so damn popular*, she thought mindlessly.

Steel paused and Justice tried to sit up. He glanced up at her, surprised, before dropping his mouth down to her stomach where he began to trail hisses across her skin, toward where his fingers had been. Justice felt the sense of invasion all the way to her toes and for a moment tried to move his head away. He glanced up and smiled his perfect smile before his lips began to lick and suck at the spot once more. She felt that amazing sensation building inside of her again and she whispered his name, his real name, in a soft plea. He hauled himself up to his knees and she felt the head of his very hard and large

cock pressed against her, invading her body. He pushed gently into her tightness and suddenly she felt him go very still.

“Jesus, woman, you should have told me. I thought—” He sucked in a breath. “Oh, hell I thought you’d done this before.”

Hurt smothered the earlier feelings of amazement and, to her embarrassment, Justice felt her eyes fill with tears. She had finally decided to let a man have her body, and now he didn’t want her. She was mortified. He growled a very masculine growl and kissed her again, lips crushing to hers, cock still precariously lodged in the tight warmth of her body.

“Justice,” he finally whispered brokenly. “I’m so damn sorry. I’m not the kind of man who can make you sweet promises, or give you anything. I’m a drifter, not good enough for a woman like you. I shouldn’t be your first.”

Understanding came into her mind and she rubbed her hand against the stubble of his strong jaw. “I don’t need sweet promises. Please, Jeremiah, I want this. You. Make me feel like that again.”

He let go of his pent up breath and with a pure, primitive sound in the back of his throat, he began to kiss her again. He skillfully worked his fingers between their bodies and the motion of his nimble actions caused the need to build in her again. When she cried out he thrust into her body. A sharp pain caused her to push at him, she wanted to get away.

“Shh, let me make it better, let me give you pleasure again. This is the only time it will feel like this for you, I promise.”

Justice relaxed slightly. He was still inside of her, letting her body adjust to his invasion. He began to massage the sweet spot again and soon her pain faded to nothing. Unable to stop, she began to move her hips against him and he groaned. When the perfect pleasure began to shake her again he began to slowly move inside of her, his fingers never stopping what they had begun. She shuddered against him, screaming his name. An animalistic sound rumbled in her ears and to her embarrassment, she realized the long, low cry had come from her own throat. It was too late, she let herself cry out

again and his thrusts became faster and harder, the movement inside her smoother and faster, drawing her climax out further until she felt him stiffen for a moment.

“Justice,” he panted. The emotion in his voice made her shiver, and then his deep masculine exclamation filled her ears as he came inside of her. He lay down next to her, breathing hard as took her into his arms. Enveloped in his embrace, with her cheek pressed to his warm sweaty chest, Justice began to drift off to sleep. She suddenly gasped as she remembered the scorpion, and began to sit up. Jeremiah wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back. His words rumbled out of his chest and she felt them as he spoke.

“You sleep now, Justice. I’ll stay awake, and see that no harm comes to you.”

Feeling the security of his promise, her eyes fluttered and she felt sleep drag her down as his arms tightened protectively around her.

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It was almost dawn. Justice awoke, feeling mystified at the soreness in her body. Then the events of the previous night came flooding back to her, and her cheeks heated with a blush. Looking up, her eyes immediately caught and held Steel’s handsome gaze. When he spoke, his voice was soft and warm.

“Good morning, Beauty. How are you?”

She detected a note of honest concern and his noble consideration made her duck her head to hide her small smile.

“Right as rain. Did you get any sleep?”

She felt guilty for having slept well while he lay awake guarding her from the critters in the night.

He smiled. “You snore like a banshee, woman! I didn’t have to worry about scorpions or anything else because you scared them all away.”

Now blushing fiercely, she smacked his shoulder playfully.

He threw back his head and laughed. “No, you didn’t really snore. I couldn’t sleep. I was too busy looking at you.”

She hoped that blushing wasn’t becoming a new bad habit. She sat up and Jeremiah turned away and headed into the kitchen. Before she could begin to dress, he was back with fresh water in a ceramic basin. He handed her a rag and left again. She was surprised by his thoughtful foresight, the water was even warm, obviously he’d had it ready. She washed her body as well as she could, feeling wonderfully fresh as the cool morning air dried her skin. Jeremiah returned with a parcel this time. He handed it to her with a smile.

“I knew you’d agree, so I picked this up on my way here. The wife of the shop keeper helped me with the sizes. I hope she was right. I described you as well as I could.”

She untied the string around the brown paper. Inside there was a small jacket, a chemisette, and full skirt in a light egg shell blue. He had the appropriate under garments and even a hairnet trimmed with ribbon. She touched the white high button boots lovingly. Normally she wore pants and a corset with nothing over it but her trench coat and hat, which were like a second skin. It was intimidating, playing dress up and pretending to be a respectable woman.

Jeremiah must have noticed her hesitation because when he spoke, his tone was full of promise. “Justice, you have every right to be a woman. Put them on, I’ll be waiting outside. Leave your pack and clothing here, we’ll come back for everything.”

He stepped out the door. She began to awkwardly dress herself in the strange clothing, resisting the urge to call out for help. She didn’t want him to know how inexperienced she was with respectability. The weight and the heat of the new ensemble made her glad that she could be herself again tomorrow.

She stepped out into the morning sun, waiting hesitantly for Steel’s response. He stopped what he was doing and a wide smile spread across his face. He hurried over to help her down the steps. Frowning, she knew that if she were in her typical clothing he would never have felt the need to be a gallant gentleman. Obviously

feminine power worked in mysterious ways. Steel pulled her to him and kissed her with a tenderness that she hadn't expected.

“Ms. Smythe, are you ready to go respectably rob a train?”

She replied back with a smile, “Mr. Wall, I do believe I am ready to do just that.”



## Chapter Five

Justice waited nervously with her ticket, and her sand and rock filled bags. A friendly looking young man picked up the bags with an "oomph". He glanced over at her, surprise widening his eyes.

She addressed him in her best sweet Texas darling accent.

"It's going to be an awfully long trip. My poor old mother is very ill and I'm going up to tend to her. Thank you for your kind assistance."

He managed to smile, even with the strain of the weight he carried, and replied in a thickly accented voice, "My pleasure, Miss."

Justice nodded, the conductor punched her ticket, and she took a seat in the very back of the train, feeling an immense sense of relief when the train finally whistled, hissed, and pulled away from the station.

She tried not to look uneasy, sitting and watching out the window in anticipation of the little town that would mark the moment she was supposed to stand and make her way to the caboose. Steel would be waiting only a few miles down the track, and by then she needed to be waiting outside the back door with her suitcases full of money, ready to take one helluva leap of faith into his arms. She hoped he was as good on a horse as he claimed to be. Otherwise, her days of being a rich woman would be very short lived.

A portly man sat down beside her. It took all of her self-control to be polite as he tried to start up a conversation with her.

"Hello, Miss, where's your chaperone?"

Using her best sweet tone of voice, she batted her eyes as she spoke, "She became ill at the train station and had to stay behind, but the conductor will be looking out for me. Please don't trouble yourself over my situation, sir."

“I’d be honored if you will allow me to watch over you, Miss.”

The way he said ‘Miss’ made it obvious that he wanted her to supply him with her name, and the look in his eyes made it more than obvious that he wanted to get to know her much better, wearing much less clothing.

“I am so grateful for your kindness, but I would hate to trouble you.”

She noticed that they had just passed the town that was her cue to go to the baggage area of the caboose. The portly man continued to insist that he fulfill the role of chaperone. It was time for drastic measures.

“Oh my, Sir, I don’t think the motion of the train is sitting well with me. I must hurry out for some air before I embarrass myself.” She darted away from the man, rushing to the back of the train, hoping he would be polite enough not to follow her. Looking back, she breathed a sigh of relief—the man hadn’t been quite noble enough to deal with potential vomit.

Greatly relieved, she found the baggage area empty and she quickly began to look for the large crates marked fragile. They were sitting near the back, just as Steel had said they would be.

Justice took the small crowbar out of her purse and, and with some difficulty, managed to loosen the lid. Gazing warily into the box, she saw the money and her small cry of joy made her look back with caution. She dumped out one suitcase of rocks and sand and began refilling it with money. She set it near the door when she finished and began to work on the second case.

When it was almost full, she heard a sound and decided not to press her luck. Closing and locking the bag, she opened the caboose door and soon had both bags ready to toss. She saw the railroad sign painted with a big black “X”, easy to confuse for common graffiti, and tossed the first case. Wind whipped her hair and the motion of the train made her stop and hold onto the railing, afraid for an instant that she was going to fall. With a deep breath, she tossed the second

bag more carefully. She didn't see Steel anywhere. For an instant she worried that she had been duped, but the sound of hooves to her right made her turn. It was Steel, pounding toward her. Carefully, she made her way to the other side of the landing and readied herself for his signal to jump.

Suddenly a hand clamped down on her arm. Startled, she jumped and nearly fell. It was the conductor, trying to drag her back inside of the caboose, his eyes blazing with anger.

Justice slapped at him and shrieked in terrified outrage. He grabbed her arm, slapping a handcuff to her before she had the chance to stop him. Looking out the still open door she watched as Jeremiah's horse slowed down and then stopped. He grew smaller and smaller before the conductor finally slammed the door shut. The jig was up, and Justice's luck had finally run out.

Jeremiah was going to cut his losses and escape with the money that she had stolen for him, she realized, feeling like the queen of fools. He had played her and played her well. She had been so taken in, she had even spread her legs for the bastard! Apparently a man could use a pretty face to his advantage as well as a woman could.

The conductor began to shout questions at her, demanding the names of her accomplices and if they were on the train. Giving Jeremiah up would do her no good. He was long gone.

"I don't know what you're talking about sir. I stepped out to get air and you accosted me," she cried, hoping the conductor hadn't seen the flying luggage.

"Don't give me that little lady! I know who you are!"

He shoved one of her wanted posters in her face.

*Why did the conductor have her poster?* She wondered if she had been set up.

Her portly friend, the unwanted chaperone, stepped up behind the conductor. He flashed his badge. His voice was firm and unfriendly when he spoke this time.

“You don’t think we would transport this much money without protection. It took me a moment to recognize you, but as soon as I did, I knew why you had gone running this way. Who are you working with?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The ranger slapped her painfully across the face.

“I cannot abide lying females,” he huffed. “Tell me who you’re working for.”

He slapped her again, harder this time. She could feel her eye beginning to swell. She spit the pooling blood out of her mouth and answered him, dangerously calm and steady.

“It takes a mighty brave and noble gentleman to slap a woman who’s chained up and can’t defend herself. I’m glad to see that the great state of Texas has a fella like you on the job.”

He reddened, and pulled back to hit her again. She braced for the impact.

The conductor spoke quietly, “Sir, if you do that again, I’ll be forced to stop the train and have you thrown off. There is no good cause to hit the woman. She won’t talk any louder with her mouth swelled shut.”

Justice could taste the blood where his first blow had split her lip. She was thankful that the conductor had the good sense to stop the man or she’d never make it to Austin in one piece. The ranger was clearly angry, but he stepped back.

For the rest of the trip, the ranger, the conductor, and Justice all sat in uneasy silence in the caboose. Justice could see that the conductor didn’t trust the ranger enough to leave him alone with her, and for that she was grateful. The ranger clearly resented her earlier

refusal to answer him, and his anger that a woman had stolen money right from under his nose was written in the hateful glint in his eyes.

Justice laid her head back and drifted. She wished she would have missed this particular train. Steel was probably in another county by now—happily ready to spend the money alone. His plan to dupe her had been brilliant. She had to give Steel credit for his ingenuity. Why had she let his delicious body and handsome face convince her that this was a good idea? She bit her lip to keep herself from growling her frustration. She was only sure of one thing—she would never see Steel Wall again.

## Chapter Six

Steel had clearly left her to rot. After her brief meeting with a court appointed attorney who seemed to have a problem speaking to anything but her breasts, Justice's hope was completely gone. She knew that the jury and the judge already had their minds made up and the trial was only for show. She could hear and see the workers erecting the gallows from her cell. The lazy bastards obviously didn't want to walk far to carry out her sentence. She slammed her open hand against the cold stone wall and growled in anger. This only accomplished making her hand sting and drawing unwanted attention from the lecher in the next cell over.

"Hey, baby, if you lean that nice little ass against the bars I can give you one last good fuck before you die."

"Thanks again for the offer, asshole, but I think the first fifteen times I told you to shut up might have been enough."

He laughed as if she had said the funniest thing in history and went back to sitting on his bunk and talking to himself. Justice went back to the window and resumed watching them building the gallows, wondering morbidly if they had a lot of experience. Would they knot it right and break her neck quickly, or would she suffer and choke, strangled slowly for a crowd? A loud sobbing near her cell door interrupted her terrible thoughts, it sounded familiar.

She turned and found herself knocked speechless. How had Purity found out about her arrest? News traveled fast, but not that fast.

Justice walked over to her sister, wondering if their last conversation would end in reconciliation or more angry blame.

"I'm so sorry, Justice. I've been so terrible to you! I don't want you to die. I've hired a private lawyer, from El Paso. He'll be here tomorrow. I'm not going to let them hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?" Purity's words gushed out like a fountain of emotion.

Justice held back her own tears. Later when it was dark and quiet she would let herself cry, but not now, not in front of her already upset sister.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Purity. I love you and I’ve always loved you. Don’t worry, if they hang me at least I won’t be gun slinging anymore.” She tried to joke with her sister but the words just caused Purity to cry harder and louder. Her obnoxious neighbor shouted out at Purity.

“Shut up lady, I can’t hear the voices in my head talking!”

Purity shuddered and looked at her sister. Justice winked and tried to present an air of false bravo.

“He’s got the right idea—plead insanity. Do you think I should try that one?”

Purity sucked her sob back in, and spoke shakily, “The lawyer I hired has a plan. He thinks we can use the fact that you’re female to shed doubt that you actually committed the crimes.”

Justice frowned and shook her head. “I don’t like that defense.”

Purity narrowed her eyes in disagreement. “If it will save your life, just be willing to be a girl for once!”

Justice sighed and nodded her head in agreement. She was just about to speak when the sound of footsteps running down the hall caused both she and Purity to turn and look. Justice wasn’t sure if she was really seeing what she thought she was seeing. She and Purity exchanged a look of stunned shock.

Grace was running toward them, dressed in expensive and very respectable clothing. She threw her arms around Purity and then reached through the bars trying to hug Justice.

“I came as soon as I heard that you’d been arrested!”

Justice couldn’t think of a reply, and Grace continued on as a tall well-dressed man walked up behind her, “This is my husband,

Ricardo. He is going to use all of his connections to help get you out of this.”

Justice was torn between joy and anger. She had been searching, obsessively, for years, thinking that the worst must have happened to her sister alone in the desert. And here Grace was—married to a crime boss, wealthy, safe, and obviously keeping tabs on her. How else would she have known about the arrest?

Purity seemed to have decided on anger. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you contact one of us? You ran away and left us, but I see you’ve done well for yourself. So glad to see you haven’t gone through hell too.”

Grace spoke quietly, clearly taken aback and hurt, “When Ricardo found me, more dead than alive, he took care of me. By the time I was well enough to try and find you, the trail was cold. For months, he did what he could to find you for me, but by then Purity was working at Martha’s Watering Hole and you were a wanted woman. He asked me to marry him, and I loved him, so I said yes. He is a respectable man in the community. I thought you’d both understand.”

Justice noticed his hand and snatched it through the bars. She studied the tattoo above his wrist for a moment and then dropped his hand in disgust.

“Respectable my ass! He’s part of The Family!”

“Shh,” Grace hushed her, looking around the jail. “Don’t say that so loud. I certainly don’t need the lawmen to overhear us. As far as our social circle knows or cares, he runs a respectable business. My husband isn’t going around robbing trains for goodness sake.”

Grace pinned her sister with a self-righteous look. If only she knew that Justice had wanted the money to find her, to save her. She would have never agreed to the robbery if she had known her sister was living the good life with her mobster husband. Justice turned so Grace wouldn’t see the tears building in her eyes. When she finally spoke, her voice was hard.



“I don’t want your ‘respectable’ help. I’d hate for your sewing circle or church ladies group to know that you were helping your criminal sister. Just go. I don’t want to see you right now.”

An angry, indignant sound erupted from Grace, and Justice heard her well made shoes clicking as she and her husband left without another word. Fleetingly, Justice wondered if they planned to watch her hang. Justice pulled turned to see Purity, still standing next to her cell, tears shining in her eyes.

“I can’t believe her! She ran from us. When we needed her, she left—ashamed of us no less.”

“At least I can die in peace now, knowing she’s alright.” Justice dropped her voice to a whisper, so that only Purity could hear her words, “After I’m dead, I want you to find Steel Wall and tell him that he owes you my share of the money. If I’m going to die for that money, I want to leave it to you as your inheritance. I want you to leave Jimmy, go north, start a life as a respectable widow and find your own happiness.”

Purity began to cry again. When she spoke, her words were stilted between sobs, “I...don’t...want...you...to...die.”

“I know,” Justice managed, “but I probably will. I want you to promise me that you’ll find happiness. I want you to promise me that you won’t let Jimmy hurt you anymore.”

Purity just nodded and kept on sobbing. Justice reached out between the bars and squeezed her shoulders reassuringly.

When Purity had calmed down a little, she spoke again, “Thank you for sticking by me, Justice. I never should have blamed you. You could’ve been like Grace and just walked away. I know you only did what you did to survive, just like me. I never should have blamed you. I just hated you for not being hurt like Hugh hurt me. It wasn’t fair.”

“No, it wasn’t fair, but I understand. I love you Purity. You will always be my sister. We’ve been through a lot, but we’re

survivors. You're going to do great. Go get that money and don't look back."

"You'll get out of here to get what you're due," Purity told her. "I paid that lawyer half his fee and he'll get the other half when you walk out of court a free woman."

"Don't hold your breath. That jury will be full of men who think a woman with a gun is akin to Satan. The only place I'm going to be walking to is the gallows."

Purity shuddered at the words.

## Chapter Seven

Justice's trial had only lasted three days. Purity's lawyer had done what he could, but just like Justice had predicted, the men in the jury looked at her as if she was some kind of succubus ready to drag them to Hell. The list of men she had killed in gunfights and her longer list of crimes committed hadn't left them much room for mercy. When the judge's gavel hit, reverberating through the court, Purity had burst into loud, uncontrollable sobbing. Several of the girls from Martha's, women who respected Justice, had come to support the sisters. Their presence probably hadn't helped matters. Justice had heard the rumble in the courtroom every day, when the strippers walked in wearing their corsets and miniskirts. The newspapers had had a field day with her, gleefully trying to convict her themselves. As far as Justice was concerned, those piranhas could fry in the depths of Hell with her. They were no better than vultures picking at her bones.

She had shaken when the judge ordered her hanged by the neck until dead, but she was proud of the bravery she had shown, she hadn't fainted. Several local church ladies groups in the area had come out to support her, begging the judge to lighten his sentence, claiming she was a poor stray lamb who had been led down a dark path. They hadn't swayed the man either. He spoke about fairness and stated that he would have given a man the same punishment. The jury had recommended the death sentence and she saw the gleam in the supervisor's eyes when the gavel had hit.

She was only a little surprised that Grace hadn't been at her sentencing. She wondered if Grace had even known, or cared, that the trial had gone badly for her sister. Deep down she wondered if, for spite, Grace's husband had paid the judge to see her hanged. Justice had always known her life would be short, but she had hoped her death would be quick too. That she would die quickly and bravely in a shoot out. Not like this, caged and humiliated in front of an entire town.

Justice sat in her cell on the last night of her life. Purity hadn't come to see her after the trial and it hurt her a little. She knew that her sister wasn't handling the news well, and that Purity might not be able to face her, knowing that she suddenly had a clear expiration date. One of the church ladies had brought her a lovely picnic basket full of food. It was a sumptuous last meal and she was honestly grateful. Part of her had been hoping to find a key or a gun when she had bitten into the pie, but unfortunately, it was only full of delicious cherries. There was so much food that she had shared with the crazy man who was constantly shouting obscenities at her. He must have felt a bit sorry about her sentence because she noticed that after the trial he stuck to just talking to himself and left her alone.

The sound of a motorcycle made her go to the cell window and gaze out into the moonlit night. Wistfully, she thought it almost sounded like her motorcycle. She pictured it rusting as the sand buried it, along with the derelict house. She would never have the joy and freedom of riding it again. She grasped the window bars and looked up into the twinkling night as a Zeppelin sailed majestically overhead. She wished she were a passenger on the airship, going about a safe, average life—that she had married Heath and talked him into going west, starting up a little farm, and staying out of trouble. She shook her head. That would have been a prison of another kind. She had lived her life without asking for permission, she had no real regrets. At least she wasn't going to die a virgin. Steel might have betrayed her, but at least he had given her wondrous pleasure to dream about on her last night on Earth. She lay down on the hard metal bunk, closed her eyes and let herself conjure up Jeremiah's face above her, whispering comfort to her as she drifted asleep.

The rattling of her cell door woke her early the next morning. She sat up groggily and blinked.

"I thought my execution was set for noon," she said through her dry mouth. "This sure as hell can't be noon."

"Your sister left you the clothes she thought you'd want to be buried in."

The jailer set down a bundle and left. Justice stood up and picked up a cup of stale water. She choked down the warm, foul liquid. At least it soothed her throat. When she opened the bundle, she smiled. Purity had sent her a message. Her sister must have her share of the money, because these were the clothes Justice had left at Jeremiah's hide out. He must have decided to do the right thing by her and give Purity her money. A sense of peace filled her and she quickly donned her own clothes. Days in the stifling robbery dress had made her eager for britches and her own sleeveless corset. Putting on her trench coat and hat, she felt more like herself than she had in a month. She even had her own boots to wear. She hoped Purity would come to her, one last time, so she could thank her. Even after the years of strain, she felt the closeness and love as if they were children again. This one simple message had carried unquantifiable amounts of love. Everything would be all right. She wanted to tell her sister that she loved her, and ask her to find her motorcycle a good loving home. It was worth a pretty penny, and it was Purity's to sell or learn to ride, whatever she wanted to do with it.

Hours crept by and Justice watched the crowd assemble in their Sunday best, carrying blankets and picnic baskets. Hanging was good old-fashioned family entertainment. It made her a little ill to see the children there. She hoped that her death wouldn't scare or traumatize any of them. Life was hard in Texas, but a hanging was always good to break up the monotony. Justice noticed a horseless carriage steam up the road. Those were scarce in Texas and this one was a beauty. She regretted that she would never have the opportunity to drive one. As it neared, she squinted at the driver and passenger.

She felt ill. It was Grace. Her sister had come to see her hanged. She couldn't look at the scene outside any longer. Emotion finally had its way and she sat down on the cot and began to cry. She would never be a wife. She would never be a mother. She would never have her own home to tend, or a little garden to grow vegetables and flowers. She would never have the chance to go straight and live honestly. Her life was over and it would end as a public spectacle, entertaining strangers and long lost family. She

wiped the tears from her face with the rough blanket, provided courtesy of the good taxpayers of the state of Texas.

As hurt and angry as she was, she only had one last request, to kiss Jeremiah Wallace one last passionate time.

Just before noon, the jailer came to her cell. He looked a little green, she was probably the first woman he'd had a part in hanging. He opened the door and cuffed her hands. She noticed he didn't cuff her legs, and was grateful he had either forgotten or didn't have the balls for it. She could at least walk with her back straight and proud, unhindered by a ball and chain.

The cuffs on her hands were loose and she noticed that she could probably slip her hands out if she wanted to. As tempting as an escape attempt was, she felt it would be shameful to be brought to her execution kicking and screaming. Besides, if she ran they would certainly catch her, and she would just be prolonging her terrible end.

She held her chin high as she walked, sorry that no one had come to say his or her goodbyes. Justice would die as she had been living—alone and unconventionally. She was finally getting her punishment from God for the only cold-blooded murder she had ever committed, the one in the rectory, Chastity's vengeance. Every other man she had killed had been killed in self-defense.

As she walked, she thought of her sisters, and the nuns, and Heath, and even Jeremiah. She wished she could have thanked Heath again, and she wondered if he would ever find out how she died and why. For a moment, she spotted a man in the crowd and thought it was him. When she looked again the phantom was gone. Sighing, she knew her mind was trying to bring her comfort so near the end of her life.

Her feet felt like lead as she stumbled, shaking, up the stairs. The noose hung, swaying in the breeze. Soon she would be what caused it to sway. She began to shake so hard her teeth rattled. The jailer put his hand on her arm, giving her a small smile. She saw the pity and understanding in his eyes and it made her want to burst into tears. Not wanting to give the good townspeople of Austin even more

of a show, she suppressed the urge and stood, tall and proud, ready to face her eternal punishment after the Earthly one was finished. A priest began to pray, and she wondered why the priest hadn't come to her cell to give her last rights, surely, the town's folk didn't consider her such a demon as to begrudge her such an important comfort. She said her own quick prayer and when the jailer ushered her onto the trap door she began to shake again. A man tried to put a bag over her head and she pushed it away. He tried again and she spoke firmly.

“No, I can handle all of this, except for that.”

He nodded and backed away. Another man came up behind her and pulled the noose over her head. She began to hyperventilate, losing her calm. She closed her eyes and fought for her control. They could take her life, but not her pride.

Her eyes flew up at a loud commotion. The priest stopped praying and Justice saw him take a gun out of the Bible he was holding. What kind of priest used his Bible as a gun case?

The man at the trap-door release moved to pull it, but the priest shot him in the arm, and he stumbled backwards and fell off the scaffolding. The priest winked at her and dove toward her, pulling the noose off her neck as she easily slipped her arms out of the cuffs. Free and uncertain, she glanced over at her saint turned savage. He grabbed her arm, jumped off the scaffolding, and hit the ground on a roll. Her body ached but at least it was still alive to ache.

She caught sight of a man in the crowd and felt her heart stop. Jeremiah hadn't abandoned her after all. Another man rode up to him on a horse as gunfire erupted, and to her absolute shock she saw that it was Heath. Heath pulled Jeremiah up and the men raced off, drawing the gunfire away from her. How had they met to join forces in her rescue? Her answer came as the horseless carriage raced up to her. The back door opened and Purity pulled Justice and the priest, who clearly wasn't a priest, inside the cab. Grace turned and smiled at her, but her husband pushed her down for safety as he sped off in the opposite direction of Heath and Jeremiah. Justice hunched down with the others, still shaking from the shock of her rescue and near death

experience. She had stared the reaper in the face and lived, forever changed.

Eventually, the pursuer's gunfire died away as the horseless carriage tirelessly out ran them. When they were clear of danger, Ricardo spoke, "We made it boys and girls. Justice, meet Regan, my brother."

"Thank you Regan. You're not really a priest are you?"

"Call me a freelancer. I borrowed these from the town priest. He'll wake up with one heck of a headache. And naked."

"I'd scold you, but right now I'm just glad as hell you did it."

They all laughed. Justice noticed Purity giving Regan a very absorbed look. She wondered if she'd soon be having another mobster for a brother-in-law.

Long after dark, they pulled up to a ranch, miles from the city. Music was playing, lights were on, and the barn was full of people dancing. Seeing as she had just escaped imprisonment, it seemed a bit ballsy for Justice to attend a square dance, but Ricardo drove around to the back of the house away from the party. He led them inside a cellar where a group of men were sitting around a table playing cards, barely glancing at her. They all had tattoos on their hands. They were part of The Family as well. Justice felt instantly safe. No sheriffs here, that was certain.

A door opened and Jeremiah and Heath stepped out. Justice ran to them, hugging them both at once.

"How on Earth did you two meet?"

"Your friend Jeremiah was planning a little prison break," Heath replied, "but when Purity found me and told me what had happened I wanted to find the bastard responsible for putting you in so much danger."

Justice noticed Jeremiah's black eye for the first time.



“Heath’s fist introduced us.” Jeremiah continued the story. “After a while, we decided that killing each other wasn’t helping you any. Grace is the one who came up with the plan.”

“After seeing you in jail, my husband saw how much I was hurting for you.” Grace shrugged. “We tried to bribe the judge first, but he wasn’t having it, neither was the supervisor. The rest of the jury took the bribe, but unfortunately, the foreman and the judge convicted you without the unanimous vote. We felt forced to move onto plan “B”. Ricardo called in a couple of favors and enlisted the help of your jailer. He has a terrible gambling problem, and couldn’t pass up an opportunity to pay off some debt. Regan detained the priest and after that—you know the rest of the story.”

Justice enveloped her sisters in a tight hug. There were no words to express the magnitude of what was in her heart.

Purity spoke quietly, “I’m sorry that we left you hanging.” Justice snorted. “No pun intended, but we couldn’t risk our plan being suspected. Your fear had to be real. Forgive us.”

Justice wiped at the tears in her eyes. “No forgiveness required. I can’t believe you all did this for me.”

Jeremiah pulled her to him and pressed his lips on hers. He kissed her until she no longer noticed the others in the room. When he pulled back, she saw something unmistakable in his beautiful eyes.

“I thought I lost you,” he told her roughly. He cleared his throat and nodded toward the back of the cellar. “I have something for you.”

Justice followed him to the back of the cellar and he handed her one of the bags she had thrown off the train.

“This is your share of the heist,” he told her. “You can leave Texas and start fresh somewhere. This is enough money to live a great life if you keep a low profile. I’d like you to make that life with me. As my wife.”

Sitting in her jail cell this morning, waiting to be hanged on the gallows she had listened to the workers build, Justice would never have envisioned this moment as a part of her day. When she had woken up this morning she had made the decision to die with dignity, and now she found herself asked to make another frightening choice. She was surprised at how simple a decision it turned out to be.

“I love you too, Jeremiah. Yes. I’ll marry you.”

Jeremiah let out a loud whoop that disturbed the card players. They gave the couple a dirty look as Jeremiah picked Justice up and swung her around. Tears trickled down her cheeks, and he kissed them away. Her sisters rushed over and hugged her. Heath walked over to Jeremiah and extended his hand.

“You’d better be good to her,” he said with sad, but deadly earnestness, “And whatever you do—keep her out of trouble.”

“I’ll do right be her,” Jeremiah responded. “She’s one in a million and I won’t soon forget.”

“You’d better not, cause if she ever needs me, I’ll kill you for her in a heartbeat.”

“Don’t worry friend,” Jeremiah told Heath with a devilish smirk. “You won’t need to worry about her. I’m going to make Justice a very happy woman.” Jeremiah set his hand possessively against her stomach. Heath’s eyes darkened and despite her happiness, Justice felt a tinge of regret for her friend’s hurt. Then Heath turned to her, hiding his pain with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Justice swatted Jeremiah’s arm away from her, angry that he could kick her friend when he was down. Jeremiah rubbed his arm and had the courtesy to look a tad ashamed for his blatant possessiveness.

“Let me be the first to kiss the bride then,” Heath said huskily.

He snatched her up and kissed her with a passion she had always known he held for her. She had never truly understood how deep it ran until that moment. Jeremiah growled, but Purity stepped in before it could come to blows again.

“Boys, boys, there will be plenty of time for a pissing contest later. Right now the three of us have a wedding to plan!”

She pulled Justice away as the men continued to stare each other down like dogs circling a bone. Ricardo and Regan walked over to diffuse the situation.

Justice still hadn't felt so happy in all of her life.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Cascade, Colorado-A small farm-August 1867**

The country was recovering well from the Civil War. Reconstruction was in full swing, and Grace reported that her husband's "business" was flourishing because of it. As much as Justice missed her sisters, she knew that she could never risk going back to Texas. Every year Purity and Grace arrived at her home to spend two weeks with her, and this year they were both bringing their new babies. Shortly after she'd left Texas, the instant Telegram had come announcing that Purity and Regan had married. It seemed all three of the sisters had a soft spot for bad boys. Luckily, it seemed that fatherhood and love had begun to tame their men, if only slightly.

Justice patted her rounded abdomen, hoping that her first-born would hold off arriving until after Purity and Grace had left, so that she wouldn't be bedridden during the visit. Modern medicine had come a long way, but she was still nervous about the birth. Jeremiah insisted that she would be giving birth at the town's new hospital, instead of at home, but she wanted to do this the traditional way and knew she would win the argument. She didn't see the point in wasting good money when both of her sisters had enjoyed reportedly easy home births. His overprotective spurts annoyed her, but at least he was cute when he was worried.

Justice stood on the porch, letting the cool evening breeze refresh her as she watched her sister's Zeppelin land far off in the field. Her brother-in-laws felt that Zeppelin travel was safer than stagecoach or horseless carriage, and hired a small private Zeppelin for their wives and children for the annual visit. Despite her personal reservations about the reported safety of Zeppelins, Justice was glad that the trip was twice as fast for her sisters and her nephews. Feeling her child kick her in the ribs, hard, she wondered if she would soon be

bringing another boy into the family. She called to her husband, hard at work in the barn.

“Jeremiah, my sisters are here, could you go and bring them to the house?”

Jeremiah came out of the barn and waved to his wife with a smile. She watched him hitch the horses to the wagon, and smiled as he bounced out to the field where her family waited. A bright pink, purple, and golden sunset gave the departing Zeppelin a brilliant backdrop. She watched her sisters waving to their brother-in-law, and she felt a sense of contentment she had never expected to feel.

She had started out her life going in a very different direction, and even with all the pain and hardship, it had been worth it to be where she was. Her family was reunited, loving and forgiving. She had a husband that she adored, who adored her in return, and she was expecting his child. There had been a time when she had never thought any this to be possible. Looking up at the beautiful sky, she uttered two simple words to the heavens.

“Thank you.”

The End



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