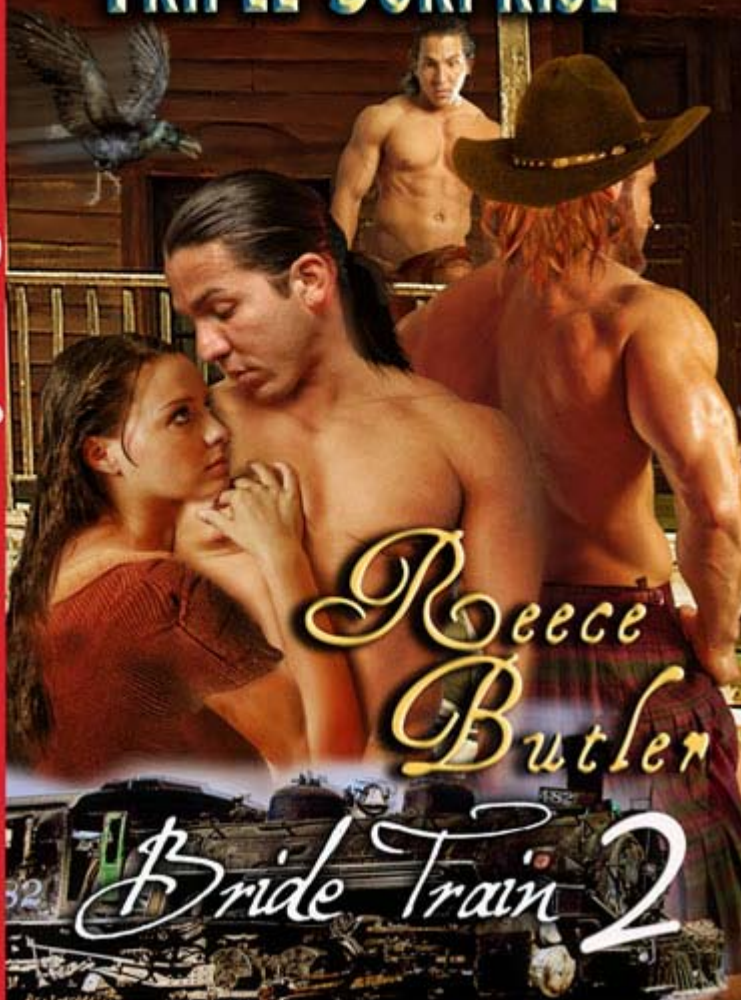


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A CONTRACT BRIDE'S TRIPLE SURPRISE



Reece
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Bride Train 2

Bride Train 2

A Contract Bride's Triple Surprise

Ross MacDougal demands vengeance on the men who killed his young cousin, but his Clan Chief, older half-brother Gillis, insists that he produce an heir. Without one, they'll lose their ranch to their brutish brother in Texas when their father dies. But no woman would marry the man known as the MacDougal Devil. An Eastern contract bride is the only way to save the ranch.

Amelia Smathers is desperate for her own home. Before dying of lung complications, her older sister Prudence insists that Amelia marry Nevin MacDougal, her husband Gillis's kindly younger brother. Eyes tearing in grief, Amelia signs the marriage contract and heads west.

Amelia is shocked to discover a different husband, but Ross's erotic touch soothes her. Still, she's expected to share herself, just like Beth Elliott, their closest neighbor. Beth's heated description of sharing three men has Amelia both alarmed and aroused. Then Ross's past catches up with them...

Genre: Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

Length: 113,965 words

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DEDICATION

As always, to my husband Paul and sons Andy and David, the three men in my life.

Thank you to my family, friends and co-workers who encouraged (and put up with) me for the last eight years.

The following groups were immensely helpful during my research trip to Montana.

Bannack State Park, governed by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

<http://www.bannack.org/>

Beaverhead County Museum for their helpful staff, reference books for sale, artifacts, and amazing taxidermy collection of local birds.

<http://beaverheadcountymuseum.com/>

Nevada City's 'living museum' of buildings and artifacts. A special thank you to the volunteers who make this historical site come alive.

<http://www.virginiacitymt.com/LivHistory.asp>

Grant-Kohrs Ranch, National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/grko/index.htm>

For a who's who of Tanner's Ford, list of reference material and photographs, visit my website at www.ReeceButler.net.

Any errors, historical or otherwise, are my own.

A CONTRACT BRIDE'S TRIPLE SURPRISE

Bride Train 2

REECE BUTLER
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Chapter One

Montana Territory, 1871, spring

“Ye’ll be marrying Amelia Smathers.”

Ross MacDougal whipped his head around. He stood as if carved in wood, arms high above his head, axe blade to the sky. After a moment, he turned back to his work. All his muscles, from fingers to toes, worked together as he hauled the axe in a downward arc. The blade slammed into the innocent chunk of maple waiting on the chopping block stump. The log exploded into two pieces. They flew high, turning in the air to land on others. The head of the axe buried itself deep into the block.

He rotated his shoulders and stretched his neck. It gave him time to think of an answer for his older brother. As Gillis was his Clan Chief, “no way in hell” wasn’t acceptable. He spat to the side to clear his throat.

“She’s Nevin’s wife.”

Gillis crossed his massive arms and looked down from his three-inch advantage. Sawdust from the two-man saw speckled his red, bushy hair, beard, chest, and arms. Stomping downhill to tell Ross

what he didn't want to hear had knocked most of the chips off his worn kilt. It hadn't knocked any sense into Gil's head.

"Nay, lad. She's for you."

Even though everyone knew it was coming, when Gil's wife Prudence died shortly after their daughter's birth, it hit him hard. He'd developed a temper, one Ross didn't want to set off. A broken jaw and eyes swollen shut would not be helpful. But he couldn't be burdened with a woman now. There were things he had to do. He was not one to leave vengeance to the Lord.

"Prudence wanted Nev to have her sister."

Gil used to laugh and smile often. Now, he only bared his teeth. "I say, nay." He moved his feet slightly apart and dropped his arms to his side. Ready to attack—or defend.

Ross swallowed. His hands curled into fists, ragged nails digging into his palms. All he wanted was to live on the MD Connected with Gil and Nevin. That and kill three men slowly and very, very painfully. An oath of vengeance came before playing husband to an Eastern woman with soft skin and few usable skills. But his oath to the Clan came before anything else.

He looked toward home. Smoke rose from the chimney. Auntie and Tillie would be making breakfast. The babies would be clean and fed, the kitchen full of wonderful smells. He'd eat, work until the sun set, and then head up to his room to sleep. A deep sleep, filled with dreams of revenge.

"Why me?" He walked over to the wheelbarrow, bent over, and began stacking logs.

"Are ye daft? The MD need a son to inherit!"

"Nev can do that."

"Aye, but 'tis you who will marry her," replied Gil, dropping his voice.

His words were quiet but had an intensity that made his blue eyes stab deep. He watched as Ross pushed the wheelbarrow over to the woodshed, added the logs to the back row, and returned.

“If yer first babe is a lass, Nev can go East to find a wife of his own to make a son.”

“Let him marry the girl. If he gets a daughter, then I’ll find a wife.”

“What woman would have ye?” Gillis erupted, throwing his arms wide. “Ye act like the devil hisself, glaring like ye expect attack. Ye toss them knives in town, lookin’ at people as if ye are choosin’ a target. Ye wear a buckskin vest, nae shirt, and tie yer hair back with rawhide. Do ye wonder why they call ye the MacDougal Devil?” He shook his head, temper spent. “Why do ye do that to yerself?”

Ross bit back the answer. If the MD was strong, no one would attack women and children who couldn’t protect themselves. The Indian side of him made it easy to scare all but a few. He was tall, dark, and well scarred. His weapon of choice was a knife, but his skill with fists, feet, and guns was equally honed.

“One look at my skin and I’m damned in their eyes no matter what. Why shouldn’t I show them what they expect?”

Gillis sighed. He brushed off his arms and chest. Sawdust drifted in the light breeze off the mountain.

“‘Tis true yer ma is Bannock. But she’s Nevin’s ma, too. He dinna act like a savage in town.”

Ross scrubbed his smooth face with his callused hands. His dark skin didn’t erupt in fiery red bristles like his half-brother, Gillis. He didn’t burn and peel under the summer sun, either. Nevin, close to a twin in looks, showed a sunny personality to the world. Nev ignored his darker skin. Ross rubbed it in like cheap whiskey on an open wound.

“I can’t get married now. I need to go to Virginia City for a bit.”

Gil snorted like a bull. He shook his head and set his fists on his hips. “What ye need, laddie, is a hot woman to cool ye down. Ye’ll have nae need to go traipsin’ ’round the countryside.”

“The men I want are there.”

Gil raised a bushy eyebrow. “And since when have ye been

lookin' fer these men? 'Tis the first I've heard of it. What, did ye gamble and let 'em walk away with yer gold?"

Ross clenched his jaw. He crossed his arms to keep from slamming a fist into Gil's sneering face. He forced himself to be calm. He learned as a child the only thing he could control was himself. A blank face and still body gave nothing away.

"I've wanted these men for most of my life. I will kill them, or die."

Gillis looked at him a moment before shaking his head. "Ye can wait a wee bit more to die. Long enough to put a son in yer wife's belly."

The words slipped between his ribs and stabbed his heart like a stiletto. Two of the men had been spotted only a few days away. Even before he learned about his targets, he'd planned to be gone before Amelia arrived. He'd let the newlyweds get acquainted before he demanded his half of the bedroom back.

Gil scratched his chin with his left hand. He frowned. "When ye were with yer ma's people?"

Ross nodded. He flexed his cramping fingers.

"Sommat happened, and ye want revenge?"

Another nod.

"Ye were a wee laddie. Did yer ma's people tell ye to do this?"

Gillis was a Highland Scot. He didn't understand Bannock ways. Subtle messages were exchanged without the need for words. Gil had never been subtle. Neither had his older brothers or their father. Loud, angry words and flying fists were common though Gil was not often violent. When he was, he went berserk as if he'd saved everything up for years.

"Talk wasn't needed. I knew."

"Was that when they sent ye home?"

Ross shrugged. He wasn't sent home. He was banished. He had not protected a child. No matter that grown men killed her, he was also guilty. When a quiet uncle had him pack his few things and

returned him to the MD, he knew they didn't want him. Neither did his parents. They sent him to live with the Elliotts across the valley.

Gillis tilted back his head and stared at the sky. "Who were they?"

"Four white men."

"Four? Ye said ye had three to kill."

"I took care of one that day."

Gil swore again, this time in Gaelic. Ross had heard the words often from their father, usually directed at him. From the way Gil glared, things hadn't changed.

"Ye can take care of yer past later. The Clan needs ye now." Gil leaned forward and stabbed a stubby finger at him. His face was as calm as Ross's, but his feet were braced to fight. "Ye will take the woman as yer wife. Ye will put a babe in her belly. After that, ye can turn her over to Nevin and go traipsing to California if ye like!"

Ross shook his head from side to side. Just an inch each way but enough to say no. Gillis narrowed his bloodshot eyes. He straightened up to his full six foot five plus boots and wild, red hair. He stared at Ross like a warrior ready to battle. A hundred generations of Highland Scots had done the same.

He held out his right arm, slightly bent with fist clenched. Such an arm, encased in ancient armor, shone from the Clan MacDougal crest. Their ancestor was Somerled of the Isles. He died in 1164 still screaming their war cry. Ross used the same cry but not in Gaelic—victory or death!

Instead of yelling, Gillis spoke quietly. As Clan Chief, he had no need to bluster.

"Ye'll marry the woman, Ross MacDougal, or ye'll be banished from the Clan."

His heart slammed against his ribs. He shivered in the hot May sunshine. "They killed my cousin. She was nine."

Never had he spoken of that day, of her screams. He refused to beg Gillis to change his mind. Their father hadn't managed to beat the stubbornness out of him, and neither would Gil. After an endless

moment, Gillis dropped his arm, but not the attitude. He shook his head.

"Ye'll have to wait for yer vengeance. The Clan needs ye to marry Amelia. If yer first babe is a lassie, I'll send Nev East to find his own wife."

Raised by the ways of clan and tribe, Ross knew to the very marrow of his bones that his wishes came second. He didn't like it, but it was part of the price of belonging.

He barely tilted his head, once. Gillis relaxed back into the older brother who'd gladly taken him and Nevin in as partners.

"If ye used some of the manners Mrs. Elliott drilled into yer thick head, life would be easier for ye."

"I don't need easy. I need their deaths to clear my soul."

"Death can wait," said Gil. "The Clan needs sons to inherit the MD. Now."

"Why? There's three of us. We're not all going to die in the next few years."

"The MacDougal might." Gil tightened his lips and looked at the mountains surrounding them. The screech of a golden eagle rang through the sudden silence.

"What's Father's death got to do with us?"

"Fin had a son three years back. The lass came to them big with child. She died birthing a big, red-haired lad the spitting image. That's when Da wrote me a letter. If we don't have a son before he dies, Fin inherits everything. Texas and Montana Territory."

"That son of a bitch would sell our ranch out from under us before we even know the man's gone!" Ross exhaled a curse. "Who knows what he'll do to my mother."

"Hold up, laddie." Gil held up his palm. "When one of us has a son, the deed to all MacDougal land in Montana Territory comes to us. We'll own this land and be free of them forever."

Ross drew a deep breath, inhaling the scent of their land. He couldn't live anywhere else. Yet Father could kick them off at any

moment. Fin and Hugh would sell the ranch to eager miners insisting there was more gold if only they could rip up enough land.

“Three years and you didn’t say a damn word about this?”

“I thought Prudence would give me a boy. I love the wee lassie, but Father insists on a son.”

Ross looked at the mountains rising to the northeast and southwest. The river meandered through the valley bottom, the dividing land between MacDougal and Elliott land. Their families had shared life, and death, since 1846. He thought of the six Elliott boys, as well as their wild sister, Jessamine, as brothers.

“Vengeance is the past, lad. It can wait. The Clan needs ye now. For our future.”

All Ross needed to do was marry Prue’s sister and put a son into her. The Montana Clan would be finally free of their father, and he could complete his quest for vengeance. He didn’t much care who the child’s mother was.

Gil said Prue wasn’t a five-petticoat matron who kept the marriage bed cold. Perhaps Amelia was the same. The blood pounded through his heart and found a home in his cock. It swelled, proving he might be out of practice, but it was raring to go.

While making a son, he’d also teach Amelia to bend to the needs of the MacDougal Clan. Once he seduced her into enjoying bedsport with him, he’d bring Nevin in. Let her get used to both of them. He cursed as he rearranged his cock in his pants.

“Bed her well, and put yer babe in her belly,” said Gillis. “Bring Nev in to keep her warm. He’ll make her laugh, and it’ll strengthen the Clan. Then ye can kill whoever ye want.”

“Show me the marriage contract, and I’ll sign.”

“No need.” Gillis almost smiled. “I forged yer name and sent the papers before Hope was born. Congratulations, lad. Yer wife already rode the Bride Train. She’ll be in Tanner’s Ford tomorrow.”

Chapter Two

Hot, dusty, and exhausted, Amelia Smathers MacDougal sat back while the men sharing her stagecoach disembarked. Early in her journey, she'd learned to let the men out first. One had "accidentally" touched her in a most disturbing manner as she bent forward to exit the cramped space.

"Mrs. MacDougal?"

She didn't recognize the voice or the name. She waited for the craggy face peering into the coach to pull back.

"Amelia MacDougal?"

She blinked. "Oh! Yes."

The man held a flat black hat, wisps of hair sticking up, proving he'd just removed it. He had the usual bushy moustache, but it was neatly trimmed above his lip. His smile seemed genuine if one could judge by the crinkles around his eyes. His black coat had a well-polished silver star pinned to it.

"I'm Sheriff Frank Chambers, ma'am. Your husband sent me to meet you. Unfortunately, he won't be here until this evening."

She'd requested in her last letter to meet in a dark room for the first time. She wasn't sure if he would agree. It would be hard enough to bare her body to a man. Doing so when he could see her scars was too much.

"May I escort you to the Tanner's Ford Hotel? Mrs. McLeod has everything ready."

She recognized the names from the letters Prue had sent. She'd even drawn mental pictures of the people over the years. The sheriff was as expected, tall, slim, and with a twinkle in his eye. She shifted

to the edge of the seat, keeping her shoulders back and head high.

“Prudence mentioned your wife’s kindness in her letters, Sheriff.”

“I’ll pass that on to Mary. We’re all sorry for your loss, Mrs. MacDougal. Your sister was well liked. The cold, dry mountain air was hard on her lungs and coughing so much only made it worse.” He shook his head. “Gillis has taken her death pretty hard. We’re hoping having you here will help him along.”

“Thank you. Prudence often wrote how much she loved her husband. Though she was told it would weaken her, she so wanted a child for him. Before she died, I agreed to come West and raise her daughter as my own child.”

“That must have comforted her, and Gillis.”

He held his hand out so she grabbed the leather handle of her tapestry carpetbag in her left hand and gave the sheriff her right. She bent forward to step out and realized she needed his strong grip. Even after she reached the boardwalk, her legs, cramped from bracing against the bumps all the way from Bannack City, took a moment to hold her weight.

“Almost home,” he said. He released her hand once she was steady. “You’ll be on the MD Connected tomorrow.”

Amelia stood on gray wood planks in front of an impressive red brick building. Five steps rose to the front door, flanked by tall windows with curved tops. It had a wide second-story balcony.

“This building resembles the hotel in Bannack City.”

“It should. Amos McLeod copied the design. He believed Tanner’s Ford would grow, so he built a hotel to suit his ambition.” He gestured, his hand sweeping wide. “As you can see, we’re not there yet. But his widow has the best food in a hundred miles.”

At the mention of food, her stomach grumbled. Loudly. Face heating, she pressed her reticule against her complaining belly.

“My wife doesn’t like to eat much when she rides the stagecoach, either,” said the sheriff with a smile. He held out his left forearm. “Shall we?”

She placed her fingers on his arm as if going in for supper at the most elegant ball back East. Once inside, she noted the building was different from the one in Bannack City. A polished oak counter ran along the left wall while the Hotel Meade had one dividing the room. However, an identical staircase curved up to her right to the second floor.

“Mr. Lumley will take care of you, ma’am.”

He put down her bag and nodded politely. After a sharp look at the clerk, he strolled down the hallway toward the back of the hotel. The aroma of roasting meat suggested he was looking for the dining room rather than bank robbers.

She’d signed a marriage contract with Nevin MacDougal, a man she knew only by her deceased sister’s letters. This evening, she’d meet him for the first time. Though the room was warm, her face suddenly heated at the thought. Perhaps tomorrow morning, the tempestuous feelings that had haunted her for years would be gone. They were not acceptable even in a married woman, but at least she’d know what the marriage bed was all about. She pressed her legs together, dreading yet anticipating her first night with her husband.

“Good afternoon, madam. I am Maurice Lumley, clerk of this establishment. I speak for the good citizens of Tanner’s Ford when I welcome you to this settlement. Mr. MacDougal stipulated that we ensure your relaxation. Once you are settled in the bridal suite, hot water will be sent up with a light collation. Mr. MacDougal informed us he expects to join you early this evening. He suggested you may wish to rest after your arduous journey.”

She stared at the clerk. She couldn’t tell if he used ten-dollar words to show off, or to put her down. All her life, she wanted to fit in. This time, it would not be as a dormouse.

“Thank you for your exceedingly unctuous welcome,” she replied.

He blinked twice. She wouldn’t be surprised if he had a dictionary hidden under his bed. He’d have to wait until this evening to find out if she’d insulted or praised him. He lifted a large brass key from under

the desk and rang a silver bell. A barefoot young boy appeared, panting as if he'd run all the way from Bannack City. Matted, brown hair hung long over his bowed head. His tattered clothing, while cleaner than many she'd seen, was too small for him. His pants stopped well above his bare feet.

"Show Mrs. MacDougal to the bridal suite." Though the boy stood near, the clerk spoke each word as if the child was hard of hearing and slow of wit. "The copper tub is in the big room. Fill it with hot water. Nettie has it heating in the kitchen."

Bath? In a tub?

Her father refused to have a tub in the house. She was lucky to have hot water and a sponge to get clean. She never thought about it until she discovered he bathed at his club. However, more was provided than hot water.

A few months earlier, she was curled up in the library with a book when her father and a few friends relaxed by the fire before supper. Caught where she was not supposed to be, she held still, hoping they wouldn't notice her. She was also eager to learn what happened outside her small household existence.

She listened as they chatted about the previous night's entertainment. They spoke about the luxurious baths and lovely attendants and boasted about how many they'd had. Two laughed about how they'd joined up to "take Betty front and back" and how the woman had squealed. Amelia was stumped as to what they meant. Another stated which part of Betty he wanted the next time, boasting as to the size of his cockstand and her ability to enjoy it every way he wanted.

Her heart beat so fast she felt paralyzed. Her head spun. She opened her mouth to get enough air to breathe without making noise. She managed to remain quiet for a few minutes until they were called to dinner.

Two men having relations with one woman, at the same time! Her body buzzed as she tried to figure out what would go where. She ran

upstairs to her cold dinner tray.

Her wicked dreams became much wilder after that.

A bath meant getting totally naked and immersing oneself in a tub of hot water. After days of travelling, sleeping upright on the train as best as possible, it sounded like heaven. She plucked at the dusty sleeves of her dress. Though she'd changed her underthings every other day, she hadn't removed her black mourning dress since she left home.

The boy grabbed her bag and turned away without waiting to see if she followed. He moved nimbly across the dark, polished floor and up the curving stairs. He kept his hands tight against his body as if to ensure he didn't touch anything. She lifted her heavy skirts with her right hand. After the third step, she held the dark wooden banister with her left as she hauled her weary body up the stairs. She stopped counting at eighteen steps, instead focusing on the prospect of stripping down and stepping into a soothing bath.

The boy set her carpetbag down at the second door. He slid around her, mumbling about water, and dashed down the hall to the back stairs. She opened the door and stepped into the main room. Like the hallway, it had high ceilings. An open door in the center of the far wall showed the foot of a bed. She gulped and turned away as another burst of heat blossomed over her body.

The promised tub sat to one side of the room. It was so big she would be able to sit down in it. A screen between the tub and tall windows would guard her modesty. Her feet tapped against the wide wooden boards as she crossed the room to the huge window. As she was on the second story and the other buildings were lower, she had a good view of the street to the east.

Beside the hotel were two small log buildings and a house. Across from the house was Tanner's Ford Mercantile. Other log buildings fronted the gray boardwalks, which lined the wide street on both sides. She watched the goings-on while the boy filled the tub with wonderful, steaming water.

A few women strolled along, but most of the people were men. After all, that was why the Bride Train was necessary. It brought together the large number of unmarried women in the East to the wild lands, and men, of the West.

Was her husband down there? She looked for a tall, broad man with red hair and beard, as Prue had described Gillis. For some reason, though she received details on the townspeople and Gillis, Prue wrote very little about her brothers-in-law. Even after Prue insisted she marry Nevin, she said little other than he was a good, kind man who would take care of her.

As the men all wore hats, it made red-headed-husband-spotting difficult. Some men were exceedingly scruffy while others resembled Eastern dandies. They strolled, strutted, or stomped along the boards, lifting their hats at the few women.

She was about to turn away when another man came into view, one very different from the others. He didn't use the boardwalk but strutted down the center of the dusty street. She looked again. No, he didn't strut. He walked as if he owned the street, and if anyone felt different, he'd convince them to his way of thinking.

What would it be like to have even a tenth of such confidence? To walk tall, able to take care of yourself without nasty whispers or pointed looks of pity. If she were a man, she could take care of herself. Maybe not as well as the man below, but enough to hold her head high for once.

He wore a leather vest without a shirt, revealing wide, brown shoulders. Dark hair flowed to the middle of his back from under a battered hat. Dark pants and boots completed his outfit. A dog trotted behind and to one side. He turned toward the far side of the street. Men slowed, watching to see where he'd go. A couple of women bustled into a shop, looking over their shoulders as if needing to get to safety.

The man continued across the street as if oblivious. He stepped onto the boardwalk and, after giving the dog a good scratch, entered

the mercantile. The dog wagged his tail for a moment more and curled up beside the door. The street seemed to sigh in relief. The women reappeared, craning their necks and pointing down the street after him.

She wouldn't mind getting a closer look as well. He exuded strength, a power that seemed to vibrate around him. Amelia shivered in spite of the heat. The unmentionable spot between her legs throbbed. Her nipples hardened.

The man made her feel as if she was in one of her wild dreams. Her unnatural dreams often lasted into the day while she rode the train. With Father dead, and having never met her husband, she could dream all she liked. Unfortunately, she couldn't touch herself as she wished.

The faceless men in her dreams did things that made her gasp in delight. She wasn't sure what they did but knew it would be wonderful. The tough man in the street made her quiver with the same need, and she didn't know why.

Prue insisted Nevin was perfect for her. He was kind and polite, holding her chair if Gillis was away. He smiled and joked with her, even brought wildflowers from the meadow now and then.

She didn't think a "kind and polite" man would make her feel the same as the man in the vest had. But even if he didn't make her tingle, Nevin would give her babies to love. With a son to inherit, she'd never get thrown out of her home again.

* * * *

An hour later and thoroughly clean from her long soak, Amelia ran her fingers through her long, dark hair to dry it. Father was right. Sitting in a tub of hot water gave one improper ideas. Rubbing the soapy cloth over herself in the bathtub make it hard to breathe. Her cleanest parts were her breasts and between her legs.

She looked at the bed, wide enough for two. What would happen

tonight when she shared that bed with Nevin? Would it hurt, like she'd been taught? Or would he make her tingle like happened when she touched herself?

By morning, she would know.

Though it was early May, the day had been hot, and the room was still warm. Since the hot water had heated her skin even more, she wore only the drying cloth provided with the bath. Unlike her clothing, it was clean. Other than her carpetbag and a small trunk, everything she'd brought was still on its way to the hotel. They'd promised her it would arrive in the morning so her husband could bring it home in the wagon.

She should unpack her clean travelling dress and shake out the wrinkles for morning. The bed drew her eye. She couldn't sleep well sitting up on a train surrounded by strangers. Once enough women left the Bride carriage, they'd let male passengers in. The last few nights, she sat next to a married couple for safety, being the only unaccompanied woman on the train.

She yawned, hastily covering her mouth. She should be nervous rather than falling asleep. She lifted her arms over her head and brushed her hair back from her face. The cloth, loosened with the action, fell to the floor. Her breasts filled. She brushed them with her hands, knowing it was wicked but enjoying the rush of pleasure. She had a few hours before her husband arrived, and the bed looked so inviting. Finally, she could touch herself. She might never have a chance to be alone in bed again.

She dropped her thin summer nightgown over her head. She folded the damp drying cloth and placed it over the edge of the tub. She padded to the bed, pulled back the light covers, and climbed in. The ropes underneath barely made a sound. The mattress, far softer than anything she'd laid on in so long, rustled slightly when she moved.

She sighed and relaxed. Pretending it was the man in the street, she touched her breast.

Chapter Three

As soon as it was fully dark, Ross entered the hotel through the back entrance. He didn't try to hide. He just didn't want to advertise the fact he was about to bed his wife. Not that anyone would recognize the tall man in a neat, dark suit. Simon Elliott's suit.

He walked quietly down the long hallway. A few sounds filtered through the open transom windows above the doors. He mentally catalogued them as he passed. No danger there. The ones who would cause problems wouldn't be back from Baldy's Saloon until the wee hours. He stopped outside the second door from the front.

His wife waited in there. If she was anything like Prudence, he wouldn't have to worry about her clinging to him. Like damn near every woman he'd met, Prue was scared of him. The few others wanted the temporary excitement of being with a man who made tough men gulp and back away. A woman didn't bring that type of man home.

None of them cared about who he was or what he wanted in life. He didn't expect his wife to be any different. At least she'd insisted on meeting in the dark for the first time. She'd be able to see his size but not his features.

And damn, he was looking forward to her feeling his size. Every inch of it throbbed, and there were more inches pressing against his thigh than in years.

He knocked lightly on the suite door. When he heard nothing, he used the key Sophie provided when he rented the room. He bolted the door behind him. Not being the trusting sort, he set a chair in front of the door. His hearing was like a fox, but he'd never tested it when he

was occupied with a wife.

The dim room held a light scent of roses, like the fancy milled soap sold at the Tanner's Ford Mercantile. Sophie told him Amelia had brought only one small trunk upstairs. The rest of her things would arrive by wagon in the morning. Waiting for it would give him time to learn about Amelia before heading home. By then, the wagon would be full of whatever a city woman considered necessary.

Prue said Amelia had brown hair, was a few inches shorter, and had terrible burn scars on her face, right hand, and arm. Other than that, he knew little.

His eyes fully adjusted to the dark during the few minutes it took to rest his jacket over the back of a chair and pull off his boots. He walked silently to the half-open door to the bedroom. His lungs contracted and heart thudded hard. He grasped the doorjamb with his hand.

"Hot damn," he whispered.

His wife lay on her left side, facing the far wall. A shaft of moonlight from the high window lit her body. She wore an almost sheer, white nightgown. Brown hair streamed across the pillow like a pennant held by a galloping Army soldier. Her body dipped from her shoulders to her waist before flaring to wide hips. A dark shadow showed the cleft between her plump ass cheeks. He choked. She sighed and rolled onto her back, proving her breasts were as ample as the rest of her.

His cock jerked, demanding to plow into her, now! He agreed. He didn't care where, be it mouth, breasts, pussy, or ass, just that he brand her as his.

Under white man's law, she belonged to him, and he could do whatever he wanted to her. Lend her to his friends, ignore her, or beat her to near death. It was his right, just because both of their names were written on a piece of paper. It was not his way. When he claimed something, it was his. Child, woman, or horse.

His cock strained against his buttons. He couldn't hold back a

groan. He knew the second he woke her. She faked it well, but her deep breathing missed a beat before starting again. The clincher was her right breast, the one lit by the slanting moon. As he watched, a large nipple rose to strain against her nightgown. In case he missed it, the shadow thrown by the moon exaggerated its size.

Ross exhaled all the tension he hadn't realized he carried. As soon as she knew he was near, her nipple sat up and begged for his touch. He considered that a very good start for an Eastern virgin. He could almost feel the way that nipple would roll around his tongue. He took a few deep breaths to make sure he could speak without his voice breaking like an eager boy.

"Good evening, Mrs. MacDougal," he finally said. "I know you're awake."

She stiffened and opened her eyes. He stood in shadow, watching her. Mother Moon had never lit up a more beautiful sight.

"I was just resting my eyes," she drawled. "I didn't know when you'd arrive."

She set her jaw when he didn't immediately reply. She reached out her hand and pulled the top sheet over her. He let her hide, for now. Gillis told him to do anything and everything to make sure she accepted him as her husband. That meant pleasuring her a few times before he made her his. He was up for that. Literally.

"Are you going to just stand there and stare at me? I've had a long journey and would like to get back to sleep."

Knowing she couldn't see, he let a grin escape. Prue was demanding but in a surface way. She was easily pleased by material things. This younger sister not only had a backbone, she had a pert tongue. Making her angry would mean she'd need spanking. Soothing her afterward would be worth damn near anything she said.

"You tired?" He still didn't move, waiting for her reaction. Would she invite him into her bed, ignore him or—

"Yes. Close the door behind you on the way out, thank you."

She rolled over on her side, again facing away. The sheet hid what

he wanted to touch. Such as the curved ass begging to be spanked for her impertinence. He shut the door loudly then waited. He didn't move but didn't try to hide his breathing, either. For some reason, he couldn't control the heavy rasps as he inhaled deep.

"You're on the wrong side of the door, Mr. MacDougal."

Her voice cracked on the last word, showing her indifference as a lie. She chose the wrong man if she thought she could control him.

"Nope."

He moved so his body was in the light but his head still in shadow. He pulled his white shirt from his pants. She whipped her head around at the sound, looking over her right shoulder. He unbuttoned his cuffs, watching her watch him. When he continued with the shirt, she rolled partway back to face him.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking off my shirt."

"Why?"

She sounded snippy, but nipples didn't lie. The room was too warm for them to rise in chill. No, she was hot. And he was damn well going to make her hotter.

"I've been working since sunup. Instead of sleeping, I rode all the way to town to meet my wife. I want my bed."

"You're not getting in this bed with me!"

He unhooked his belt and slowly slid it out of the loops. She watched as if it was a leather snake, slithering toward her.

"Who am I, Mrs. MacDougal?"

She rolled onto her back and clutched the sheet to her chin with both fists. She shifted her gaze to where his face would be.

"You're my husband, Nevin."

He rolled up his belt and placed it on the table as he strolled to the far side of the bed.

"Nope. I'm your husband, Ross."

For a moment she stared then shook her head silently.

"No!" She scrabbled to the far side of the bed, taking the sheet

with her. "I married Nevin, the quiet, nice one, not the MacDougal Devil!"

That was the problem with a bad reputation. People believed it. He sighed.

"You want me to turn on a light and show you the contract, wife?"

"No!" She covered her left cheek and ear with her hand. "Why aren't you Nevin?"

"Because I'm Ross."

She lay there, eyes wide and chin quivering. He sighed and rested a shoulder against the wall. He put his weight on one leg and rested the toe of the other on the floor. She swallowed, blinking a few times. After a moment, her breathing slowed from mad panic.

"What did your sister tell you about me?"

"People told her you were a vicious killer who put dozens of men in the ground. You always have ravens around you and carry three knives. You like to throw them at people."

She pressed her lips together as if debating whether to go on.

"You weren't rude though you usually grunted your answers. She wasn't sure if you could speak English very well, but you understood it. And when you thought no one was looking, you liked to play with her friend's baby."

He didn't know Prue saw him playing with James Elliott. Every child was a joy to be cherished, and Trace's boy was a rascal, eager to grab his long hair and chew on it.

"I only kill men who need it," he said. "Ravens are better company than most men. I always carry two knives in my side sheath and one in my boot. They go where I throw them. I know a few manners, and as you see, I speak English."

He waited for her reaction.

"What about the baby?" She frowned up at him. "Playing with a baby doesn't match your tough reputation." She forced a rusty laugh. "Vicious killers wouldn't want that to get out." When he didn't reply, she gave a small shrug as if it didn't matter. "You don't have to tell

me.”

“Yes, I do. I want a marriage based on truth.”

“Truth?” This laugh was pure sarcasm. “I thought I signed a marriage contract with Nevin MacDougal. That’s hardly the truth.”

He scratched his chin. “Yes, well, that had nothing to do with me.”

She gasped. She scrambled to sit up. “Nothing to do with you? How, when you signed the paper and mailed it to me long before Prue had her baby!”

Do not look at her chest. Do not check to see if the sheet slipped.

His perfect control snapped. She sat cross-legged in the bed with the sheet resting in her lap. Her breasts were full and round, and her nipples pointed right at him. He stared.

“Ross MacDougal, did you hear me?”

Her breasts jiggled when she shook her finger at him. She finally realized why he was silent and slid into the bed once more, sheet at her chin

“It’s rude to stare!”

He continued to look his fill. He’d kept his cock under control all his life. His family knew him for never showing emotion. All those beatings and never did he cry. Why the hell did the tiny woman in the big bed make him feel like a sixteen-year-old with his first woman?

“Not,” he growled, “when you’re my wife.”

She shut her mouth, but the glare was still there. Though he cursed the effect she had on him, one thing was sure. This marriage, if she agreed to go through with it, would be a challenge. She had fire and gumption, which, if he was lucky, meant passion between the sheets as well. He enjoyed challenges, especially when the rewards would be high. If he played his cards right, he’d have a warm bed and hot woman whenever he was home. Nevin could keep her happy the rest of the time. Slow but definite steps were needed.

He walked to the bed and sat. Not too close, but enough to let her know he wasn’t backing down. She didn’t move away, but she

watched him very carefully.

"Here's some truth. Only my family knows I also carry another four knives that I keep hidden. I didn't want that reputation. When the townies laid it on me, I made sure it stuck."

"Did I marry a bully?"

"Nope. If you're the meanest son of a"—he switched words when he saw her eyebrows coming together—"a gun around, trouble avoids you. It helps keep the MD ranch safe."

He bent his right leg and rested his ankle on his knee. Having never worn a suit before, he hadn't appreciated the advantages. The loose material didn't bind his cock like work pants. If he'd been in his usual canvas pants, there was no way he could sit. He held his ankle to give his hands something to do so he wouldn't reach out and touch the near-naked woman lying beside him. The woman he had a legal right to throw on her back and take as often as he liked. As hard as he liked. And damn, he had never been harder in his life.

"Because I'm older than Nev, Gil said I had to marry you because you had no choice but to accept me." He winced at her gasp in response, but damn it, she'd best know the truth from the get-go.

"We need sons to inherit the land. Gil and Prue had a daughter. If our first child is a girl, Nev will marry. He shouldn't have a problem as he's good with the ladies. I'm not." He looked at her though his long hair hid his face. "It's too late to do anything about it. The MacDougal insists we have a son as soon as possible. I'm ready to start."

Her chin trembled. He had a destiny, one of vengeance. He didn't like taking Amelia as a wife just to satisfy their father's ridiculous requirement. But honesty and respect would get them through. A bit of caring would help, but Nevin would be able to provide it. Hell, Nev might even end up loving her. Then they wouldn't need him anymore.

"I thought my husband wanted me," she whispered. Her hands clenched the sheet high under her chin. "The women on the train didn't know who they would marry or what would happen. I thought I

was so much better off. I was already married to my brother-in-law, a man my sister said was kind and gentle. A man who wanted me as his wife!”

Tears glistened in her eyes, but she hardened her voice for the last sentence. After his sister Louisa’s temper tantrums and pouts, he didn’t trust women who used tears to get what they wanted. But though tears slid down her face, she didn’t make a sound. Instead, she gritted her teeth and glared.

He held back a grin of appreciation. This woman would fight for what she wanted. But would she want him? Though near-naked and defenseless, she glared up at him from the bed. She crossed her arms, plumping up her breasts as if to offer them. He wanted them...and her. More, he wanted this small, feisty woman to want him. It was a crazy idea. No one wanted him, other than Gil and Nevin, and Gil wanted him for stud service. There was no reason they couldn’t both enjoy it.

“I want you, but the timing of this marriage is bad. I had to put aside important things.” Did she sniff back tears? No, it was more of a snort. “We’re stuck with each other. We might as well make the best of it, princess.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“You’ve got soft, white skin. You come from the city. Your father had money. That means all you were trained to do was bat your eyes and be pretty. Well, that don’t mean a damn out here.”

She opened her mouth in outrage, but he kept on going.

“I work hard, and I expect my wife to do the same. I want decent hot food, clean clothes, and a tidy home.”

“Are you finished?” Her tears were gone, which meant the snippy attitude was back.

“Couple more things.” He held up his first finger. “When I give an order, you obey it.” Second finger. “I want my wife in my bed, every night.” Third. “I’m big, loud, and ornery.” He let go of his fourth finger. “Don’t expect me to change who I am just because I have a

wife.” He opened his palm, holding it up nice and easy as if he was saying “howdy.”

“Does that mean you have a number five?”

“Nope,” he drawled, low and slow. “That’s what I use on my wife when she doesn’t follow the rules.”

She shrunk, wincing as if he’d already hit her. “Prue said MacDougal men don’t beat women!” She stared at his hand.

“I don’t beat women, children, or animals. But I will spank my wife if she needs it.”

She gasped, but not in fear. The sheet rose and fell as she panted. Her nipple buds pushed up the sheet, and her nostrils flared. Damn, did his luck change and he got a woman who liked to have fun?

“I will not let you spank me!”

“You sure about that?”

She sputtered what might be curses. Considering the company she had to keep to get this far, she likely heard a good variety. She’d not be using them on him.

“Are you breathing hard because you’re afraid I’ll spank you?” He lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned closer. “Or are you hot and wet because you want my hand on your ass?”

She huffed and puffed. He’d bet a hundred dollars it wasn’t outrage that riled her—it was that he was right.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting an edge of pain with your loving now and then.” Her hands fidgeted with the sheet. “That’s something to work up to, so I won’t be doing that for a while. Are you inviting me to lie down?”

Though he seemed relaxed, he wanted her with a heat he’d never felt before. His patience, honed from listening to the grandfathers speak, from waiting for his dinner to come into his path, didn’t exist with this woman. While he waited for her answer, his body trembled, for God’s sake!

She seemed calmer but still pleated that sheet. She flicked her eyes around the dim room. He made himself give her all the time she

needed to come to a decision. It was the most important one of their future life. After swallowing a few times, she exhaled and looked to the shadow where he waited.

“I don’t know,” she finally whispered.

“Say, come to me, husband,” he growled. He listened to her silence with the same sense that kept him alive more than once. She was thinking so hard he could almost hear the gears shift. She twitched.

“Prue said she always felt safe when Gillis held her in the night.”

“Now that you’re married to me, you’ll always be safe. But I plan to do more than hold you tonight.” His deep voice was rough with need.

She panted, the pulse at her throat beating as fast as his own heart. He stood up, tossed off his shirt, and turned back to the bed. She gasped and threw out her arm to point at his feet.

“You’re not going to leave your good shirt on the floor! Someone will have to press it in the morning before we go down to breakfast, and that won’t be me.”

He stared at her frown, thanking the Gods it wasn’t fear that made her gasp. He snorted a laugh. “You already sound like a wife.”

“Your shirt?”

He swept it from the floor and placed it on a peg sticking out of the wall by the door.

“Hang up your pants while you’re at it.”

He stopped with his hand still lifted. He hadn’t planned to strip naked yet. But if the lady wanted to speed things up, so much the better.

“You don’t seem to be like Gillis,” she continued. “Prue said he’s big, wide, red, and hairy. I can’t see you very well, but you’re not wide.”

“Nev and I look a lot alike,” he said as he carefully shucked his pants, “because we have the same mother. Gillis has more of our father in him.”

"Oh. I guess I wouldn't have recognized you from the window."

"When did you look out the window?" Had she seen him go into the mercantile to pick up the suit Patsy Tanner pressed for him?

"While I was waiting for my bath to be ready." She dipped her head as if shy. "Thank you for that. I've never had a tub bath. It was wonderful."

He grunted in reply. Damn good thing Trace bought a tub after they married. No way was he returning the big one the Elliotts gave Prudence as a wedding present. He'd wash Amelia all over, covering her body in rose-scented soap. After rinsing, he'd lick every inch of her dry, inside and out.

He lifted the shirt with shaking hands, hung the pants on the hook, and then placed the shirt over them. He angled his body away from the bed so she'd not catch a shadow of the massive erection pointing forward. He wanted to come in her so bad, right now! But she was a virgin. Do it wrong the first time, and she wouldn't want a second. Do it right, and he'd have her screaming her release again and again, all night long.

"You ever seen a cock, Amelia?" The silence stretched.

"I don't think you mean a male rooster," she finally said.

"No, I mean the man's part that fits in the woman."

"Oh." She fiddled with the sheet, pleating it. "That's what the man uses to make babies?"

"Eventually, yes," he ground out.

She was even more ignorant than he expected. Trace had warned him that Eastern women were taught little about sex other than to keep their knees closed before marriage.

"Prue said I would have a home here for as long as I wanted." He could hear the tension as she struggled to breathe. "You said you need sons. I want a home. Even if making a baby hurts a lot, and you do it every night, I'll have a place to belong."

She spoke as if she'd put up with being raped every night just to have a place to live in. He dropped his head back and exhaled. How

many women were stuck with that existence? Too many, he knew. He was going to make damn sure she learned about pleasure tonight.

“You have a home now,” he whispered. “And I’ll kill anyone who dares to hurt you.”

The second sentence came out before he knew it. He hoped she hadn’t heard it. He didn’t care about her like that, of course. Everyone knew if he discovered someone hurting a child or woman, they soon wished they were dead. He usually granted that wish, eventually. He looked over when she cleared her throat.

“Can you give me a baby now?”

Christ! His cock jerked, pre-cum easing out. He thought of how damn cold that stream was in early spring with the snowmelt. Imagined himself sitting in the middle of it, his cock shriveled from the ice. He gripped his fists with everything he had so he wouldn’t rip off her nightgown and plunge deep in her sweet, hot, virgin pussy.

His cock still throbbed. The icy stream wasn’t working. Maybe if he counted backward, by fours. No, that was too easy. By sevens, then. *One thousand. Nine-hundred and ninety-three. Nine-hundred and eighty-six. Nine-hundred and seventy-nine.*

He was at eight-hundred and eighteen when he heard the bed move. He used every sense he possessed to discover what Amelia was doing. He smelled the rose scent on her skin as she pushed back the sheet. She waited with just one thin layer between her skin and the moonlight.

“Please, hold me.”

If he could wait all these years to avenge the most horrid crime imaginable, he could hold one small woman for a few minutes without violating her. He eased into the bed. The ropes squeaked a bit as he settled. She lay to his right, her shape outlined. He reached out his right arm and forced out two words.

“Come here.”

She gave a mew like a frightened kitten and snuggled, her left side on the mattress and her right leaning on him. He settled his right arm

around her, resting his hand on her waist. Her head lay on his chest, her breasts pressed against his ribs. Her right hip lay to the left of the biggest erection of his life. Her right leg settled between his.

Exquisite agony. He held her for a moment until she relaxed. He, however, was stiff as a board, and not just the part standing at attention near her hip.

"Prue said Gillis is all furry, but you're nice and smooth."

She skimmed her palm over his left chest, rasping his nipple with an innocent touch that inflamed him. He put his left hand on top of hers.

"Amelia, unless you stay perfectly still, I won't be able to just hold you." *Hell, she'd be lucky to be a virgin for more than two minutes!*

She held still while he forced himself to relax. He lifted her left hand, freeing her right. She didn't move for a few minutes, but he could almost hear her brain working overtime. He was almost under control when he heard her breath catch. A bare whisper of a sound, but when her nipples pressed against him and her sweet perfume rose from between her legs, he knew he had to get out of the bed, the room, *the town* or do something he'd sworn never to do. Unless she wanted him.

She swept her hand down his chest. His heart stopped beating then pumped like a revival organ at full savior mode. His belly rippled when her hand floated past. His cock stood, tall and proud, pointing forward.

"Oh, my. Is this your cock? It's very big."

Her fingers touched his hard flesh. Before he could push her away and escape, she gripped him by the hilt.

"No wonder it hurts so much! That will never fit inside me."

He waited, his whole body tight from eyebrows to toes, but she didn't release him. If anything, she held him tighter.

"Babies are a lot bigger than this," she said as if rationalizing to herself. "If you go in and babies come out, I expect I can stretch." She

changed her grip. “You’re fuzzy here. What are these?”

She cupped his balls, squeezing gently. He groaned, loud and long. Before she could release him, he clamped her hand tight.

“Don’t stop.”

“I’m not hurting you?”

“Nope.” Maybe if he came, he’d be able to lie there and not ravish her for at least fifteen minutes.

“Show me what to do.”

With his guidance, she raised and lowered her hand twice. He released her and let her do what she wanted. Luckily, that was what he would walk through coals to feel. The room was hot, but her hand burned. She reached the tip and found his pre-cum. She figured out what to do with it, sliding up and down his shaft. She took to it so quickly he wondered if she was a virgin. If she thought making babies hurt so damn much, why was she all over him?

“Is it bad for me to touch you when I was supposed to marry your brother?”

“Nevin won’t mind,” he croaked.

He didn’t tell her that, either way, they intended share her. If she wanted to, that is. Considering the way she stared at him, licking her lips while driving him crazy with her hand, it would take more than one man to satisfy her.

He slid his hand down her back to her ass. Her nightgown shifted when she moved. It was easy for him to reach between her spread legs and press his finger inside.

“Oh, my godfathers!”

She gripped his cock hard, not moving as he gently explored her pussy with his fingers. He pushed farther. She gasped and jerked, pulling on his cock.

“Keep that hand moving, Amy,” he growled.

Though she panted like a tired dog, she slid her hand along his cock. He rewarded her with a touch on her clit. She tilted her ass up in the air, silently begging for more. The witch was wet and begging for

him, but she wasn't ready yet.

"Sit up on my chest," he said.

"Will this make a baby?"

"I'll do my best."

He helped her sit on his chest. He inhaled her scent, sweet and clean. He wanted to lift her over his mouth and lick her dry, but his cock needed attention. He grasped her breast in his palm. She fit perfectly. She thrust her chest forward and ground herself against him.

"You ever touch your breasts?"

"Is that wrong?" She whispered the question, not answering him.

"Nope. Nothing that brings pleasure is wrong."

"But the church—"

"Is full of sanctimonious old men who couldn't get it up if they tried."

He took her hands and placed them on her own breasts. When he let go, she squeezed her breasts. He watched for a moment, enjoying the show. His cock demanded attention, but she needed more first. He brought his legs up, bending his knees to make a backrest for her.

"Slide back so you can rest your shoulders. Slowly."

"Why? I'm comfortable like this."

"Because I want to touch you right here."

He placed his thumb lightly on her clit. She grabbed his thighs and backed up. Her ass cheeks framed his cock, pressing it up. He wouldn't be able to hold her like this for long, but for now, it felt great. He reapplied his thumb to her clit. She tilted her hips to give him easy access.

He could feel her barrier with the end of his finger. He pressed gently. It gave slightly. She clenched his fingers with her pussy, and he shivered. He flicked her clit again, and she shivered in return.

"Lift up and bend forward," he said. He held his cock in one hand and pressed it against her pussy. "Feel my cock?"

"Mmm, that feels good," she said.

“You want more?”

When she nodded, he guided her hips until she took him as far as her barrier. He fought hard, forcing himself to stay still, to not thrust up and take her. He held her hips and guided her forward and back over his cock. Each time she came back, she did it harder.

“It won’t go in far enough!”

“That’s up to you. It will hurt for a minute when you sit down, but then all you’ll feel is pleasure.”

“You promise? They said it hurt every time.”

“Most men don’t take time to get their woman hot, wanting, and wet.” He grasped the root of his cock, pressing her clit with his thumb. “If you want more, take it!”

She wavered, pressing against her barrier. She rose to her knees. He guided her so she didn’t go too far, too fast. Once past her barrier, she would still be tight. Finally, she growled and pushed back hard. She gasped and stopped, mouth open. He held her until she relaxed and settled back.

Once more he thought of winter. She leaned forward and rubbed herself against him, her clit dragging across his belly. He slid his hand under so he could give her more to rub against. She had both hands on his chest, panting as she moved back and forth. Her breasts swayed out of reach of his mouth. She must be short to be so far away. He hadn’t even seen her out of bed yet!

His balls swelled, ready to explode. He felt behind to his cock. Her juices coated him. He gathered some and trailed his fingers up her ass, spread wide around his hips. She shuddered. He scratched against her tight ring. She groaned. He gave her clit a good rub with his knuckle and pressed his smallest finger into her ass.

She groaned louder and squeezed him so hard he grabbed her hips and slammed her down on him, again and again. She squealed, and he erupted. His mind went blank as the greatest pleasure he’d ever known blew out his eyeballs from the inside out. Again and again, he pumped as she convulsed, squeezing him dry. Finally, she collapsed

on his chest, both of them gasping like fish out of water.

He wrapped his arms around her tiny body and pulled her close as minor earthquakes trembled through him. He felt her answering echoes when she squeezed him.

When he could think, he trailed his fingers over her back, down to her ass, and back again. He found places that made her twitch. Some made her gasp.

"Does this mean we're married forever?"

Ross couldn't tell from the words mumbled into his chest if she was glad or not.

"If you mean has our marriage been consummated, then yes." He waited for her reply. He barely heard the whispered, "Good." A moment later, he heard a soft snore.

Ross jammed his eyes shut. He curled his lower lip over his teeth, biting down to stop the emotional storm that threatened to rage through him.

Just because she had an orgasm didn't mean she wanted him. When she saw his color, would she demand the next train East? If she wanted to stay in the area, there were more men than he could shake a stick at who would take her, sight unseen, as a wife. Knowing she'd spent one night with a half-breed wouldn't stop them. They'd insist she'd be far better off with a *real* man. He had more book learning, manners, and money than most, but he didn't have white skin. To some, that was all that mattered. Would Amelia care?

With one single white woman for every few hundred men in Montana Territory, he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of keeping her. Not if she wanted to leave.

But with the fire she'd showed him just now, he had a way to keep her near. He'd show her nights with him would make up for everything else.

He had one whole night to prove what he could do for her before morning's light brought the truth.

Chapter Four

The hand stroked her, fingers trailing from her neck, over her back, and around her bottom. She relaxed, letting the dream take her. This was a good one, where she could almost believe a man wanted her. The hand slid farther around her bottom. She moved to encourage it. Fingers strayed inside her tissues, inflaming her. She moved to roll onto her back. Something stopped her.

“Stay right there.”

She rolled away, scrambling from the deep voice. A body rolled with her, on her, trapping her with its weight. His weight. He chuckled and shifted off her. She groaned, realizing who it was. Ross, not Nevin. The one who made her tingle so much more than all of her dreams together. The one she’d sat on, changing her world.

“You don’t listen well.”

She heard the touch of laugh in his voice. She tried to move away, but he was far too strong. It should bother her that he was so in control. Instead, it made her feel that, for once, someone could protect her.

“According to Father, I’ve never listened. Don’t expect me to change,” she said, throwing his words back at him. “Get off me.”

“Why? I like it here. Lots to play with.”

He trailed a finger around her breast. She forced back a groan. He caught the tip with his mouth and suckled. Fire shot from that spot to the place between her legs. It began to heat up again, making her twitch.

“We already did it,” she whispered.

“Nothing stopping us doing it again. And again. Unless you’re

sore. Then you can play with me.”

She shook off the bolt of lightning at the thought of doing things to him. Would it make him want her?

“I thought one has marital relations once a night until one is with child.”

“Not this one,” he said. “And not you, either.”

He nibbled her other tip. All thought flew from her mind. An arrow shot again to the place between her legs.

“Nothing stops us from this,” he continued. “Not unless you’re sore.”

He lifted himself up on his arms. The moonlight made his shadowed face and body dark. He moved down her body and off the bed. She frowned when he grasped her ankles. He pulled her to the edge of the bed. She squeaked and struggled to escape. He held her down with one broad palm on her belly, nudged his way between her thighs with his head, and kissed her.

There.

His tongue flickered over the button that held her still. He lifted her legs and rolled her back until her bottom raised off the bed. He kissed her again in a totally unmentionable spot. Then he licked her from one to the other. She trembled, flaming and wanting and—

“This is your clit,” he said. He pressed her button, making her hiss. “This is your pussy.” He licked her between her legs. He flicked his tongue around the flesh that she ached to explore now that she knew what touching it felt like.

“And this is your asshole.”

She squawked and struggled when he lightly scratched it with his finger. A small pain erupted on one back cheek. He’d spanked her! She tried to attack, but he rolled her forward and pushed her knees toward her ears.

“You brute!” She sputtered the words from between her breasts, pushed into her chin by her knees.

The sting had faded, though not the shock. He pressed his finger

inside what he called her pussy. It slid easily, wakening new desires. She relaxed a bit to encourage him.

“Don’t complain when that little tap made you wetter,” he said. “That’ll make Nevin happy.”

He settled himself on the floor and placed her heels on the edge of the bed. She stared at him. What would make Nevin happy, and why? He drew a finger over her pussy, making her shiver. She closed her eyes and concentrated on right now.

“Now, I’m going to taste you.”

“No!”

Her heart beat as if to escape the cage of her ribs. She jammed down her heels and skittered backward like a crab on the beach escaping the tide. Like the tide, he followed her. He caught her just before she would have fallen off the foot of the bed.

He set her on her back and, very deliberately, lay on top of her. He put one heavy leg over both of hers. His chest pressed on her breast. The moon shone from behind his head into her eyes.

“I know you were a virgin. When we have light, the sheets will prove it. You’ve touched yourself before.” He traced a line of fire from her breast to her belly and back. “My tongue will show you pleasure. Tell me what you like.”

He whispered the words into her bad ear. Heat flashed up her chest. She closed her eyes in shame. Father would have had her locked in an institution for perversion. What would this dangerous man do?

“Na, ah, Mrs. MacDougal. Open your eyes and face me. I want honesty.”

He didn’t sound angry. She looked up, still unable to see much with his hair hanging over his face.

“Did you touch your breasts?” He ran his callused palm over one. His touch inflamed her as her own never had. She nodded, inhaling a gasp as his rough skin rasped her nipple.

“Did you touch your pussy?” He dragged his fingers all the way to

her thatch. "Like this?" He slid two fingers in, pressing her inner lips together.

"Not until—" He lightly pinched her clit. She arched her hips.

"Until?"

He continued to play with her swollen lips, making it hard to think.

"Today. After the bath. I never did it before."

"And your clit?"

"I didn't know about it," she said, panting.

His fingers continued to stroke her. "You put your fingers in your pussy before I arrived, then you told me to leave you to your dreams."

She gasped when he hit a sensitive spot. Without stopping his finger, he suckled her nipple. She gasped and clutched the bottom sheet with both hands. She couldn't think when he touched her. She sighed in relief when he moved his hand to her belly and lifted his head.

"You didn't think I could make you feel this good."

She shook her head. No, she had no idea her body had parts that could feel like that. Even when her dreams were wild and she woke up swollen and shaking, wanting more, she didn't know it could be this good. She wanted more of it before the sun came up and he saw how ugly she was.

He captured her breast with his large hand. She arched her back.

"These are going to cause me trouble," he said. "I want to show everyone how lucky I am." He kissed the top of one breast. "I hope you brought pretty gowns that show off these beauties." He lifted his head, giving her a respite so she could think.

"I never had gowns," she quietly admitted.

"Why not? Didn't your father parade you in front of rich young bucks to make a match and better himself?"

She gave a sarcastic laugh. "My father wasn't going to spend money when no one wanted to see my ugly face."

Immediately as the words left her mouth, she wished them back.

This was where he'd get the lamp out. He'd see her scars, hidden in the soft dark, and show his disgust. She cursed the temper that gained her many beatings from her father.

"Are those your father's words?"

"Yes, and my ex-fiancé's, ex-girlfriends', and, once you turn on the light, yours as well, I expect."

She waited, tense and tight, but he said nothing. His fingers skimmed over her breast for a few minutes before rising to her neck. They trailed up the right side of her neck, over her temple, and around her perfect ear. She blinked back tears as they then traced over her burned left cheek and temple. He ran a finger back and forth over the crumpled top of her ear. His touch disappeared for a few seconds where her ear was so burned she could no longer feel anything.

He raised up on one elbow and lifted her right arm. Once again, he traced the marks. Her arm had received the worst burns as she protected the baby from the fire. It was no longer smooth, but she'd regained all her feeling. Her hand was merely mottled, like her face.

"Prue said you were burned while saving children."

"Yes," she whispered.

"You went in when your friends walked past."

"They said they would get help."

"You knew the children would die without help. So did they. But you chose to act while the cowards rode away."

Tears leaked from her eyes. She closed them but once again saw the tiny faces in the upstairs window, screaming behind the glass. She raced her horse as close to the house as she could. When it balked at the heat, she leaped off, lifted her skirts, and ran. The others called her back, but she couldn't stop. She got the oldest out but had to go back for the baby. On the way downstairs, she protected the baby with her right arm. A board fell on her, and she had to fight to escape. She didn't remember what happened next, but the doctor said she was lucky to get out alive.

The next months were agony. Not just from the burns. The

servants must have whispered about what her face looked like, for no one would visit. She'd done something unforgivable. It wasn't only that she almost died for a poor family. When she rescued the children, the others were shamed. They could never forgive her for that.

Lips touched her burned ear. A tongue traced the edge. Small, light kisses trailed across every part. He lifted her hand and, beginning at her elbow, kissed his way to her fingertips.

His unquestioning gentleness seeped into her soul. She fought the childish sobs that threatened. Crying did no good. Nothing changed the past. You had to take what you had and do the best you could. That was why she signed a marriage contract and came West.

"You know what I see with my lips and fingers?"

"Nothing. It's dark," she joked. She couldn't bear it if he showed pity to her.

"I see a brave woman who faced death to save children."

"The others saw a stupid girl who should have thought before running into a burning house," she said bitterly.

She opened her mouth to continue but found a set of lips on hers. He tasted her with his tongue, tracing between her lips and teeth. She tingled at the sensation. He deepened the kiss, flicking his tongue against hers. When his hand clasped her breast and squeezed, she moaned into him. He lifted his head.

"Tell me what you think about when you touch yourself."

Chapter Five

She couldn't speak of what she'd heard in the library then dreamed about. Or the book she found just before leaving while looking for her mother's long-lost family Bible. Behind the Latin section, she found a thin book bound in oxblood leather. *Sinful Pleasures* was written on the cover. She opened the first page and saw a drawing of a woman lying on her back at the edge of the bed. Her knees were tucked around the ears of a man whose face was almost buried in her thatch. His tongue protruded like a gargoyle, aiming right at her. Was that what Ross was about to do to her when she panicked?

"Something's got you hot. This spot," he kissed the side of her neck, "is fluttering like when you rode my cock."

She looked up at Ross to gauge his mood, but it was hard as he kept the moon at his back. She knew he could see her face and part of her body, but she could only see his outline. He didn't seem to be disgusted with her, though. From the long, hard shape nudging her hip, he wanted to do what they'd done before.

"Has another man touched you like I have, other than in your dreams?"

"No! Until tonight, I've never even seen a man with his shirt off."

"You've seen and felt a lot more now. Tell me what's making you hot."

"You might get angry with me."

He flicked her nipple with his fingernail. She gasped at the sting, which shot to her pussy in a demand for more.

"That shouldn't stop you from telling me the truth."

"I-saw-things-in-a-book." She said it fast to get it over with.

His hand grasped her breast again. "What things?" His deep voice whispered the words over her hard nipples. Her heart pounded as if it would jump out of her chest.

"There were, um, drawings." She licked her lips and swallowed. "Of men and women."

"A pillow book?" He leaned back his head and laughed.

Shame flooded her. "I knew I shouldn't have told you." She blinked back tears. "I'm not saying anything more!"

"Oh, yes, you will," he said, still chuckling. "I like that my virgin wife has naughty thoughts. Tell me what you saw."

She crossed her arms over her chest and turned her head away. She lay there as still and unresponsive as she could with a naked, sexy man draped over her. He trailed his fingers over her, making her twitch.

"No!"

"You'll tell me more or get a spanking," he said in a low and teasing voice.

Icy fire roared over her skin. She gritted her teeth, stubborn as always.

"Amelia MacDougal, you will answer me now, or I will turn you over my knees and paddle your ass."

He said it quietly, not as a threat but as a statement that what he said would happen. Her pussy spasmed, wanting him to do just that, but she was in control, not that eager part of her. "I can't say out loud what I saw."

"Was there a drawing of a man standing behind a bent-over woman?"

Heat flashed over her face. She nodded.

"Did you see where the man's cock went? Was it in her pussy or her ass?"

Her heart pounded at the question. She licked her dry lips.

"How many men were with her? One, two, or three? Hold up your

fingers.”

There were different drawings for each. She held up one finger. After a moment, she added another. When he still waited, she held up the third.

“Three men with one woman?”

She nodded. He leaned over and kissed her mouth. His fingers found their way into her pussy. He stroked her as if rewarding her for her answer. She didn’t care. His fingers felt so good. Thinking about the pictures made her hot. Not that she would ever experience what those women did. They were paid to take men. Had the artist drawn the truth? The woman had seemed to be in ecstasy, not the immense paid she’d imagined.

He lifted from her kiss but kept his hand inside her pussy. He pulsed gently, stretching her.

“Do you have fantasies about two men pleasuring you, Amy?”

“You’ll be angry.”

“Only if you lie.”

“Yes,” she whispered. She wished she could see his face. Was he furious?

“Good,” he whispered back.

He moved quickly, pulling her under him. He rose up on his arms. Bending his elbows, he dropped down to suckle her nipple. She squirmed as jolts of fire shot to her pussy. He released her and rose up again. Knowing what he wanted, what she wanted, she bent her knees so he could lie between them.

She knew he watched her. She looked back though she could see nothing but straight, dark hair. He nudged his cock into her, pushing past swollen lips. She lifted and pressed herself onto him. He laughed and surged forward. She gasped as he went deep. He stopped moving.

“Sore?”

Instead of answering, she wrapped her legs around him. It was his turn to gasp. She pressed her breasts together the way she liked. He slowly entered her all the way then pulled almost out. It was too slow

for her. She wanted the stars and lights he'd shown her earlier. She tried to hurry him by pushing up with her heels, but he growled at her.

Slow slide in, then out, again and again. Her need rose like a spiral, ever higher. He finally moved faster though still not enough for her. Holding himself up like that, she could see where they joined. She reached down and touched the magic button he'd shown her.

"Umm," she moaned. She rubbed her clit and squeezed her breast in time with his thrusts. Faster and faster. She managed to get her hands out of the way when he suddenly dropped to his elbows. She wrapped her arms around him and pushed up with her heels to meet his beat.

Again and again.

He was so much bigger than she that his chest lay right above her mouth. She nibbled his skin, tasting clean sweat. He moved and suddenly hit something wonderful. Each time he nudged that spot, she almost came loose. Once more and she clenched hard around his wonderful cock, exploding again. She held on as he grunted twice more, her body shaking with release. He bellowed, slamming deep inside her. She held on tight to his massive muscles as he erupted.

Only when he rolled onto his back, taking her with him, did she release him. He cupped her bottom with one hand, a breast with the other. Both of them gasped for air, their skin slick with sweat. She'd barely caught her breath when he sat up. He curled her into his arms and swiveled. He stood up and walked toward the door.

"What are you doing?" She squeaked the question.

"Time for a bath."

"It will have cooled by now."

"Good. My hands are full. Open the door"

"We can't leave this room without our clothes!"

"Try to stop me."

He braced her hip against the wall to twist the doorknob. He pushed the door open with his foot and walked through. The screen blocked the moon from shining on them though there was enough

light that he didn't stumble. She grabbed onto his neck with both arms when he held her over the tub.

"Stand in the tub," he said.

The water was actually refreshing. It came up to her hips. She gathered her hair and twisted it up and out of the way. She would normally have braided it before bed, but it hadn't quite dried before she fell asleep.

* * * *

Ross stared when he backed away from Amelia standing in the tub. He hadn't appreciated her lush shape or the fact she was so tiny. When she raised her arms to lift her hair and her full breasts rose, he almost bit his tongue. His cock valiantly tried to salute her. After two full bouts in a short time, he was out of steam. He watched her breasts sway as she moved.

Her older sister Prudence had been short and thin. Amelia was shorter by a good two inches, and she was well rounded. She had everything he wanted. Long, soft hair to run his hands through. Giant nipples topping her breasts. Because her hips were wide, her waist looked small. He wasn't afraid of a small woman. Many of his aunties were small but strong. They enjoyed their bedding, worked hard, and easily birthed many strong babes.

Considering she was a pampered Easterner, he doubted she could handle a tenth of what his aunties did daily. The fact that she enjoyed his bedding was a good start. He would bind her to him that way if he had to. Not that it was difficult the way she heated his blood.

"What are you staring at?"

"You."

"Surely, you can't see me very well. I can barely make you out."

He picked up the soap and cloth from the bowl where Amelia had left it. He wrinkled his nose. If he washed using this rose-scented soap, he'd be laughed at by Gil and Nevin.

Or not. They'd think it was her scent on him. He wanted to get clean, of course, but it was bathing his wife's body that mattered. He lathered up the cloth and walked toward her.

"I have excellent night vision."

He touched her nipple with the cool, damp cloth. A soap bubble stuck to it. He blew gently. He grinned as her nipple rose as if obeying his call.

"When I asked to meet in the dark, you knew you'd be able to see me?"

"You asked Nevin to meet you in the dark."

"Oh. Yes."

Had she already forgotten that she'd married the "wrong" man? As far as he was concerned, putting a son in his wife's belly was going to be the highlight of his life so far. Part of him wanted it to take months. Months when he alone could have her pussy. The child would be his, without question.

He walked behind her and admired the curve of her ass. It sloped out, two dimples centered around the long crack. He couldn't wait to take that ass.

He mentally kicked himself in the head for using the crude words, even to himself. This was his wife, not a whore. He wouldn't *take* any part of Amelia. He would encourage her to share herself with him. And with Nevin, of course. But later. After he'd shown her every pleasure he knew. Maybe he'd check out that pillow book and find a couple new ones.

She stood with her feet braced. She leaned forward slightly, holding onto the tub edge. Waiting for his touch. His soapy fingers slid easily between her back cheeks. She gave a slight gasp and straightened. His fingers were caught by her butt. He smiled to himself at her muscles. When he looked, he saw her arms and legs were much tighter than he expected. Perhaps she was not the pampered lap dog he expected.

When she didn't move, he curled his longest finger. It pressed

against her tight little asshole. Who would budge first? She didn't let him go, so he wiggled it, pushing against her tight hole. Still, she didn't release him.

He reached a long arm around her hip and pulled her toward his finger. She shivered when it penetrated through her hole. He pulsed it in and out, just enough to give her an idea of what it was all about. She liked the drawing of three men, did she? How close had she looked?

"One of the men fills her pussy," he whispered. He used her bad ear on purpose. "When he pulls back, another fills her ass. Like my finger, only bigger. Deeper."

She shuddered but otherwise didn't move.

"They work together, filling her back and front. Making her so wild she knows nothing else but their touch. The third man plays with her breasts or, if she's really eager, she sucks his cock."

Her chest heaved as she sucked air in and pressed it out.

"A pussy is made for a man's cock. But your ass is special."

He pushed through to the first knuckle. All he needed was an inch to convince her.

"See how much more you feel?"

He twisted his finger, flexing it at the same time. She kept up enough pressure, clenching her butt cheeks to let him know she wanted his right hand there. He moved his left to her pussy. Using the same long, strong finger, he played with her clit. She moaned.

"You want to have two men in you, don't you, Amy?"

He continued to work her, front and back, imitating what he spoke of while she decided whether to answer him or not. He pushed deeper, to his second knuckle. She tilted her ass to give him more access.

"Amy?"

"Yes," she panted. "But it's wrong!"

He rewarded her answer by caressing her clit. She'd come twice already, yet her pussy begged for more.

"Nothing that feels good is wrong, as long as no one is hurt. I

would never let a stranger touch you.” He kissed her ear and nibbled down her throat. She tilted her head to encourage him. “But Nevin is my brother.”

“Nevin?”

“We’re a lot alike, Nev and me. We share a bedroom. Now that I’m married, he’ll feel left out if he’s not invited to join us.”

He moved so the heel of his hand rubbed her clit and his fingers pressed into her pussy. She trembled under his hands. If she hadn’t been holding onto the edge of the tub, she might have collapsed at his feet.

“Nevin is an ass man, and you have one fine ass, Amy.”

He twisted that finger, slowly pulsing in and out. She panted even faster. He sped up both hands. If he hadn’t just come twice, there was no way in hell he could have kept control like this.

“Someday, when you’re ready, I’d like to see you ride my cock. You’ll lean over to take Nevin in your ass.” She moaned as he worked her, front and back. “You’ll be so hot you’ll buck against him, demanding what you want. We’ll make you come hard, then we’ll explode deep inside you, front and back.”

She shook as he pressed deeper, faster. He curled his fingers up against the front of her pussy, searching for that soft, spongy place. When she gasped, he knew he’d found it.

“You want that, Amy? You want to take both of us?” She groaned and shook. “Tell the truth, Amy. Yes or no?”

She threw her head back. “Yes!”

“That’s it, princess.”

He pressed hard against her clit with the heel of his hand and damn near lifted her off her feet as he probed. She convulsed and fell apart in his arms. He couldn’t tell the color of the orgasmic flush that erupted over her breasts. He held her as she shuddered then gently released her to sit in the cool water.

He was breathing damn near as hard as she. If anyone looked at him, they’d be shocked at the shit-eating grin that he knew covered

his face. Hell, Gil would wonder what had happened to turn stone-face Ross into Nevin.

She lay back in the tub, eyes shut, breasts heaving. She was such a tiny thing that she barely took up any space. He gauged the level of water and decided it was close enough. He put his hands under her arms and lifted her to her feet. She gave him a dazed look but managed to stand. He stepped in behind her, sat down, and eased her into his lap.

He congratulated himself on his eye. The water was at least half an inch from overflowing. He tugged her against him. She relaxed, limp as a wet shirt. When he moved his arms to wash his hands, her breasts bobbed in the water. He pressed one underwater and released it. It rose and floated once more. He chuckled.

The tub at home was not much bigger than this one. He'd speak with John Tanner in the morning. He wanted one twice the size, with a drain in the bottom. They were thinking of expanding the house, and a bathroom was something he would insist on. Once he explained to Nevin why, he was sure he'd get two votes.

"Sleep now," murmured Amelia.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her snug. When he was sure she was asleep, he kissed the top of her head. If three explosions hadn't proven to Amelia that she should stay with him, he didn't know what would. He rested his hand on her belly. Had they already created a child? It took Gil and Prue over two years to start Hope. She was sickly, though. Beth's son James was born nine months after they were forced to marry.

He'd forgotten that neither Beth nor Trace chose each other. Looking at them now, with Trace's son James going full speed and Beth working on giving Simon a daughter, no one would know they'd had a rocky start.

But he wasn't like Trace. They both had a few rough years, but Trace didn't have a blood oath hanging over his head. Ross could dream all he liked, but a happy-ever-after like the Elliotts had wasn't

in his cards. He'd do his duty and start a babe with Amelia and enjoy every damn minute of it. That didn't mean he loved her as Trace did Beth.

Once Amelia saw Nevin and he saw her bare ass, the two of them would be thick as thieves. Nev would seduce her with flowers, words, and kisses. He was a smooth talker, something Ross admired but couldn't do. While those two snuggled together, he'd take care of his duty to his tribe.

But first, he had to do his duty to the Clan, and that meant Amelia bringing his son into the world. If he survived killing the three men who stained his soul, maybe Amelia would accept him back. If not, he'd lost nothing.

He stood up and gathered Amelia in his arms. She settled against his chest as if she trusted him with her life. He liked having her there, but he couldn't let her know that. He laid her in the bed and dried her off, then rolled her to the other side of the bed. By the time he was ready to sleep, his side might not be damp.

He stood at the window for a long time, his mind blank.

Chapter Six

Amelia lay on her right side, still half asleep. Parts of her body she'd never known existed ached. They didn't hurt so much as demand she not forget them. Ross had shown her things that, even half asleep, made her blush. Surely, some of what she remembered doing was a dream. No man would share his wife with his brother.

Except Trace Elliott.

Prue had said in pen and ink that Beth shared herself with all three Elliott men. She'd had wild dreams for many nights after receiving that letter. Since she wasn't really sure what one man did with a woman, she was hazy on the idea of three.

Then she found that book. After staring at the pictures until her lamp grew dim, she'd slammed the book shut. She'd wrapped it in a couple of petticoats, locked it in her valise, and gone to bed. Ever since, she'd been travelling and had to sit, fully dressed, on hard benches. When she fell into the hotel bed, she'd barely touched her breast before she fell asleep.

Tonight, Ross had shown her that the dreams she'd thought so wicked were nothing compared to what a determined man could do. She flushed at what he'd done with her. Not only had he made her cry out in bed, but he'd done things with his hands while she stood up in a tub, for goodness' sake! She couldn't remember what they spoke of, only that she wanted whatever he promised. She'd come close to never knowing this pleasure. Not just the touch that made her scream, but the arms now holding her snug against his warm back.

If this is what her sister felt, no wonder Prue didn't want to return East. Her sister might have lived a few lonely years longer if she

moved far from Montana winters, but it wouldn't make up for the glorious but shorter life with her Gillis.

Would Ross care for her as Gillis had Prue? If her husband wanted only her ability to work and produce heirs, perhaps Nevin or Gillis would become a friend to her. She sighed. It wasn't something she would learn tonight or for many weeks.

Giving up on sleeping, she opened her eyes. The moon shone straight in, allowing enough light to see by. Ross mumbled something and pulled her close, his left hand grasping her right breast. He felt solid and secure, a bulkhead against the world.

She looked at the arm holding her. A brown, mostly hairless arm. When she saw his dark skin earlier, she thought it was a trick of the light. The moon shone full on the arm resting against her body. She was white. He was...not.

Why would a Scotsman named Ross MacDougal be dark? He shifted, and the moonlight flooded his body. He was far darker than any tan. She glanced down to confirm he was the same color all over. She could see him taking off his shirt to work, but not his pants. Even the exhausted cock lying against his thigh was dark.

While Prue said Gillis had red hair sprouting from almost everywhere, Ross had very little. Other than his head and under his arms, the only hair she'd noticed was the curls that hid the base of his cock. Dark skin and little body hair.

His mother must be an Indian.

She swallowed as the thought hit her. Sight unseen, she'd married an Indian. She breathed deep in her belly to slow her racing heart. No wonder he'd agreed to meet her in the dark. She glanced over her shoulder. His strong face was handsome with a proud nose and high cheekbones. Both could have come from his Scottish father or Indian mother. He was nothing like her fiancé, the two-legged swine.

But why didn't Prue tell her about Ross? Did they think she would prefer to live as Cousin Oral's servant, facing his cutting tongue, anger, and fists? To live in her own home and see him lord it over

her?

Ross was better than so many men she'd met before her accident or seen on her journey. The marriage contract she signed said "for better or worse." From what she'd seen from the window of the Bride Train, she could do worse. Far, far worse.

She knew he was in the room before she woke from her nap. A vibration surrounded him. It made her skin prickle as if a wild August thunderstorm would soon erupt. She'd never spoken to anyone as rudely as she had to him. She'd even ordered him from her room! Instead of raging and beating her as Father would have, he calmly kept on doing what he wanted. Then he did things with her she hadn't known existed. He made her crave things with an intensity she hoped never faded.

He was her husband, and she would care for him as best she could. God willing, she might have a couple of sons. Maybe then she could believe she had a home that wouldn't be taken from her. But that was years in the future. She would live as she had for so long—one day at a time. But now, she had wonderful nights to look forward to.

Decision made, she exhaled and settled back against her husband. She was almost asleep when his slow breathing changed. She felt his heart pound against her shoulder. He tried to pull back, but she held tight. Her white fingers stood out against his dark arm.

"The moon's out, husband, and I can see as well as you now."

"Then you know I'm a half-breed. My mother is Bannock."

The words, spat out like a curse, erupted from behind her. "Half-breed" was an ugly word. Her children would be browner than she. She would love them no matter what. She said what her father, fiancé, and others had told her for years.

"And I'm an ugly woman."

He suddenly pushed her to her back and stared down. Her heart thudded at the sight. Moonlight brushed against his high cheekbones and strong nose. Both could have come from the Scots side of the

family. The golden-brown skin was from his mother's people.

"You're beautiful in my eyes. No one else matters," he growled.

She reached up her hand to touch his cheek. She knew the fierceness in his expression was to protect her, not attack. The strength of his muscles proved he could do both very well.

"Your father should thank your mother's people for the improvement." She smiled, wanting to banish his scowl. "I expect Gillis burns in the sun. I suspect I will as well if I'm not careful. You, however, don't need to cover yourself for protection. And neither will our children."

"Our children."

She could imagine how people would see his lack of expression as frightening. She knew he used it to hide his feelings. She did the same with her father.

"I signed a contract to marry a MacDougal of the MD ranch. Your signature is also on that paper. If this is a typical small town, everyone knows you are here with me. Though only we know for sure we've, um, consummated our marriage." Heat crept over her chest at the reminder. His lip twitched. His eyes tracked her naked skin.

"The window's open," he said, purring like a well-fed mountain lion. "They know. You screamed my name when you came the first time. And the second."

She fought the urge to throw the covers over her head in embarrassment. She'd worry about facing the town in the morning. Right now, she faced a man who smiled at her with his eyes as well as his mouth. The smile was fierce and full of desire. For her.

"You knew the window was open? You wanted other men to know!"

He got up on his elbow and looked down at her. She finally saw his eyes. She couldn't tell the color, but they seemed dark.

"Are you my wife, Amelia MacDougal, until death do us part? Think hard before you reply. We have a baby to make, and I'm a hard worker. I'll want you in bed, against the kitchen wall, in the meadow,

and anywhere else.”

She shivered at the deep, demanding voice. She would always know where she stood with this man. He wanted her, all right. He challenged her, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. She didn't fool herself to think of love. But she felt wanted in this man's arms.

What she had discovered with Ross was something beyond anything she could imagine. With their bed to look forward to when the sun went down, she could get through anything during the day.

“Yes, Ross MacDougal, I am your wife. But know that I intend to have *you* as well.”

“Saucy wench,” he said. The tension in his body eased. He caressed her breast, causing a different tension to rise in her own body.

“There's one thing you need to know. When I signed that contract, there was nothing in it stating I would obey you.”

“The woman always says ‘love, honor, and obey.’”

“Not this woman.”

He leaned up on an elbow and stared down at her with wide eyes. They grew darker. She swallowed hard when his nostrils flared. Her breasts tingled, the nipples crinkling. Between her legs, moisture spread.

“My wife will obey me. In bed and out.” He said it as if it was one of nature's laws.

“Don't be too sure about that, husband.” She screwed up her face, making a challenging face back at him.

He suddenly laughed. “We'll talk about that later. Right now, I want you to scream my name again.”

She moved so she could see from his face to his sculptured chest and the dark nest between his thighs. As she watched, it stirred to life once more. He licked his index finger and touched the tip of her nipple. A zing shot to her pussy. Her nipple immediately hardened. He blew softly, the air cool against the damp flesh. Both nipples hardened. She felt a rush of heat rise.

“Could we have a marriage ceremony someday? Just something small—”

“Why?” He said it gently.

“I always dreamed of a wedding. We both know we signed a marriage contract, but I’d feel better if I said ‘I do’ in front of a preacher.”

He nodded. “Patsy Tanner warned Gillis you’d want that. She said, ‘Every girl dreams of her wedding day with a new dress, flowers in her hair, and a handsome man at her side.’” His eyes crinkled in a smile. “She says it’s time Tanner’s Ford had a real wedding.”

She released tension that had been winding up since the contract arrived. He gave her a quick kiss on the tip of her nose and then looked away as if thinking.

“Trace and Beth got hitched last year, but that was a quick job in the jail. Neither one was clean or fancy dressed. Nine months later, they had James.” His gaze swept back to her. “Beth says Trace is his father, but the next one will be Simon’s.”

She flushed, not wanting Ross to know Prue had written her about it. “Who is Simon?”

“Trace’s brother. His twin is Jack. All four Elliotts share ownership—and everything else—at the Rocking E Ranch.”

“I thought Beth was the only woman at the ranch. Is Simon married?”

“Sy’s not married. He and Jack share Beth.” He touched her erect nipple. “It’s Sy’s turn to make a baby with her. He wants a girl.”

Reading about it and having Ross tell her were two different things. A rush of heat flowed into her pussy. Did Beth have three men in her at once, like that book?

“This is Montana Territory,” said Ross. He ran a finger around her belly, making it hard for her to hear his words.

“There are hundreds of men for every free woman.” He picked up a lock of her hair and dangled it over her breast, tickling her. “That’s why Trace, Simon, and Jack share Beth. It would be wrong if only

Trace has a woman warming his bed while the others do without. Sharing work and joy keeps the Clan strong.”

“Beth does, um, this, with more than one brother?”

He nodded. “Trace, Simon, and Jack.”

He gently cupped her breast. Her nipples hardened even more. If Ross’s hand made her body crave him again, what would it feel like with more than two hands and one mouth? If Nevin was like Ross, and she found Ross irresistible...

“Do they take turns sleeping with her?”

“Nope.”

He squeezed her nipple between his fingers. She gasped and pressed her legs together.

“I hear they share one very big bed,” he continued. He raised his eyebrows. “The MD homestead was built to the same design as the Rocking E. It has two bedrooms, a small one on the first floor and a big one above.”

She squirmed as he continued to play with her breasts.

“Gillis and Prue shared the small bedroom. Tillie and Auntie sleep there now with Hope and Peter, Tillie’s son. Gillis sleeps in the bunkhouse, where we boys used to live. We’ll be in the big bedroom upstairs.”

Her chest rose and fell quickly as her breathing quickened. Once more, she thought of the drawings with one woman and a couple of men. She licked her lips. Ross’s smile reminded her of a cat. He trailed a fingernail over her from breast to belly. She quivered in automatic response.

“I am the master, Amelia. If I want you, I will take you.”

She saw in his eyes the determination she heard in his voice. She trembled, but in eagerness rather than fright. She knew Ross wouldn’t hurt her. After years of her petty, domineering father, why would this man’s dominant sexual demand make her crave him? Perhaps it was because she knew she would get as much pleasure as he. Ross would push her to do things she’d never do otherwise. As he had this

evening.

"Hard and fast, or slow and easy," Ross continued after a moment. "My choice, my way. When, where, and how I want. It doesn't matter if someone's watching. Do you understand?" He growled the last few words.

She shook her head, wanting him to tell her what she could expect.

"I might see you in the kitchen while you're working," he said with quiet intensity. "You'll be naked under your dress." He held up a finger before she could refuse. "That's the first rule. You will wear only what I allow. No chemise, drawers, corset, or petticoats."

It would be like wearing her nightgown, her skin rubbing against the cotton.

"I'll kiss you, like this." He brought his lips to hers. When she yielded, he slid his tongue in. The skin between her teeth and upper lip was another place where his touch sent her reeling. He pulled back, chest heaving.

"Then I'll kiss your ass or breasts."

Since she lay on her back, he nibbled on her breasts. He caught her nipple between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, sending a message of urgency to her pussy.

"Maybe I'll press your belly to the table, lift your skirts, spread your legs, and take your pussy from behind."

She imagined him doing it, knowing someone could walk in. What would his brothers do?

"Another time, I'll lie you on your back and rip the buttons off your dress. There you'll be, flat on the kitchen table, naked and eager, for anyone to see."

"What if someone came in?"

He shrugged as if it was no matter to him.

"What if I fight you?"

He slowly scanned her hot face, erect nipples, and swollen breasts.

"I'll know you're asking for punishment, so I'll spank you."

“What!” She struggled to move, but he rested his wide chest across her body.

“Just a love tap or two to warm you up. You’ll squeal, knowing my hard cock will soon be fucking you. That’s what loving is called when it’s hard and fast, Amy.”

“What—” She swallowed to clear her throat. “Then what will you do?”

“I’ll fuck you so hard you’ll have to hold onto the table so I don’t drive you right across it. When you come, you’ll scream my name. Everyone who hears will know who pleased you.”

She trembled, wanting it. The danger of being seen, the thrill of being taken by someone who wanted her so bad that he had to have her, now!

“What if Nevin saw us?” She licked her lips, dry from her panting.

“Oh, Nev will see us,” he replied like a lazy cat. “If you’re lying on your back, your breasts might get cold when I lick your pussy. His mouth and hands will warm you up. And when I finish, I’ll ask him to take over. This time, you’ll scream his name.”

Wherever his eyes touched, she felt heat.

“There’s nothing like a well-pleasured woman wanting more,” he whispered. “But I’m not sharing you anytime soon.”

Chapter Seven

Ross held Amelia's right breast, her warm back tight against his front. Spooning, Gillis called it, boasting that it was almost better than sex. He'd laughed at something so absurd. Now, he understood. It felt right to wake this way, his wife trusting him to protect her.

Tonight was the first night he slept with a woman. When he shared the bed of an eager woman, he left her well satisfied. He always left right after, alone. Even when he was deep inside a woman, he never reached out to touch. He'd learned to kiss well and to satisfy women, but all it had meant was a mutual easing of need.

Making love with Amelia MacDougal was a whole different world.

She sighed in her sleep and snuggled closer. She still had a touch of the rose soap she'd used in her bath, but now she wore his scent. Though the bond was invisible, she was forever marked as his. He'd been the first to waken her need and the first to feed it until she erupted.

He gently kissed her hair, careful not to wake her. She murmured something and sighed. Her breath drifted across his hand. She'd marked him, as well. He'd never known love though some had been kind to him. He cared for Gillis and Nevin, of course. He would fight to the death for them.

When her nipple hardened against his palm, he knew she had awakened. She pressed her backside against his rising cock, pretending to stir in her sleep. Testing her now, he relaxed his body, releasing a loud snore. She gave up her pretense of sleep. She pulled away, pushed him to his back, rolled to the edge of the bed, and stood

up. She tried to pull off the loose top sheet, but he held tight. Though her face flamed, she walked across the room and went behind the screened corner. He admired the way her ass cheeks moved with each step.

He heard her use the chamber pot and wash. He waited for her, arms crossed behind his head, cock rising like a mast from his belly. He stared when she emerged from behind the screen. The sun had barely crept over the horizon. At home, he'd already be in the saddle. Maybe she would ride him again.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and stuck her fists on her hips, shoulders back. A breeze slipped in the window and rippled her hair. It flowed behind her like a cape. She glared at him like Brigit, the Celtic warrior goddess.

Her breasts, full and round, easily filled his large hands. He could hold her wide hips as he pounded into her from behind. Those hips would safely carry and deliver the children his Clan needed. Her ass cheeks were plump enough that his fingers would press his mark into her when he stood tall and lifted her onto his cock.

She was his. His to have, to hold, and to share.

Not until his babe was growing in her would Nevin enter her pussy with his cock. That first child, boy or girl, would be his. He would love them all, Hope included, but deep in his heart, he would know something of theirs existed in the world.

Amy stared at his cock as it bounced with his heart beat. She licked her lips, too naïve to have done it on purpose, making him harder. She stalked toward him—there was no other word for it—and knelt on the bed. Still staring at his cock, she crawled over to him. She lay down, facing him, and watched in fascination. A drop of fluid glistened in the light. He groaned.

“Was that a groan of pleasure or pain?”

“I’m so hard I can’t tell.”

She snuggled closer to him, one leg between his, her breasts pressed against his chest. He placed an arm around her, feeling the

tension in her back. She bit her lip, unwilling to meet his eyes. He waited, making slow circles with his hand.

"For years, I had these dreams. Not often, but they were memorable. I'd wake, wanting...something. Tonight, I discovered what that something was."

"Orgasms."

She flushed. "Not just that. When I woke with you at my back, your arm holding me, protecting me, I realized I'd never felt so wanted." She concentrated on a design she drew on his chest with her finger. "If we hadn't found each other, I'd never know what I'd missed." She finally looked at him. "I'm sure Nevin is a nice man, but I'm glad I married you."

She laid her head on his chest. He heard soft sniffles. Not knowing what to do but not wanting to upset her, he did nothing. When a hot tear dropped on his chest, he wrapped both arms around her and held her tight.

He'd faced dangerous men, hungry catamounts, and bears, and never been afraid. But he knew the acrid taste rising from his belly was fear. Having found a woman who cared about him, what would he do if he lost her?

The good folks of Tanner's Ford called him a savage. They thought him illiterate, dumb, stupid, and eager to kill with the knives they knew he carried. He didn't care. What the townies thought of him didn't affect anyone else. Though he swore he wouldn't change, it was different now. He had a wife to protect. She was almost a foot shorter and had none of his strength. She was a pampered city woman with no mountain survival skills though she could learn those in time.

He cursed Gillis, only now realizing the gift of a wife was a double-edged knife. She not only stopped him from exacting vengeance, she was his Achilles heel. When they left their room, her eyes would shine with knowledge of what she'd learned during the night. Not that they could hide anything after leaving the window open.

She was his wife and belonged to him. Whether he loved her or not, she'd be an easy target to get at him. All he could do was make sure everyone knew the repercussions. Even an unpleasant glance in her direction would bring a swift, personal response.

He'd not let her know of his protection, of course. He didn't know much about women, but strong ones like Miss Lily, Sophie McLeod, and Patsy Tanner did not take kindly to a man's protection. They believed they could take care of themselves. He let them think so while sending the message that they were to be left alone.

Sophie had some trouble when Orville Rivers first arrived, but Ross suggested the mayor not accost her again. No threats but a strong suggestion it would be better for the Mayor's health if he treated Sophie as a businesswoman. He'd kept his eye on Rivers every since. Something about the man was familiar and not in a good way. He'd met enough two-legged beasts to recognize one.

He'd make sure no one trifled with Amy. He would protect her as the mother of MacDougal heirs and part of the MD Ranch. He'd enjoy her body and share it with Nevin. When Gillis recovered, he would be invited as well. Surely, if a man loved a woman, he could love her sister as well?

That should give Amelia enough open love to keep her satisfied.

Unfortunately, it was too late for him.

Chapter Eight

"You'd better stop looking at me like that, Mrs. MacDougal." He purred the words. "I'm too hungry to spread you on that bed and do what you're thinking about."

His nostrils flared and golden hazel eyes darkened in promise. He'd tied his long, silky hair back with a leather thong. Instead of a tie, another thong draped around his neck. It was held together with a huge lump of—

"Is that a gold nugget?" She pointed at his throat.

He nodded.

"Aren't you afraid someone will try to take it?"

He blinked, stared for a moment, then leaned back his head and laughed, deep and slow. He shook his head at her, still smiling. "Let them try."

He actually looked eager, as if having someone attack him before breakfast was the perfect start to a wonderful day. She remembered the men, women, and children she'd consoled and bandaged, victims of a man's anger.

"I abhor violence." She held herself as tall as possible and set her shoulders. It was the first morning of their marriage, and she had to make this clear. "Violence is evil. I do not want my husband to be involved in such acts."

His only visible movement was to raise one eyebrow, but everything changed. From the laughing, relaxed man of a moment ago, he seemed to turn to stone. She swallowed. If the chair wasn't behind her she'd have stepped back. Was this the man the townspeople feared? If she saw him, even on the street on a sunny

Sunday morning, she'd pull herself into a doorway as well. But he'd taught her body pleasure greater than anything she could have imagined.

"Things are different out here." He spoke so slow and deep it sounded like a growl. "I will protect what's mine. Any man comes near you, he'd better leave town before I find him."

He wore a gun on his hip like almost every man she'd seen in the last week. And there were the knives. He was just another man posturing to prove who was top dog. She would not be part of that. No one should be hurt because of his male need to strut around like a rooster!

"I will not have someone hurt because they smiled at me and you got jealous."

"You don't have a choice."

He growled his order like a feral dog. A very big, very dangerous one who could snap her neck with one hand. She couldn't stop the tremble that hit as they stared at each other. He looked down her body as if assessing her, wondering how far she would go and what he would do about it.

The longer she stared, the more intense his look. His nostrils flared like a bull about to charge. She swallowed. This was not something she could win. Her husband was far too strong in body and character for her wishes to have any sway over him. The beaten women told her to let the man win and avoid being beaten.

One slap of his hand to her head and she'd be knocked to the ground or into a wall. She would not fight Ross. Not today. But she would not go along with him, either. A man who would attack another man could do the same to a woman or child when drunk or angry.

Last night was magic. She'd never forget it. A different man stood in front of her now. This one she could never love. She dropped her eyes and turned away. She pulled at the thick ribbon and removed the pretty gray bonnet that matched her dress. She set it on the table and walked over to the padded chair. She'd left a book beside it on the

table. She picked up the book, sat down, and began reading. She couldn't see a thing through the tears welling in her eyes, but she'd not give him the satisfaction of knowing that.

"What are you doing?"

Unlike her, his voice was calm and controlled. Obviously, his heart wasn't pounding hard enough to escape the cage of her ribs. A cage. That was what she would have to live in. She'd switched one house for another, both run by opinionated, arrogant, violent men. Would Ross throw her out as her father had if her first child was a daughter?

"Reading."

Her throat was so tight she almost squeaked the word. She opened her mouth to breath, unable to get enough air otherwise.

"Aren't you hungry?"

She shook her head. She pressed her right hand tight in a fist against her heart, but it didn't slow. She closed her eyes, knowing she must calm down or risk a terrible headache. Soft footsteps approached. She opened her eyes just enough to see his boots a few feet in front of her. He moved away for a moment and then set a chair down in front of her, backward. He threw a long leg over it and sat as if he was on a horse. He leaned his arms on the back and stared at her.

She ignored him. After a few minutes of complete stillness and silence from him, she managed to get herself under control. She turned the page of her book, still unable to read.

"Why?"

She looked up at the sudden question. This close, she could see the individual gold flecks that speckled his eyes. Lines radiated out, likely from squinting into the sun. She doubted it was from too much smiling. His stare was so intense she had to look down.

"You afraid of being seen with me?"

He'd whispered the words, but she'd heard clearly, though she didn't understand what he meant. This time, when she looked into his eyes, she saw a flash of pain and longing. It was gone when he

blinked, but she knew it was still there, hiding.

She let out a shuddering breath. She was scared and upset about facing the world without her veil and gloves. Ross was not an emotionless beast like those she'd seen beating their wives and children. He would have saved those children and been burnt just like she had.

Ross wasn't a vicious brute, and he wasn't her father. When he woke her, she'd railed at him, ordering him from his own bedroom on his wedding night. Worse, she called him a vicious killer. He might have killed, but he liked to play with babies. Like her, he had scars inside and out. He used his strength and power to keep people away. She used her burns.

She looked away. A line of heat crept up her chest to her face. The considerate, caring man she spent the night with would never attack her. She'd tarred him with a black brush from her past. But she still couldn't let him hurt anyone because of what she might innocently do. She pressed her lips tightly together. He sighed and then stood up. She heard him move the chair, and then he gently tugged her book out of her hand.

"I was reading that," she choked out.

"Useful skill, reading upside down."

He set her book back on the table and then swooped her in his arms. He sat on her chair with her in his lap. She looked across the room instead of at him. His chest warmed her left arm where it rested against him. His thighs warmed her bottom, reminding her what tonight might bring. Unless this was a major fight. Then she might sleep alone.

"Talk to me, Amy."

She tried to wait him out, but the man had the patience of her old neighbor's hunting cat. The scruffy tom would wait in the weeds, perfectly still, until an unwary rat would run past. She was more like a mouse.

"Go eat," she said. "When it's time to leave town, I'll come down

to the wagon with you. I'll wait here until then."

"Why?"

"Because I don't wish to go outside."

He snorted at her answer. "That's not what you said earlier."

"That was before I realized you might kill someone because of me." She paused, but he said nothing. "If I smile at the simple joy of walking outdoors, you might see a man smile back. You'll get jealous and get into a fight. If you hurt him, you'll go to jail. They'll hang you."

He shook his head. "Not gonna happen."

"You won't get jealous of me smiling at strange men?"

Though his expression didn't really change, she was learning to read him. When gold warmed his eyes and he stared at her mouth or lower, she understood what he was thinking. Her nipples responded immediately.

"You'll be too satisfied to smile at anyone else," he murmured.

She pouted at his smirk of satisfaction when he saw her nipples.

"Why did you ask if I was afraid to be seen with you?" Barely a moment passed before brown covered the gold flecks in his eyes. They were truly the mirror of his soul, telling her more about him than the rest of his body. "You're a very attractive man. I'm proud to have a husband who speaks so well and has excellent manners."

"Very few people know that."

"Why?" This time, she said the word.

"I have my reasons."

She stared, waiting him out. The turnaround gave her a sense of satisfaction, even a touch of control. He finally sighed, but she knew he'd allowed her to win. This man didn't give in. It took lots of her usually nonexistent patience, but she managed to sit quiet and almost still during the many minutes it took him to begin speaking.

"Nevin and I came home from Texas five years ago on a cattle drive. When we rode into town, we'd been riding hard for months. We were dirty, hungry, and tired to our bones, but we were finally

home. We went into Baldy's Saloon for a celebratory drink. A few miners objected to him serving 'dirty savages.' We were not longer boys but not yet men, skinny and ragged. We fought off six of them until Sheriff Chambers broke up the fight." He rubbed his jaw, smiling slightly.

"Were you hurt? What about them?"

"A couple broke bones. Four or five needed stitches. Nev and I had sore ribs and jaws along with black eyes for a while." He shrugged as if it was nothing. "Just another Saturday night. After that, they called us savages, maybe because two of us took down six of them." He looked away. "I've seen white men do things far more savage. If they want to believe I'm eager to kill, so be it. It helps keep the MD safe."

Amelia held still until his breathing slowed.

"Have you killed anyone?" She whispered the words, praying the answer would be "no."

"A few who needed it." He gently brought her chin to face him. "I need to kill three men. They will die by my hand."

"Just three? You're not going to change your mind and kill a dozen or more?" She pressed her fingers over her mouth. Father would slam her against the wall when she used sarcasm. He said it was an affront to his authority.

Ross looked deep into her eyes. His were now mostly dull brown with a few brassy flecks. No gold.

"This I do not joke about. They will face me, and they will die. It is a debt of honor."

"You won't kill anyone else?"

He smiled like a coyote.

"Because they think I'll kill without a thought, I won't have to. No one touches me or mine." He released her chin and let his hand drop to her breasts. "Smile all you like, Amelia MacDougal. No one will dare behave improperly to my wife."

Her mind went blank at his touch. She nudged his arm away so

she could think. "If everyone is afraid of you, will I be able to make friends?"

"I'll introduce you to the few who know me well. I can trust them."

"Will they pity me for marrying you, like the hotel clerk?"

A slow, sensual smile appeared. He guided her head to his, first brushing his lips against her then pressing her close for more. He molded her breasts as his kiss deepened. Under her bottom, she felt his cock struggle to rise. He pulled back, panting. This smile was full of wicked promise.

"With you looking like that, when we walk downstairs, no one will pity you."

"Why?"

He easily stood up, holding her in his arms.

"Because you look thoroughly ravished and wanting more."

Chapter Nine

Ross heard the whispers from down the dark hallway as soon as he closed the door of their suite behind them. Maurice Lumley must have spread the word that Ross MacDougal had done something unforgivable. It was bad enough that Trace scooped Beth out of jail and into his marriage bed before Big Joe could take her. Ross married Amelia Smathers before she even stepped on the Bride Train to head West.

If one of the men at the Circle C or Double Diamond had done so, it would bring grumbles and a few fights. But “that half-breed Scot mudsill” had euchred them all. Being a rich half-breed was bad enough. What made it inexcusable was that they were afraid of him. The more they feared him, the more they hated him for making them feel inferior.

He gave Amy a quick wink when her skirts finally touched the main floor. Sophie or one of her girls had done a bang-up job smoothing the wrinkles on her dress. She looked neat and tidy, even prim, until you saw the twinkle in her eyes and the blush on her cheeks.

They strolled down the center hall to the dining room. Sophie tilted her head toward his usual table in the corner. This time, it had a jelly jar with flowers. By the time they got to the table, the room was quiet except for the expected loud whispers.

“Who in tarnation’s that?”

“Looks like the MacDougal Devil, only he’s wearing white man’s clothes.”

Ross seated Amy and settled himself back against the wall as

always. He ignored the hostile glares as well as the furtive glances both at himself and at Amy. The rumble grew louder.

"Let's get this over," he said. He stood up, pushing his chair back with a screech. The room went still.

"I'm Ross MacDougal of the MD Connected. This is my wife."

He held out his hand. Following his lead, she took it. He helped her to her feet. She'd arranged her hair to cover her misshapen ear, but the mottling on her cheek was visible. She held her shoulders back and head high as if she defiantly faced a firing squad.

"Mrs. MacDougal will be treated with respect. Do you understand?"

The few men who met his eyes as he scanned the room nodded. They might not respect him as a person, but they knew what he could do to them. As for the others, he'd stated his claim.

A chair scraped back, the sound grating against his ears. He flexed his free arm to shoot a knife free in anticipation of problems. Luke Frost of the Circle C stood up.

"Join me in congratulating Mr. and Mrs. Ross MacDougal. It must be a comfort to Gillis to know little Hope will have her aunt's love if she cannot have her mother." Luke picked up his cup of coffee. "A toast, gentlemen." He raised his cup and turned around the room. "Mr. and Mrs. MacDougal."

"MacDougal," called out Gabe, then Oscar, Luke's partners in the Circle C. They stood and raised their cups.

"I say, congratulations, old man," called out a deep voice in a strong English accent.

All three men at that table grabbed and rocked the chair backs of the men next to them as they stood. Those men grumbled but did the same until everyone was standing with cups raised. Sour faces proved many were doing it grudgingly, but Western hospitality to ladies was strong in Sophie McLeod's dining room. The nearest decent food was over a hundred miles away, and no one wanted to get tossed out for manners unbecoming to a gentleman.

Ross held Amelia's hand and nodded as she curtsied her thanks to each corner of the room. Her color was high as she smiled. He noticed she looked at the place where the wall joined the ceiling and no lower. He gave the quiet room another glare before seating Amelia.

"If you want to be fed, you'll sit so Nettie and Elsbeth can get through," called Sophie from the doorway to the kitchen. In a few moments, the only sound was hungry men devouring their food.

Amelia was almost as eager. Ross ate slowly, watching her enjoy herself. His tiny wife cleaned her plate quickly and efficiently. She used excellent manners, but her smaller portion was gone before he finished.

"Oh, my, that pie was so good!"

"Auntie's venison pie is better," said Ross. "Sophie's a good cook, but Auntie knows which plants add more flavor."

She set her knife and fork together across her plate. Most of the men in the room used spoons and their belt knives, but Sophie had set the table specially for them. He swallowed the last bite and settled back. After a long night discovering his wife and a decent dinner, he was ready for a stroll around town before loading up the wagon and driving home. He wanted to stake his claim in their bedroom.

"Prue did mention that Gillis brought in an Indian woman to do most of the work."

"He didn't bring Auntie. She came on her own when she heard Prue was sick."

"After Hope was born, Auntie arranged for Tillie Conacher to care for the baby. Tillie's husband comes from a Clan aligned to the MacDougals. Their son Peter is a few weeks older than Hope. Tillie has lots of milk for both babies. By the time her husband gets back from his trapping route, Hope should be weaned."

Amelia pleated the edge of the tablecloth, another concession from Sophie for their wedding dinner. She pursed her lips and blinked quicker than normal. He waited for her to say what was obviously on her mind.

"If you have someone to run the house and another woman to take care of Hope, you really don't need me. Other than as a bed partner and brood mare, that is." She flashed her eyes once at him then went back to wrinkling the carefully ironed linen.

Brood mare? She was right on that point, but even without much knowledge of women, he knew telling her so was not a good idea. If, that was, he wanted to repeat last night's sport. Gil said that life was easier if women didn't know the whole, exact truth. But if he used those tricks, he wouldn't be able to complain if she did the same.

In this, he trusted Trace's advice more. When he told Trace he'd be marrying Amelia rather than Nevin, Trace sat him down and told him a wife has to believe she's appreciated for herself. She wasn't a hired hand with bed benefits. A wife wants to be special to her men, to feel like no one else could do what she did.

Amelia had strong opinions, as did Trace's wife. It might take a bit for her to get used to him and express them as strongly as Beth, but it would come. Beth was a vocal woman, both in and out of bed.

When he rode over to tell the Elliott boys about the change in plans regarding Amelia, he'd heard shrieking from the barn. Simon, already sampling the honeycomb Ross brought as a present, ignored the noise. A few minutes later, Trace strolled out, whistling while he tucked in his shirt. Beth, still putting her hair back up, followed a few steps behind. When she saw him watching, she flushed bright red. She swept past with her head high and nipples jutting against her blouse.

Simon's nostrils flared like their prize bull. He looked at his hand, covered with honey, then at Beth's ass. He winked at Ross and followed Beth into the house. Ross heard Beth complain about Simon getting her face all sticky with honey kisses and protesting about the kitchen table being covered with flour. Simon suggested she either strip naked or lift her skirts and bend over said table if she wanted to keep her dress clean. Ross's cock hardened like a fence post, his pants tenting.

Trace told him to play his cards right and he'd have the same.

That's when he told Ross a few things about mutual marriage to a demanding woman. Beth's moans and her second scream confirmed she was as loud as Amelia when she came.

If he wanted that, and he damned well did, he had to tell Amy that she was the one he desired. No matter that he was forced into the marriage, no one else would do for him. Whether it was true or not didn't matter. When he told her, he would strip her naked and prove it. First, he had to get his cock under control so he could leave the room without every man in the room knowing what he was thinking.

"I need you, Amelia MacDougal," he said quietly. "We need you. Gil, Nev, me, and Hope. You'll mean different things to each of us, but you're now part of our family. In a few days, we'll wonder how we got along without you." He leaned closer and lowered his voice even more. "And it's not just because I want to spread you wide and make you scream my name when you come."

Dang, when she blushed like that, he could almost see her flushed, pink breasts, hard and full, waiting for his hands and mouth. Who would notice his hard cock when every damn man would be the same, looking at his very desirable wife with her "well-bedded but wanting more" expression?

"It takes a lot of work to feed three men and run a home, Amy. Auntie cooks and cleans, but she's older than my mother," he said. "She's stubborn and won't admit it, but she'll be grateful when you take over."

Instead of looking pleased, Amelia went back to wrecking Sophie's ironing.

"Would she be willing to stay for a while, to show me how to do things?"

"With a baby to rock and more coming, you couldn't get rid of her if you wanted to. We're building her a small cottage back in the trees. She'll have her independence, and"—he winked and dropped his voice, not that anyone could hear over the noise around them—"we'll have our privacy."

He looked at her breasts, still full and erect. He would keep her on the edge all day. When they got home, she'd be so horny one touch of his tongue on her hot, red clit would make her come. He'd better have his cock free before he touched her because he wouldn't last long, either. Color rose in her cheeks. She knew what he was thinking and wanted it as well

"Are you laughing at me?"

He blinked, realizing he must have let a smile slip out. A touch of a pout appeared on her lips. If they were alone, he'd nibble it.

"Mr. MacDougal, I asked you a question."

Now, she was getting huffy. Good. He'd rather have her feisty than subdued. One showed passion, the other, disinterest.

"Auntie will be happy working in the sun or by the fire while she watches our babies play."

"Babies?" She gulped, her flush fading.

He leaned across the table and took her hand. "You might already be carrying our son, Mrs. MacDougal. And no, I wasn't laughing at you. I was thinking of what I'm going to do as soon as I get you alone."

She blushed bright pink again but didn't pull her hand away. He lifted it to his lips, released her, and then stood up. He pulled out her chair. With trembling hands, she gathered her reticule and stood, still pink. He knew how far down her flush went. While the color didn't go farther than her breasts, her pussy lips would swell, red and plump. He put his arm around her, placing her in front of him as he escorted her from the room.

They'd barely been dressed an hour, and already his cock was hard, demanding to plow her flesh once more. He looked over her shoulder and down. Yep, her breasts were still as hard as his cock, her nipples pushing against the soft cotton. Every man who saw her would know Ross MacDougal was the cause.

He gritted his jaw to stop himself from telling them to either drop their eyes or look his wife in the face. He couldn't really blame them

for reacting when a lovely, aroused woman walked past. Most of them had gone without a woman a long time. From the pained and longing expressions he passed, Amelia had roused quite a few cocks other than his. But only he would get to pleasure her.

Amelia wouldn't be getting much sleep again tonight.

Chapter Ten

When they stepped on the boardwalk, Amelia placed her hand on his arm. He felt branded. By her action, she declared to the world she belonged to him. He slid his brown hand on top of her white one. He stared at it for a few seconds. He'd forgotten about their color difference. Did he need any more proof of how she affected him?

How would others think? The banker's wife would make sure she knew they considered her worse than Miss Lily's gals. The only women he knew, other than Beth, had businesses to run. They would appreciate Amelia's patronage.

He decided to introduce her to all the shopkeepers. Mrs. Jennet looked down her huge nose at them as well. He rarely went near the shops. This would be a good opportunity to show them he could be civil. The MD and Rocking R spent a lot of money in town. An extra touch of manners today, and the shopkeepers would treat Amelia right.

He turned to his left, past the assay office, bank, and the Jennet house. George Byers, owner of the chemist, dentistry, and barber shop, gave her a peppermint candy. She laughed and popped it in her mouth immediately. She smiled shyly when Dieter Arnott insisted on sending some of his smoked pork sausage to the hotel for them to bring home.

Stumpy was in the back when they stopped at the livery stable, but Rod Venner, the saddler, was there. Ross ordered sturdy leather custom boots for Amelia from him. He had to bite his cheek when the man took her stocking-clad foot in his hands to measure her. Next door, she kissed Smitty's cheek when he insisted she take the iron

trivet she'd admired. The usually stern blacksmith held his iron poker like a sword and grinned like a child with a licorice stick.

He introduced Amelia to Patsy Tanner, who was busy unloading. They made a promise to chat the next time in town and wandered back past the hotel. Ross waited patiently while Nora Dawes, the owner of a dress and millinery shop, enthused over Amelia's gray bonnet. When she came out of the shop, she had a new ribbon, one that brought out the blue of her now-sparkling eyes.

He had one more stop. Though every woman who worked with Lily wanted to be there, the woman did run a house of prostitution. Gillis would rage, but he had to introduce Amelia to one of his best friends.

* * * *

"Ross MacDougal, how dare you bring your pretty little wife to my establishment. In broad daylight through the front door!"

Amelia turned from admiring the tastefully decorated parlor to see a furious woman sweeping toward them. Though her tiny, buttoned-up shoes had heels, she was still shorter than Amelia. The finger she shook at Ross was equally small, yet her attitude was more than full size. Ross pressed his hand against Amelia's back, urging her forward.

"I wanted you to meet my wife. Amelia, Miss Lily is a good friend."

"How do you do, Miss Lily. My sister, Prudence, wrote me that you had excellent taste. She enjoyed adding her lace to the fancy nightgowns you ordered."

"Prudence tatted better lace than anything I could order from Europe," said Miss Lily. Ross grunted when she poked him in the belly. She had to raise her hand to do so. "You realize you just ruined your wife's reputation by bringing her here?"

"Amelia received a number of welcome-to-Tanner's Ford gifts,"

replied Ross. "We used the front door because we're not hiding anything. You don't receive visitors in the afternoon, and anyone who knows me won't care. The rest will condemn her for marrying me no matter how pure she is."

Lily sighed. "So true. But we'd better move to my private parlor." She raised a manicured eyebrow at Ross and then turned to Amelia with a wide smile. "Rosa, my cook, said the butcher's boy told her the girls in the cribs behind Baldy's Saloon are having a busy afternoon. Since we all contribute to the Bride Train expenses, I'm pleased we are getting a return on our investment." She winked, still smiling. "I hear you almost beat Trace's wedding night record."

Fire raced through Amelia from her toes to the top of her head. Her knees wobbled for a moment. Ross put his arm around her waist, but she poked him with her elbow. "Does everyone know what we did last night?"

"Not the details, of course," said Lily.

"Anyone who knows me—"

"Won't care," choked Amelia, finishing Ross's sentence. It didn't matter. She cared. The worst was that knowing people had heard their lovemaking made her want to do it again.

Lily led the way out of the room and down a corridor covered with a red Turkey carpet. She turned left into a bright room papered in yellow and gestured for Amelia to sit. Green plants covered a table set near the window. A pigeonhole desk, closed and locked, suggested Miss Lily used this room as her office. She also had an upholstered settee and a few matching Queen Anne chairs. Amelia chose a chair, smiling when her heels actually touched the floor.

"Tea?"

"We beat Trace's record. My wife's screams were muffled a few times," declared Ross. He waited behind the biggest chair for the ladies to sit.

Amelia flushed. "That would be lovely," she managed to murmur.

Lily daintily settled beside Amelia and arranged her skirts. "May I

call you Amelia?"

"Of course." If Lily could act as if this was a daily occurrence, so could she.

"Ross, please ask Rosa to bring tea. She made some of those sugar doughnuts you like so much."

Ross narrowed his eyes at Lily. She fluttered her eyelashes back at him. "I don't know if I should leave the two of you alone together," he said.

"You know I think of you boys as nephews, just like the Elliotts. I want what's best for you."

"We don't agree on what is best for me," he growled.

Amelia looked from one stubborn face to the other. Lily pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and waved him away with it.

"Fine, we'll discuss lace while you're in the kitchen." She drew her handkerchief across her palm. "I treasure the lace your sister made for me. Do you tat as well?"

Amelia shook her head. The door had barely closed when Lily held up her hand.

"There. We spoke of lace." She tilted her head and gave Amelia a shrewd look. "You don't object to your husband's color, or that a madam is a friend of his?"

"After the way people treated me because of my burns, I try not to judge people by what they look like or what they do. From what I've seen, my husband is a good man. As to the business you run, if my father had thrown me out after I recovered from my burns, I don't know what I would have done to stay alive."

"Why would your father do that?"

"He had plans for both Prudence and myself to marry to improve his business. Prue ran away from home and married a Highland Scot. I became too ugly for anyone of substance to consider marrying. He threatened to throw me out many times, but I managed his home well at little cost to him."

"You were useful, so he kept you," guessed Lily.

“Yes. I never went out in society, so I didn’t need expensive clothing. Father recently passed, leaving everything to my cousin.”

“Is that why you rode the Bride Train, to get a home of your own?”

Amelia nodded. She glanced toward the door and lowered her voice. “I took everything I wanted from my mother’s side of the family. I packed it up and had it shipped here by train.” She frowned and leaned forward. “Do you think Ross will be angry? I paid for everything.”

“What is it you paid for that would make your husband angry?”

She gasped and turned to the open door. Ross waited, expression blank, one hand still on the knob.

“Get yer corpse outter the way, Ross MacDougal, or I’ll ram right through that fancy, black suit yer wearin’.”

The woman with a deep voice must have jabbed him with the tray he carried, as he grunted and moved aside. She wore a gray work dress and white apron. An old-fashioned white mob cap was pinned to the braids wrapped in a crown around her head. She set the tray on the low table in front of them and began setting out cups, saucers, and spoons. She moved the plate of sugared doughnuts, a pyramid with a missing top, in front of Lily. Amelia looked closely at Ross. Sure enough, his upper lip had a suspicious sparkle to it.

“Amelia, this is my wonderful cook. Rosa, Amelia married Ross MacDougal.”

Rosa stood up. She was tall as well as large, her body suiting the deep voice. She curled her thick fingers into fists and set them on ample hips as she stared at Amelia from bonnet to boots.

“You good enough for Mr. Ross?”

“I don’t know,” replied Amelia. “I just met him. I wish to raise my sister’s child and have children of my own. My sister said I would have a comfortable home here. For that, I will do whatever necessary to care for my husband and his family.”

“You’ll do for his family?”

“Yes. I understand his aunt lives with them, as well as his brother Nevin and, of course, Gillis and Hope.” She swallowed at the intense stare, thinking she’d never come up to this capable woman’s standards. “I plan to ask Ross’s aunt to teach me.” The woman gave a barely perceptible nod. “Ross said you’re an excellent cook and household manager. Perhaps you might be willing to guide me. Only if it is convenient for you, of course.”

Rosa snorted and turned to Ross. He shrugged.

“I realize you must be busy, but I’ve heard how wonderful a cook you are. When I was in Virginia City, I overheard two gentlemen complimenting the food at Miss Lily’s Parlor. I recognized the name from my sister’s letters, but couldn’t remember where. I asked the gentleman if he meant the one in Tanner’s Ford, as I was travelling there. He smiled and asked my name.”

“Oh, Lord,” muttered Ross. He winced and scratched his cheek. “Did you tell them?”

“I didn’t know them, so I just said ‘Amelia.’ He nudged his friend and asked if I could ride double. I’ve seen two people riding a horse that way, so I replied that it looked uncomfortable, but I’d try it as long as someone held onto me so I wouldn’t fall off—”

Rosa’s deep laugh covered Ross’s choked groan.

“You are delightful, exactly what Ross needs to shake him up,” said Lily. Her smile for Ross was like that of a proud aunt. “I’ll let you know if anyone asks for you.” She laughed at Ross’s thunderous expression. “I’ll let you explain to Amelia why we’re laughing. Or should I ask Nevin to tell her?”

“I will tell my wife what she needs to know,” he growled. He gestured at the window, where clouds now obscured the sun. “We’d better get your trunks home before it rains. You can have tea with Lily another time.”

“Yes, do come back again. I’ll answer all your questions.”

Amelia rose to her feet along with Lily. Ross stomped to the door, obviously impatient to get moving.

"If you're in such a darn hurry, Ross MacDougal, I'll give these to someone else. The Doc is always hangin' around. He'll eat them."

Rosa picked up the untouched tray and swept out the door. Ross grabbed a handful of doughnuts as she passed. Since her hands were full of the heavy tray, all she could do was glare up at him. Amelia picked up a feeling this was an ongoing battle between them.

"Remember, I know a lot about life. Any question you like, no matter how embarrassing, you come here for an answer." Lily winked and smiled.

"Why did the men ask if I could ride a horse with another person?"

"He was asking if you were willing to ride one man while another rode you."

"Oh, like—"

"Amelia, not another word!"

Ross stomped back into the room. He took her elbow a little less gently than usual and propelled her out in front of him. She managed to peek around his wide chest. Miss Lily, smiling broadly, waved goodbye. She mouthed the words "next time" and imitated drinking tea before Amelia lost sight of her.

Chapter Eleven

Ross sighed into the fragrant evening air. He had his left arm around Amelia, sleeping against him. Raven, riding on his perch to the right, looked over and crooned. The horses, used to the birds, labored up the track toward home. The rain had held off, but thick clouds obscured the moon.

“You’re right, my friend,” said Ross to his feathered companion. “She’ll be a good mate, but settling her into her new nest might take some doing. I’ll soon have her brooding a nestling. That should help.”

He now understood why Gillis said not to introduce Amelia to Lily for a few weeks. It had nothing to do with Amelia’s reputation and everything to do with what the women could get up to behind his back.

Women!

Since Amelia fell asleep, he’d been trying to figure out how to convince her to put everything of hers into the bunkhouse. He liked his home the way it was. Plain and empty.

But it wasn’t his home.

His parents took almost everything with them when they moved to Texas five years earlier. Bachelors didn’t care as long as they had a decent bed and something to sit on and eat off. They put their efforts into the rest of the ranch.

Prue had added female touches such as lace, her fabric pictures, and the like. Beth had taken those for safekeeping until Gillis could look at them without grief.

Considering how comfortable he felt when he visited Lily and how well Amelia fit into the private room, perhaps it would be good

to have more comfortable things. The rocking chair Gillis bought Prue for their wedding present was in constant use. With three women around, at least for now, perhaps he should make one for Amy. He wanted her to feed his baby in a chair he made with his own hands. He'd make it small, just for her.

Every time he thought about Amelia he got frustrated—either horny or angry.

Wait until his brothers heard about Amy's conversation in Virginia City. She'd as much as told them she worked in one of the highest class establishments for working girls west of the Missouri. To top it off, she was willing to take on two men at once. As long as someone held on so she wouldn't fall off, of course!

When he chuckled at her naiveté, his raven joined in.

Maybe he'd better wait to tell them until Amy understood exactly what it meant. He'd let her ride him while Nev entered her from behind. Nev would hold on tight, but he was big enough that there was no way she'd fall off his cock.

Just thinking about it caused him to swell. To heck with emptying the wagon tonight. He'd park it in the barn in case it rained, and he'd unload it in the morning. He needed to keep his strength for his wife.

Amelia's loose hair drifted in the evening breeze. Though she complained, he removed her hat and released her hair as soon as they were out of town. She sighed and snuggled lower, pushing out her ass. She finally settled with her face in his lap, her left arm resting on his thigh. Should he wake her or not? Her fingers were too near his cock to let him ignore it but too far away for her to grab on.

A horse nickered ahead. The two horses pulling the wagon moved a little faster, as eager to get home to their food as he was to his bed.

Their bed.

Though it was dark, a lantern helped him recognize the large shape waiting for them in the yard. For once, Gillis stood still. Since Prue died, the man spent all hours chopping, sawing, digging, cutting—anything to use his muscles and tire him out so he could

sleep for a couple of hours.

“She look like Prue?”

“A bit,” replied Ross. “Brown hair, smoky blue eyes, small nose. She’s shorter with wider hips and more flesh.”

“Hand her down to me.”

Gillis hooked the lantern on the wagon and raised his arms. Ross reluctantly handed Amy over. She murmured something but didn’t wake. Ross scrambled down and over to his brother.

“Good,” said Gillis, staring at Amelia’s face. “The lass must be like her mother’s side of the family. I dinna know what I’d do if she was like Prue.” He let Ross take her back and then grasped the nearest horse’s halter. He turned his back and waved them away. “Go put a son in her belly, lad.”

“Are we home?” Amelia’s eyes were barely open. “I need the necessary.”

Ross was already walking toward the privy. After a quick visit, he insisted on carrying her to the house. Auntie had left a lamp burning on the kitchen table for them. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. Trace told him women liked the tradition of getting carried into the home. Ross figured it was a man’s way of making sure his wife didn’t dawdle on the way to their bedroom. He carried her through the kitchen and up the stairs, her long hair dangling.

“Welcome home.”

He set her down just inside their room. He would have to thank Tillie for her efforts. A lamp burned on the corner table. A flowered ewer and basin waited beside a folded towel topped with a small bar of soap. He sniffed, inhaling the relaxing scent of sage. Auntie would have smudged the room to clear out any lingering memories. She’d done the entire house when she arrived, but he welcomed her extra effort. All he wanted in this room was good memories, made from this night on.

“That’s a big bed.”

“Nevin must have lashed both of ours together so we’d have lots

of room to play.”

He reached around her waist and began unbuttoning her dress. He hadn't said a word when she dressed that morning, just watched as she put on layer after layer. No more. Starting tomorrow, she wouldn't have to perspire from all that clothing. Ross felt her resistance, subtle but there. She hadn't been like this after their first time together. He tugged her dress from her fingers. Her corset and both petticoats followed.

Ross would marry anyone, claim anything as his child, if it meant Fin and Hugh didn't inherit the MD. He tried not to hold anything against Gillis's mother, but if she hadn't doted on her first two sons so much, maybe they wouldn't have made his life so miserable. Yet, without everything he'd gone through, he wouldn't be the capable man he was.

Amy sighed as she looked out the window. The moon highlighted her pale skin, so unlike his. He shucked off everything but his pants. His cock strained hard against his buttons. He winced then stripped. Naked, he walked over to her. When he placed his hands on her hips, she leaned back against his chest. There was no way she could miss the hard mass pressing into her back.

Together, they looked out the window. Did she feel the same sense of permanence those mountains brought him? Why he couldn't bear to live anywhere else?

“It's beautiful here,” she whispered.

A lone wolf howl was joined by others as the pack celebrated. Perhaps it was a downed elk to feed them all, or maybe they wanted to say, “I'm here. This is mine.” He understood. Family, clan, pack, all were the same. You worked together to benefit all.

Some men thought they were the leaders, ordering their womenfolk around. Wolves knew better. The alpha female was the boss of the hunt. Everyone bowed to her strength.

Everyone but the alpha male.

Ross brushed Amy's hair off the right side of her neck. He kissed

her flesh right where her neck joined her shoulder. Gently, he bit down. The alpha male wolf took the female from behind and held her by the scruff of her neck as he mounted her. He had to earn the right, chasing her until she let him catch her.

When Amy settled in here, he'd take her far up the mountain under a full moon. He'd strip her naked as nature intended. He'd chase her across the meadow, easily following her white flesh.

When he caught her, he would mount her. He'd thrust deep and bite her, right there. Just hard enough so she would remember her mate. Every time he stood behind her, he would kiss that spot, and she would remember how he'd claimed her.

"Do you think they sing because they're happy?"

Amy turned toward him. Because she was so short and he tall, the raised tip of his cock touched the underside of her breasts. She looked down, swallowing hard. He waited for her. With trembling fingers, she let her chemise slide off her shoulders. She bent her knees slightly and caught him between her breasts. He gently thrust, and together, they watched his tip appear then retreat. He counted the times, concentrating on anything but coming.

"Oh, Ross, what you do to me," she said.

She released him and stepped back. When she bent forward to slide her drawers down her legs, her cheek brushed his cock. He almost came right then. She dropped her head as if suddenly shy. He weighed her breasts in his hands, chafing her nipples the way he already knew drove her higher.

"What is it I do to you, Amy? Tell me."

She gasped when he pressed her nipples between his thumbs and fingers.

"You make me want to do wicked things." She panted the words. He massaged her flesh, hard from need.

"What things?"

When she grasped his cock he jerked. She licked her lips. He held his breath.

Slowly, she knelt in front of him. He had to release her, but he ran his hands through her hair instead. She licked his glistening tip. He couldn't stop the growl. It was close, but he kept himself from thrusting deep into her soft, wet mouth.

"Amy, while I very much want you to do that, if you put your mouth on me right now, I'm going to come right away."

The moon caught her light-colored eyes when she looked up at him.

"Why don't you look out the window," he said.

She stood up without releasing his cock, using it to keep her balance, and turned to face the night. The bottom of the open window frame came to her waist.

"Hold on with both hands. Tight."

She turned her head over her shoulder to look at him. Comprehension made her smile like a coquette. She looked forward and settled her feet. She leaned over and grasped the wood.

Ross realized this was not going to work without bruising her. He looked around. Folded on the chair was a quilt. Touching her ass in a silent order not to move, he picked it up and brought it back. She folded it over the wood and leaned over, pointing her naked ass at him.

Her legs were so short he had to spread his wide in order to get down to the right height. He placed one hand on her lower back and guided himself into her. Only an inch, as if he was setting up a nail to be hammered and he wanted it to go in straight.

He was as stiff as a nail, and he wanted to hammer her just as hard. Though she was wet, she wasn't ready for that. He held her hips tight and pressed into her pussy. Her tissues stretched around him, holding him tight. Back and forth he went, a little farther each time.

Her pussy was so hot. So wet. So eager to swallow him. Finally, he was all the way in. His cock felt like it was in a vice. He shook from the need to keep himself still.

When she wiggled her ass as if impatient, he pulled back. Almost

out, then in again. Slow and steady. He reached under her belly with his fingers. He smiled at her sudden hiss. Her clit was right where he remembered. He rubbed it in small circles while continuing to slowly pump.

In and out he went. One hand held her hip so she couldn't jam herself back on him and take over. The other kept at her clit. She twitched, her back rippling with the tiny gasps that somehow made him even harder. He changed angles, dropping a bit to angle higher.

She clutched his cock from tip to balls and keened her orgasm. He held back for at least two seconds before grabbing both hips and slamming her against him. She grunted every time her ass hit his belly, every time his cock dove deep. His chest felt on fire as he gasped, his cock felt like lightning, and everything else was a blur.

Once more, her pussy clenched him hard. This time, he let go, releasing his seed along with a howl of triumph. She joined him for a final orgasm before he pulled her up against his chest and sank to the floor.

Legs shaking from the strain, he held her, still joined. The wood floor under his back felt cool to his overheated flesh. Every few moments, she quivered with an aftershock. He'd spent it all in one massive explosion and had nothing left.

From far up the mountains came the deep, long call of an older wolf, still in his prime. A sign from Wolf the Creator, congratulating him on finding his mate.

If Amy was fertile, in nine months, he'd hold a squalling bundle of new life.

Chapter Twelve

Amelia woke to the sound of blue jays screaming outside her window. A cool breeze drifted by. She reached her hand out for the covers but found nothing. Ross hadn't let her put on her nightgown, saying he'd keep her warm enough. But he was gone. She opened her eyes, blinking at the sun shining in. The angle was far too high for early morning.

She groaned. Her first day at her new home and she slept in! Auntie and Tillie would think she was a lazy, pampered girl from the city. She stretched, wincing, and then sat up and looked across the room. The top sheet, all bundled up, rested by the stairs. It must be wash day, and she was still in bed.

She yawned and looked at the double bed. Lying beside her pillow was a yellow rose. She remembered Prue's letter boasting how her dear Gillis sent all the way to Boston for her favorite rose bushes. She lifted it, wincing when a thorn pricked her finger, and inhaled the scent. Her husband knew how to pleasure her and make her wake with a smile.

It was far past time to get up, but she had nothing to cover herself but the sheet under her. After listening for a moment, she confirmed that the door at the bottom of the stairs was closed. She carefully rolled out of bed and crept behind the screen to do her business. A flower in a jelly jar beside the basin made her smile. It looked like one she'd seen on the way down the mountain. It was fresh, drops of dew still damp on the petals.

She added the yellow rose to it. Ross must have gotten up very early to have gone up the mountain and down again while she slept.

Despite his gruffness, he was kind. If she'd known marriage could be like this, she'd not have cared for Father all those years!

She needed to find where her trunks were stored. They contained all her clothes but the gray travelling dress she'd worn yesterday. The gray dress was gone from the hook, replaced by a spring green one she didn't recognize. Prue, who stuck to pastels, would never wear such a bright color. Other than the dress, she could see no feminine clothes.

"Ross MacDougal, you better have left my underthings!"

No one answered her growl. She stomped over to the window where she'd undressed. She flushed, remembering how they'd done something shameless. She tingled, eager to do it again. She bent down and looked under the bed but found nothing but a pair of old boots and dust.

There was a trunk in the corner, but she would not look in another person's trunk. She couldn't see why Ross would put her things there, anyway. How could she go downstairs without a chemise, drawers, hose, corset, or petticoats under her dress? No proper woman would leave her chamber without at least a morning wrap. Whether she wore the green dress or wrapped the sheets around her, she's still be naked underneath.

She peeked out the window, keeping to one side. She saw no one. With the sun far up, the men should be out tending the cattle or whatever they did daily. Only Tillie, Auntie, and the babies would be at home. The dress was a very pretty green. It covered her toes. Prue said Beth was much taller and blonde, so perhaps it came from her.

The crisp cotton supported her breasts to some extent, but the tiniest touch made her nipples rise. She brushed her hair and braided it into one strand although she couldn't tie the end. She hoped she soon found some pins. Ross had pulled them out as soon as they left town, wanting to see her hair fly in the breeze.

She tidied the bed, blushing in memory as she placed the folded quilt at the foot.

Wearing nothing but the dress, she stepped quietly down the stairs, carrying her jar with both flowers. Her thighs brushed against her pussy lips with each stair step. She followed the soft murmurs to the kitchen. A dark-haired young woman with skin the same color as Ross sat in the rocker nursing a baby. A red fuzz covered the child's head.

"I'm Tillie," said the woman, "and this is Hope."

The baby's white hand rested peacefully on the brown breast. How soon before she had a tiny brown hand resting on her own? She flushed at the memory of a very large brown hand and mouth doing the same.

Tillie lifted Hope from her breast. She smiled at Amelia and lifted the baby. Amelia had spent many days helping at a charitable place where poor people could get medical care. She'd seen firsthand what a cruel man's fists could do to women and children. She'd learned how to treat the more common problems. The best part was holding a baby. She took a cloth from the pile Tillie pointed to, placed it over her left shoulder, and took her niece.

Hope smelled clean, unlike the poor little ones she was used to. She was also heavier than expected. But Amelia held the darling to her chest and patted the tiny back as she swayed side to side. A tremendous belch emerged. Amelia couldn't help laughing at the surprised expression on the baby's face.

"Take her to her da. He likes to see her when she's happy."

"Oh, I couldn't," she said. After what Ross had said about being ordered to marry her, she wasn't sure she was ready to face the man. She handed Hope back.

"Best to get it over with," said Tillie. She looked at Amelia with intelligent, brown eyes. "Don't believe his bluster. It's when he gets quiet that you have to watch out." She stood up, jiggling Hope. The baby smiled. "He grieves for your sister. The only time he smiles is when he holds the babe."

Amelia reluctantly nodded. Whenever she tried to put off her burn

treatments, the anticipation of pain made things far worse. This was no different. She found her boots, brushed and neatly set at the back door. She put them on without stockings, took Hope back, and walked outside.

The sun did not fall from the sky because Amelia Smathers, now MacDougal, wore nothing except a thin cotton dress and heeled boots. She flushed at the thought, but the morning wind chilled her heated skin. Her breasts tightened, nipples popping up in response.

She looked downhill, hoping to see a herd of deer or perhaps antelope, but she saw none. Rugged mountains, the tops still covered in snow, rose on either side of the green valley. She inhaled the fragrance of sagebrush and fresh air. Across the river lay the Elliott ranch and Prue's good friend, Beth. They were far enough away that she could only see the larger buildings. That meant they couldn't see her, either.

She followed the uphill path Tillie had pointed out. She held the baby carefully as her boots were loose without stockings. The heels, so good for walking in the city, sank into the ground between rocks and made her ankles wobble. Her hem dragged along the ground.

"Your Uncle Ross said Mr. Venner would finish my new flat boots soon," she told Hope. The baby frowned at her as if unsure whether Auntie Amelia could be trusted. "Those blue eyes of your must come from your papa. That hair is certainly not from the Smathers family." She kissed the wisps of fine, golden-red hair. "If he was still alive, your grandfather would have disowned you just for that beautiful hair."

She'd have to shorten all her hems so they didn't sweep dirt as she walked. A decent couple of petticoats would help as well. Once she passed Hope onto Gillis, she'd find her trunks and spare undergarments. She'd been dressing herself for a long time. No husband would dictate what she wore.

A loud *caw* sounded above. She looked up. A large raven circled her, less than six feet above her head. Hope laughed and waved, but

she pulled the baby close to her chest and glared. The huge, black bird backed off, flapping toward the forest.

She chatted quietly to Hope, pointing out the few plants she recognized. The three-month-old baby wouldn't care, but it kept Amelia's mind off what was to come. After a moment, she realized she heard more than one man's voice. She stopped, heart thudding. Why hadn't she realized that Gillis would not be working alone?

She recognized Ross, and there was another voice quite like his, yet different. The third had a broad Scottish accent.

Gillis.

Prue said her husband was the only one of the three with the accent. He was almost two when his Scottish mother died. After that, he spent most of his time with his older brothers and father. Ross and Nevin had little to do with them so had no accent.

If she kept Hope pressed to her chest, the men might not notice she was unencumbered by the layers women used to keep them at bay. The wind blew at her skirt, molding the fabric against her legs. She winced. They'd know. Surely, they wouldn't be rude enough to comment? She pressed her shoulders back and continued up the hill.

"Hobble yer lip, laddie. I'll get them!"

She stopped at the angry growl. Out of the woods stormed a hairy, red giant wearing nothing but boots and a kilt. He moved like a bull, head down and full speed. Hope saw him and squealed. He stopped short. His face changed, a smile erupting in a face designed for battle. He brushed his hands on his kilt as he strode forward.

"There ye are, lassie. Yer da was wond'ring when ye'd visit."

Gillis didn't seem to notice who carried his daughter, he was so fixed on the baby. She pumped her little legs as he chuckled. Amelia handed her over and stepped back.

"Ross hid yer knickers, did he? Smart lad. Trace does the same to Beth."

Amelia gasped and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Dinna fash, Amelia. We're yer family and clan. We dinna hide

much from each other.”

Bright blue eyes, the whites tinged with red, looked down at her. Ross was tall, but Gillis was huge. In addition to the thick, dark red hair hanging past his shoulders, the orange beard and moustache, Gillis had, well, fur. His chest hair was so thick it looked like a pelt though his arms and legs had only fuzzy curls. His hairless shoulders had burned, peeled, and burned again.

“Ye got the same hair as yer sister, but the rest is yer own.” He nodded, as if to himself. “Go meet yer man,” he said, gesturing with his chin. “Nev’s with him. Hope will keep me company whilst we get a pail of nails. Won’t ye, lovey?” His tiny daughter safely tucked in the crook of his left elbow, kilt swinging side to side, Gillis strode down the hill.

Amelia exhaled. One brother-in-law down, one to go. She turned her back on Gillis and faced forward once more. Now that her hands were free, she lifted her skirts. Knowing Ross was close by and she near naked made her pussy swell as well as her breasts. The cotton rasped against her nipples. Her thighs brushed each other with every step.

Dreading Nevin, yet eager to see Ross, she followed the path. She stopped before they could see her. They were cutting logs into boards. One man worked uphill, the other from the bottom. Each man held one end of a long saw blade. Stripped to pants and boots with their faces down as they worked, there was little to tell them apart. A closer look showed her that Ross was above while Nevin yanked the blade down from below.

She took the opportunity to take a closer look at her husband in the daylight. He faced her, arms and chest heaving as he lifted the saw. Muscles rippled over Nevin’s broad, brown back on the return stroke as sawdust flew. His dark hair had a touch of auburn highlights.

She waited for them to finish. When they were done, they wiped their faces, smearing sawdust with sweat. A raven swooped out of a

tree and landed on Ross's wrist, which he held out for it. He and the large bird looked at each other. His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear his words. The bird nodded its head as if it understood. She crossed her arms and waited for Ross to finish with the bird and acknowledge his wife.

"You didn't tell me about her curves. Dang, why wasn't I born first?"

Amelia flicked her eyes to Nevin. She blanched at the deep gashes running from his left shoulder to his right chest.

"Welcome to the family, Amelia. Did you like the flower? Not the rose, the other one."

"Yes," she managed to choke out. "Thank you for giving it to Ross for me."

His white teeth shone when he smiled. She recognized that look as well as the answering quiver in her pussy. She pressed her thighs together. He looked like her husband and made her feel the same need. Her heart pounded as if she'd run all the way to the meadow. This was the husband Prue chose for her.

"What flower?" Ross frowned. He tossed the raven into the air and walked toward them. The bird squawked and landed on the far end of the cut log. It settled its wings, watching them.

"The one I left beside the basin when I washed up this morning," said Nevin. He flicked his eyes over her, from hair to boots. One side of his mouth quirked up in a knowing smile.

"You went into my bedroom when I was sleeping?" Amelia took a step back. She almost stumbled when her heel sunk into a soft spot. She reached out her arms for balance.

"No, I went into *my* bedroom, where you were sleeping."

His eyes roamed over her breasts. She quickly crossed her arms once more.

"I've slept in that bed since we came back from Texas," continue Nevin. He turned to Ross and winked. "She snuffles when she snores."

Ross, instead of raging at his brother for intruding, crossed his broad arms and smirked. At *her*. Her mouth dropped when he nodded companionably to Nevin as if discussing where to make the next saw cut.

“She makes other noises, too. Loud ones.”

“So I heard. Auntie will sleep through anything, but Tillie heard the two of you. Good thing I slept in the Elliott barn last night. Gil’s going to stuff his ears with beeswax until he learns to sleep through the screams.”

“Excuse me!” She glared from one to the other.

“Feisty, too,” continued Nevin. “I like a woman with passion.”

“She’s got that, all right. Seduced me out of my clothes that first time.”

“Oh!”

She whirled around and stumbled away. She’d only gone a few steps when a strong arm lifted her off the ground. He hauled her back against his naked chest. She smelled Ross’s musky scent. Her body instantly reacted, flooding her pussy. He shifted his arm so his hand covered her breast. Her breath caught when he snared her nipple between his fingers.

“Don’t run away, Amy.” He almost sang the soft words.

“You are rude,” she gasped, “and crude, and—”

“That’s the way men talk about women they like.”

“Like? What do you say to women you despise?”

“Nothing,” Ross replied. “Nothing at all.” He kissed her bad ear. “You’re making Nevin worried he did something wrong.”

“He watched me sleep!”

“He went to his room to get his clothes and bring you a pretty flower.” She shivered when he ran his tongue over her ear. “People sleep all the time, Amy.”

“But I had nothing on!” She hissed the words at Ross, embarrassed at Nevin hearing them.

“It’s good we got that over with.”

She gasped. "Got *what* over with?" Ross's fingers circled her breast, making it hard to think.

"Now that Nev's seen you, he won't spend all day wondering what your skin looks like. He can get some work done without sawing his leg off thinking about these."

He gently squeezed her breast. She grabbed his arm with both hands and yanked. Nothing happened.

"Doesn't that bother you?" She pounded on his arm with her fists, but he didn't budge.

"That my brother saw your luscious body and now wants you as much as I do? Nope."

She shut her mouth then had to open it again in order to get enough air in her lungs. Ross shifted her around so she faced him. Though she stood on solid ground, he locked her to him with both hands cupping her bottom. He shifted his chest, chafing her erect nipples. His fingers molded her cheeks, pressing her belly against the hard cock straining to reach her.

"Nevin wants you, Amelia," he whispered against her neck. He nibbled under her ear, making her shiver.

"He wants to...touch me like you do?"

Ross nodded. His eyes almost glowed in the sunlight.

"Isn't that wrong?"

"You thought you'd married Nevin. You were angry it was me standing beside your bed, not my brother. What's changed?"

"I married *you*," she whispered. She couldn't see past Ross's broad chest. Was Nevin still there? The pounding of blood in her ears covered up every sound.

"Nevin still wants you. My name on a piece of paper doesn't change that."

Ross brushed a kiss across her lips. He traced inside her top lip with his tongue. She shivered and opened her mouth to him. He flicked his agile tongue, sliding it around hers while he rubbed his cock against her belly. She moaned and pulled him close. He pushed

back, gasping, forcing her to release him. He lifted his hands to her shoulders and pressed his forehead against hers. He held her there for a moment, gasping.

“Amelia, unless you want me to bend you over that log and take you, right here, right now, you’d better head home.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” said a deep voice behind her.

Another hot set of hands reached around and caressed her breasts. He squeezed them, showing her he could also please. He pressed against her back. A hard length rested between her bottom cheeks. He dropped one hand between her legs. Though the cotton separated his fingers and her clit, she moaned in need as she stared up at her husband.

“You like that, don’t you, wife?”

Though she wanted to demand more, Amelia twisted away, panting with anger and lust. Ross winked while Nevin grinned openly at her discomfort. Her clit burned in need. Her face flamed with embarrassment and shame.

“Ross,” she said in a wavering voice, “your brother touched me.”

Ross nodded. His face was blank, but a tic near one eye gave away his tension.

“Nev wants you as much as I do, Amy. More, because he’s gone without a woman for so long.”

“But I’m your wife!”

“You’re the *only* MacDougal wife,” replied Ross.

He pulled her close and wrapped his bare arms around her. She peeked around his shoulder. Nevin winced and adjusted his pants. When he saw she’d noticed, he winked. Another flush of need raced up her body.

“We weren’t raised with Puritans or gospel sharps,” said Ross. “Sex is part of life. As long as everyone enjoys themselves, we don’t think there’s anything wrong with sharing. Nevin knows it would be him holding you right now if Gillis hadn’t ordered otherwise.”

“I’d let Ross in our bed if you were my wife,” said Nevin

cheerfully. "Of course, that's only if you wanted him. But from what Tillie said about your screams last night, you enjoy the marriage bed." He leered in a way that heated her blood rather than threatened her. "You could enjoy it even more with two to pleasure you. All you have to do is say yes, Amelia."

She thought of the drawings where two men pleased a woman. Had Fate made sure she found that book before she even met her husband? Instead of the proper sense of revulsion at the thought of both Ross and Nevin touching her, she felt a needy urge. It came on her whenever she saw Ross. A hot need that burned her from clit to breasts, demanding that he touch her everywhere, that he fill her with his big, strong cock.

Did she want Nevin to do the same?

Yes!

She would surely burn in hell. From the heat in her pussy, she already burned. But it made her think of heaven instead. Both men stared at her as if they knew exactly what was in her mind. Would they really do those things to her in the sunlight? The thought of taking such a risk tightened the need inside her.

Nevin winked at her flush. "Speaking of noise, I'm heading back to Trace's barn after supper so I can get some sleep. Beth said she'd likely stop by tomorrow."

Ross groaned and rubbed his face with both hands. He sighed. "I expect Gil and I will meet you there after breakfast. Last place I want to be is with four women and two babies while they natter."

"Six females," corrected Nevin. "Beth will bring those two miner girls. Trace says they're eager to help now they have a family, but they get in his way."

"The Elliotts took in Meggie and Bridie Redmond back before Christmas," explained Ross. "Their mother died before they came out, then their father broke his back. Before he died, he begged Trace to help his girls."

"Meggie's fifteen now," said Nevin. "Some of the miners were

sniffing around her skirts even before her pa got hurt. No one will bother her now.”

That’s what Nevin was doing to her, sniffing around her skirts. She grabbed the chance to escape. “If we’re having guests tomorrow, I’d better go back and help get things ready.”

“You head off home,” said Ross. “Nev and I will be along in a bit.” He dropped his head, raised his eyebrows, and pointed a finger at her. “Don’t think this discussion is over.”

“Don’t let Gil eat all Auntie’s biscuits,” called out Nevin as she turned away.

“Any he doesn’t eat, I will,” she sassed back in relief of escape. She laughed, not quite hysterically.

Would Ross and Nevin really do to her what she’d seen in that book? She kept putting one foot in front of the other until she reached the kitchen steps. Then she saw the pile of wood. Wood for the fire. The hot, burning fire!

A flash of terror raced through her. She braced herself to run. But there was no fire. No burning heat. Just warm sunshine. She collapsed on the step, her face wet with tears of relief. She hadn’t had an attack in ages.

There’s nothing wrong. You’ll get over this.

Of course they had a wood stove in Montana Territory. Unlike the city, wood was free for the taking while coal must be paid for in gold.

She would just have to get over it and learn to make a fire in the stove. Not the fireplace, but she should be able to manage a closed, fireproof stove. She had overcome other things. This was one step on the way. No one needed to know of her fear. She wiped her face with her sleeve and stood.

She put her right boot on the first step, her left on the next. A pile of logs was not going to hurt her unless it had a snake in it or something. She peered at the neat stack of split wood. Who could be more afraid of a cooking fire than a rattlesnake? Getting caught in one fire years ago didn’t mean she’d ever have that happen again. And if

she did, she'd survive. Somehow.

She opened the door and stepped in. Gillis sat at the table eating stew, Hope tucked in the crook of his elbow. He dipped his little finger in the bowl, waited for a moment for the broth to cool, then held it out to her. She grabbed hold of his finger with both hands and brought it to her mouth. She gummed his finger until the flavor was gone then squawked for more. Tillie sat in the rocker nursing a dusky child with reddish-brown hair. He was much bigger than Hope. She nodded at an older Indian woman, who must be Auntie.

"Sit. Eat," said Auntie.

Since she'd had little but cheese and bread on the ride home and no breakfast, her stomach rumbled in agreement. The woman nodded, her eyes bright.

"Thank you," said Amelia. "Your son is much bigger than Hope," she said to Tillie.

The young woman beamed back. "He is healthy and strong, like his father."

"You miss him."

Tillie nodded. "It is necessary, but he will be back soon. Then we will make another one." She tickled the baby's belly. It stopped sucking long enough to smile back then went back to the serious business of eating.

Amelia nodded her thanks and inhaled the fragrance rising from the bowl Auntie set in front of her. She picked up her horn spoon, dipped it, and took a sip. Unfamiliar flavors, strange but wonderful, rolled over her tongue.

"Mmm, Ross was right. You are a wonderful cook."

"You will learn the plants."

As Amelia had already decided to do that, she nodded at the order. She was scraping the bottom of her bowl and considering asking for another when two men burst into the room. They argued in a strange language. Auntie lifted her wooden spoon and told them off with the same soft syllables.

"Is that language Bannock?" Amelia asked when Ross and Nevin sat down. Sheepish from whatever their aunt had said, they waited quietly to be served.

"We speak Paiute," said Ross. He filled his mouth with stew after thanking Auntie.

"Do you speak Gaelic, too?"

"Gillis is fluent," replied Nevin as Auntie prepared his bowl. "He spent a lot of time with Father and the older brothers. His mother, Phoebe, spoke only Gaelic to him until she died. That's why he has that terrible accent when he thinks he's talking English."

Gil made as if to throw a punch at Nevin for the disparaging comment.

"Ross and me, all we know of Gaelic is the curses Father, Fin, and Hugh threw at us." He winked at Amelia. "We keep in practice by using them on Gil."

Gil grunted. He grabbed the last biscuit from the wooden plate.

"Hey, we only had one each," complained Nevin.

"That's what happens when ye're late." Gillis, Hope still in his arm, stood up. "Thank ye for the meal, ladies. I'll put the wee lassie down for her nap." He rested her over his left shoulder and crossed the room.

The tiny baby's hair was a more golden red than her father's. She snuggled into his neck, secure in his love. Amelia's children would have a trio of men, fathers and uncles, to love them. From what Prue said, the Elliotts were the same and behaved as uncles.

"Gillis put your trunks and boxes in the bunkhouse," said Ross. "Is there anything you need from them?"

"My unmentionables." She raised an imperious eyebrow at her husband.

"Not gonna happen," he said, returning the eyebrow threat.

Chapter Thirteen

“Are ye staying for the week?”

Gillis called out the friendly insult as the loaded Elliott wagon rolled to a stop in front of the kitchen. He laughed when the man driving growled something about women.

“That’s Beth and Trace on the seat,” said Ross to Amelia. “In the back is Meggie, holding James, and her sister, Bridie.”

Amelia noticed Ross kept his attention on the two outriders rather than the knife he nonchalantly tossed in smooth arcs. He caught the hilt each time without even looking. The knife was rather large to Amelia’s way of thinking. Ross grumbled when the grinning, handsome, brown-haired man gave her a big wink.

“Nev!” called out the flirt as he eyed Amelia up and down. He dismounted and approached. “Ross is tossing his knife again. He’s not thinking I’ll steal his wife, is he?”

“Not if you want to be welcome upstairs again,” called out Beth.

“But it’s the first time I’ve been able to make old Stoneface nervous,” replied the man, still flashing white teeth at her.

“Jack, you play nice or git home,” growled Trace.

That morning, Gillis had warned her about Trace’s voice, how he was roped by the neck and dragged for saving a woman from three men. It almost killed him, and it broke his voice box. He certainly sounded like a demon from hell that a revival preacher would warn against.

“Don’t mind Jackass,” said a calm voice at her side. She turned to find a tall, black-haired man with warm, gray-green eyes. “Welcome to Tanner’s Ford, Amelia. I’m Simon.” He touched a finger to his hat,

winked, and turned to Ross. "Don't kill Jack until after the house-raising. After that's all done, you can skin him alive. I'll even help you hold him down."

When Beth, helped down from the wagon by Trace, started walking toward them, Ross's knife disappeared. Eight inches taller than Amelia, Beth barely had to go up on her heels to kiss Ross's cheek.

"Don't you dare hurt him, Ross MacDougal. I want all my men's parts in good working order. I hope you don't mind us calling you Amelia," said Beth. "We're all family, and there's too many of us with the same name." Her smile faded. "I'm so sorry that you didn't get to see Prue before she passed. She loved you very much and was my dear friend." She looked up, blinking hard. "Dear me, I promised I wouldn't cry." She pulled out a hanky and dabbed her eyes.

Amelia had seen the gesture before, but Beth obviously meant it. If what Ross told her was correct, Beth had three husbands. It was an open secret, which meant the town busybodies would know. Perhaps Prudence had been Beth's only friend.

"You're welcome to come over anytime for a natter, like before." Ross turned to Amelia. "You going to invite them inside so we men can get some work done?"

Heat flashed up her face. "Me?"

He patted her bottom, making a show of it and stirring a different kind of heat. "As the only wife, you are the lady of the home."

"Oh!" She fumbled for something to say. "Please, come inside. I made some lemonade to go with Auntie's baking."

"Not yet," growled Trace. He stalked over to Beth. He stared at her as his long legs covered the ground. Her color rose as he approached.

"Trace Elliott, you are not going to—"

"Hush, woman. Girls, bring James inside."

Meggie and Bridie giggled and waved as they passed. Trace wrapped his arms around Beth and kissed her. Not a peck that a

husband of many years would provide, but a deep, thorough job. Amelia licked her dry lips as she watched. She'd never seen a kiss like that though she'd imagined them. Beth reeled when Trace backed away. He'd untied her bonnet strings, grinning. She grabbed it to keep it from sliding to the ground.

"No, Jack," said Trace as Jack lifted his foot. "You said good-day. Time to get home. There's a stack of boards needing cutting for that addition."

"If I can't kiss Beth, neither can Simon," said Jack. He produced a pout a two-year-old would be proud of.

"Last one home makes dinner," called Simon. He leaped on his horse and raced downhill. Jack followed, whooping and hollering with a more sedate Gillis at the rear.

"No, they never stop," sighed Beth, answering Amelia's unasked question. "Pray you never have twins, especially boys. They never grow up, always trying to one-up each other."

"I've never met twins before," said Amelia.

"I haven't yet met Ben and Ranger, the second set of Elliott twin boys," said Beth. "Along with Patrick, they plan to drive in a herd of cattle sometime this fall. For everyone's sake, I hope at least one of them brings a wife."

"Not likely," said Trace. "Ben's too hepped up about his lawyering, Ranger's too hard for a woman, and Patrick too shy." He lifted an eyebrow to Ross, who gave a barely perceptible nod. Trace leaned over and kissed Amelia's cheek. "Nice meeting you, Amelia."

He groped Beth's bottom as he passed. She shook her fist at him with one hand while rubbing her cheek with the other. He made a strange noise, which Amelia realized was laughter.

"Beth," said Ross. He barely brushed her cheek before turning to Amelia. "Let's see if we can top Trace," he murmured in her ear.

He grasped her bottom cheeks and lifted, holding her pressed against his erection. She instantly reacted, reaching her arms around his neck. She stretched her knees around his hips as best she could in

her dress. He ground himself against her. They'd only had relations once the night before. She rubbed her breasts against his chest, eager for more sensation.

"Looks like you got yourself the right type of wife."

The deep, grating growl smashed through Amelia's red fog of lust. Gasping, she pushed herself away from Ross. She fought to get her feet on the ground, but he held her tight.

"Hold on a minute, wife. I wasn't finished."

So mortified she wished she could crawl into a hole, she kicked out and caught his knee.

"That'll cause you a spanking," said Ross. He stared at her, eye to eye.

"Put me down," she demanded. It came out more like a pant, so she cleared her throat and tried again. "Down, Ross MacDougal."

"You're worse than the twins," said Beth, laughing. "Come on, Amelia. Let's leave these two billy goats to butt heads and play 'I'm the better husband' without us. That lemonade sounds wonderful."

Ross set her down. He leered at her so openly she poked him in his belly with her finger. It didn't penetrate past his shirt. The man was hard muscle, everywhere. She looked down, considering a more sensitive place to poke.

"No, you don't." Ross took her shoulders and turned her toward Beth and the house. "Off you go." He gave her a playful slap on the bottom. She squeaked at the minor pain. She stuck her mouth open at him and stomped toward the house, arm in arm with Beth.

"Men," said Beth. "Can't live with them, but life isn't much fun without them."

They shared a laugh. Halfway across the yard, Beth slowed her steps. Amelia slowed as well.

"So, have you shared your bed with Nevin yet?"

Amelia stopped. She stared up at Beth for a moment before shutting her mouth.

"I guess not." Beth winked. "Don't go all white and frightened,

Amelia. Before she died, Prue made me promise to tell you she wanted you to care for all the MacDougal men. Just like I do the Elliotts.”

“Umm—”

“Ross wants you to take care of Nevin, and Gillis when he’s ready, but he wants you all to himself as well.”

Amelia nodded. “You understand.”

“Very well.”

* * * *

Amelia waved as Beth expertly maneuvered the wagon down the worn track home. In a year, she would be equally proficient. Would she also have a baby at her breast? She rested her hand on her belly. Her parents had only two children though they were married for years. It took Prue three years to finally have a baby. She hoped she would be like Beth.

“See you soon,” she called out. The girls waved back until they went around the trees and out of sight.

Suddenly, tears flowed down Amelia’s cheeks. She hugged herself, fighting for control. She had a friend. One who accepted her as she was, scars and all. Even better, Beth didn’t care about society’s rules, choosing to do what was best for herself and her family.

She was part of the MD Ranch now. She would follow her own rules.

Amelia used her apron to wipe away her tears. It reminded her of something she needed quiet to do. She turned away from the house and walked toward the small plot of land framed by iron bars and wildflowers. She looked at the headstones, stopping at her sister’s.

Here lies Prudence Smathers MacDougal. Darling wife, loving mother. RIP.

She sank down, resting her bottom on her heels.

“I’m sorry I didn’t leave Father and come to you sooner. I was a

fool, thinking he would change, that he would care about me. You were right to run away. You found the freedom you always wanted and the love we never had.”

A breeze stirred the hair that had pulled out of her braid.

“Hope is a wonderful baby. Gillis loves her so much. Only she can make him smile.”

She leaned forward and absently picked at the few weeds around the headstone.

“Beth said you made her promise to encourage me to love the MacDougal men. I think I may love Ross someday, but it’s too soon to say.” She sniffed back tears. “I really like how he makes me feel wanted. I know he wants my body, but I think it might be more than that.”

She brushed off her skirts and stood up.

“I don’t know how long it will take Gillis to get over his grief at losing you. But I’ll help him however I can. When he smiled at Hope, I could see the loving man you fell in love with.” She worried her bottom lip for a moment. “Beth is a wonderful woman, and she shares her men. If Gillis needs me that way, I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Wildflowers waved in the breeze that swept her words toward the mountains.

“I’ll be the best aunt to Hope, treating her as my own daughter. I’ll tell her all about you and Mama. Even Grandmama. You didn’t know, but I met her a few times without Father finding out. She would have been so proud of you, making a place here in the wilderness. Thank you for bringing me here, Prue.”

She closed her eyes and waited for a sign. All she heard was the sighing of the wind in the trees. She finally gave up and opened her eyes. A raven flew past and settled on Prue’s headstone. It rattled its wings at her, tilting its head almost comically.

“Did Ross send you to keep an eye on me?”

It nodded, bouncing its entire body to do so. She laughed at its antics. It flapped its wings and flew into the trees.

“He told me where to find you.” She gasped when Ross pulled her back against his chest. She would have to put a bell on him, he moved so quietly. He crossed his arms over her, resting his hands on her belly. “Between his bird’s-eye view of the whole valley and his speed, Raven knows what’s going on for miles around.” He kissed her head. “Beth and Prue were good friends.”

Amelia nodded. “I feel a lot better now. Both about being here with you and about not arriving before Prue died. I’m glad she had Beth.”

He rested his chin on her head. They stood there together until the sun began to set.

“I’m hungry, and so are these mosquitoes,” he said. “I don’t want that skin of yours to get all itchy from their bites.”

He took her hand, and together, they walked home to supper.

Chapter Fourteen

One week later

“Isn’t it wonderful how much help you’ve got,” said Amelia. They’d arrived early to the Elliott home to prepare for the expected help. Because the addition was for Meggie and Bridie, lots of miners walked to the Rocking E. Beth insisted home cooking had a lot to do with their eagerness.

“We’ve got a few minutes,” said Beth. “Could you help me get something upstairs?”

“Of course.” Amelia followed Beth. Both homes had the same layout yet seemed totally different. No welcoming aroma of sweetgrass greeted her, and the walls were covered with bright, quilted pictures.

“I just realized how bare our walls are. Yours are so colorful,” said Amelia.

“That’s one of the things I wanted to show you. Your sister gave me the most beautiful set of picture quilts, one for each season. I had the men put them up over our bed.”

Our bed.

Amelia gulped. She was going to see The Bed, the one Beth shared with three men. Three! She’d almost got her head around the thought of sharing a bed with Nevin as well as Ross. After all, it was their bedroom originally. But three men?

Face hot, she kept her head down, watching Beth’s feet, until they arrived in the room. Like in her own room across the valley, clothing hung on pegs on the wall. A screen closed off one corner for the

chamber pot, which Gillis insisted on calling a “thunder mug.” Since her fussing about it almost made him smile, she reacted as he expected.

It didn’t take long for her to discover that men, especially bachelor brothers, could be very crude to each other. Most of the time, she pretended not to hear their outrageous arguments and boasts. Sometimes it made her blush, but the discomfort was because she wanted to do what they said.

“You’ll have to look at our bed to see them, Amelia. You might as well get it over.” Beth’s smile matched the tone of her voice.

Amelia closed her eyes, faced the far side of the room, took a deep breath, and then looked. A very wide bed filled the far wall. There was enough space on either side to walk past to make the bed, but that was all. Beth walked over and sat on one corner. She pointed to the wall above the bed.

“Oh, Beth, they’re beautiful!”

Amelia walked slowly forward, staring at the four picture quilts, one for each season. She recognized the one far to the left, spring, as it was the view she had every time she looked out the parlor window.

“I didn’t know Prue quilted.” She frowned at Beth. “Why isn’t there any of her work on our walls?”

Beth patted the mattress. After she looked at her fill of Prue’s work, Amelia sat beside Beth. She sank into feathers, far more comfortable than the cornhusk mattress she slept on.

“We took everything down because Gillis got upset having to look at them.” Beth pointed to a trunk in the corner. “Anytime you think he’s ready, or if you want them back, they’re all in that trunk. I packed them very carefully as they’re so precious. Her lace is in there, too.”

Amelia looked up at the tiny, framed quilts once more. The detail in them! She squinted and, yes, two brown dogs played in the autumn fallen leaves. A man on a horse walked through the snowy winter scene, facing home. A yellow light in the window welcomed him.

Home.

An arrow of loss shot into her heart. She collapsed sideways onto the bed. She covered her face with her hands, but the tears wouldn't stop. She was jostled when Beth moved closer and rubbed her back.

"I'm sorry," Amelia choked. "I know Prue's gone, but now and then, it hits me."

"Don't be sorry for a few tears. Your father and sister, the only family you had left, are gone. You have a baby to raise in a place far from anything you know. You've got to get used to living with your husband. Even more, he has two brothers who want you." She leaned closer and hugged Amelia. "Nothing could have prepared you for the thought of sharing your bed with more than one man. Cry as much as you want. I'm here, and I'm ready to answer your questions."

Beth patiently waited while Amelia's emotional storm passed. Beth handed her a handkerchief when she sat up. The delicate lace edging, Prue's signature work, almost got her started again.

"Better?"

Amelia nodded. Beth brought her a cup of water from the jug on the side wall. She drank it slowly, thinking about what to say.

"Actually, something did help prepare me for this." She waved her hand at the huge bed. Beth said nothing so she continued, still looking at her cup. "I had these...dreams. For years, before I came here. Then, just before I left, I found a book." Beth was silent. "With drawings. Of men and women together."

"A pillow book?"

"Is that what they're called? The title is *Sinful Pleasures*. I looked at the whole book one night, page after page. I had terribly wicked dreams. In the morning, I packed it away in my trunk. It's still there, in the bunkhouse."

Beth leaned over, an eyebrow raised over a sparkling eye. "Does Ross know about it?"

Amelia nodded. Heat flashed up her body.

"Someday, I'd like to borrow it. When you've memorized it, that

is. I might get some ideas to surprise my men.”

“There’s one drawing with three men and a woman. She looks”—Amelia bit her lip, looking for a word—“uncomfortable.”

Beth laughed. “You might find it so the first time, but once you relax and enjoy it, things will go much better. Remember, you are the one in charge of the bed. You decide if you will share it, with whom, and what goes on.” She wiggled her eyebrows like a bad villain actor. “Or comes off.”

“Um, Ross thinks he’s in charge of the bedroom. And other things as well.”

“You let him think that, but don’t let it stop you from doing otherwise. Men, especially strong ones like ours, like to think they’re in charge. Smart women let them have their illusions. You’re a very smart woman, Amelia MacDougal.”

Beth took her hand. “If Auntie is going to stay in the downstairs bedroom with Hope, get Ross to build you a small room of your own. Anytime I want to just sleep, I go downstairs and rest in my own room. Alone, or with someone to hold me. It’s a sunny room, so I have my sewing in there as well.”

“If I had a place of my own, I wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed.”

“I’m much taller than you, Amelia, and I get overwhelmed by all that he-man bravado sometimes.”

“How do you stand it?”

“They’re just trying to be the top dog in the pack.”

“But we’re a family, not a pack of dogs.”

“They’re male, and men work in packs,” said Beth in a droll voice. “Men don’t think or act like women. We are the ones who nurture and build families. They protect us and provide what we need for our family.”

“Mrs. Beth, riders!”

The yell came in through the open window. Beth scrambled across the bed to look. She leaned out for a moment before facing Amelia.

“I recognize the Circle C men, but the others are strangers. We’d

better go down and greet them.” She smiled reassuringly at Amelia. “Luke Frost wouldn’t bring trouble to our door. Perhaps the others heard about our cooking. Single men will do almost anything for a good woman-cooked meal.”

Amelia followed Beth downstairs and across the yard.

“Luke Frost, you are not having any pie unless you put in a good day’s work!”

Beth shook her finger at the repentant-looking man, but Amelia heard the laugh in her voice. He turned his head, and she saw a wide scar on the right side of his face. He was the man who stood up first in the hotel dining room. His smile pulled at the scar, disfiguring his face even more. The sparkle in his eyes more than made up for it.

“I brought lots of help, Mrs. Elliott.” He pointed downhill, where three men slowly approached on horseback. Luke and his two partners dismounted as the others approached.

“Mrs. MacDougal,” said Luke, bowing his bare head. “It is a pleasure to meet you in person. May I introduce my partners, Gabe Downey and Oscar Cutler?”

Both men pulled off their hats. Mr. Downey was built like Gillis but with brown hair. Mr. Cutler winked at her with his left eye, the other being covered with a black patch.

“Mrs. Elliott, Mrs. MacDougal,” said the two.

They replaced their hats and, along with Luke, led their horses to the barn as the strangers rode up and dismounted. Trace and Ross strode over. Jack trotted up, grinning like a ten-year-old eager to play.

“Langford, Statham, and Bennett of the Double Diamond,” said Jack, still grinning. “It is a very great pleasure to meet you.” He held out his dirty hand. The men didn’t hesitate to grasp it, each one trying to outdo the others in grip. Langford won, and Bennett lost. Statham, two inches taller than Ross and far broader, made Jack wince. He shook his fingers out, mugging as if Statham had destroyed his hand.

“These gentlemen are our new neighbors,” continued Jack. He flexed his right hand into a fist and released. “They took over the

Double Diamond from that ba—"—he glanced at Amelia and Beth—"that undesirable so-and-so Smythe."

"I'm Trace Elliott, that's Jack, and this is my wife, Beth."

"Ross MacDougal and my wife, Amelia."

"Kenrick Langford but please, call me Ace." He bowed to the women as if they were in a drawing room. "Ladies." The other two doffed their hats. Bennett winked at Beth and Amelia.

"I hear Smythe's longhorns are now yours," said Jack.

"If he sent the gold to pay for them," said Bennett with a frown.

"Mr. Smythe was not forthcoming with many details," said Ace. "He refused to say from whom he purchased them, but only that they would arrive at some point."

"The longhorns are on the way from the Elliott ranch in Texas," said Trace. "They'll be here before the snow."

Ace, who seemed to be the leader, perked up. "Elliott ranch? Is there a relation?"

"Ranger and Patrick are my brothers," replied Trace, nodding. "Half that herd of longhorns are yours. The rest go to their ranch to the west of here, the RB."

"I will certainly sleep more easily now," said Ace. He looked at his partners, both of whom looked relieved.

"Enough jawing," said Trace. "We've got some building to do."

"Ah, yes." Ace spread his hands and looked at them. Fresh cuts and bruises marred the long, slender fingers. "I recently got reacquainted with a hammer. We didn't agree on the placing of a few nails. Mine, in particular. You wouldn't happen to know of a manicurist?"

Statham punched him in the shoulder. "We're ready to work."

"Don't mind Ace," said Bennett. He shook his head as if Langford was a naughty child he'd given up on. "He likes to see how many people he can irritate in a day. Please, call me Henry, and this is Sin." He pointed his thumb to Statham. The blond man nodded, his still face expressionless. "Where do you want us?"

"I'd appreciate you working near the miners to keep an eye on them. We've got women and young girls here, and some of them can't be trusted."

"We'd be honored," said Ace with a slight bow. He and Henry walked their horses toward the barn. Sin silently tipped his hat to the women and followed.

"They've known each other awhile," observed Ross.

"You'd think they were brothers, the way they treat each other," said Jack. He punched Trace in the shoulder the way Sin had Ace. He quickly danced over to where Simon and the miners sorted boards.

"Be good to see Ranger before the snow flies," said Trace. He winked as he tucked a strand of hair behind Beth's ear. "More hungry Elliott males to feed."

"They can feed themselves," growled Beth at her husband. "They bought the RB, and they can live there and take care of themselves." She eluded his hands. "Amelia, you'd better get to the kitchen with me before our husbands do something foolish."

"Kissing my wife is never foolish," said Trace.

Amelia saw the same heated look on Ross's face. She skipped away, following Beth toward the kitchen and the relative safety of women's work.

"You'll pay for that tonight, woman!" Trace made a spanking motion with his hand. Beth stuck out her tongue and wagged her hands at her ears.

"Don't teach Amelia any bad habits," called Ross to Beth.

Amelia did the same as Beth but also wiggled her bottom at him.

"Don't count on sitting down to breakfast!" roared Ross.

"Do you think he'll do it?" Amelia whispered the question to Beth.

"Of course. And when he does, you whimper. That way, he'll take a long time to make you happy again."

Beth winked. Amelia stood by the door, hot and eager but with no way of satisfying her need until the night.

Chapter Fifteen

Amelia rested her head on Ross's shoulder. He drove the horses, but she could relax now. All the food was gone, the bulk of the work done. She hadn't seen Nevin or Gillis since the miners left an hour earlier. She expected they were "escorting" the men home.

"Would you rather have married someone else?" Ross almost whispered the question.

She raised her head and looked at him. "Why are you asking me that?"

"Life would be easier with a white man. Back East, you'd be a lot warmer—"

"I don't care about that!" She poked him in the ribs with her finger. "Yes, if I didn't come out here, I'd not be working morning to night."

"Wouldn't that be better?"

"Not when I'd be forced to stay in the attics out of what my dear cousin calls 'decency.'"

"Your cousin?"

She looked to her left. Nothing but dark out there, but she had a warm body to her right. His strong thigh rested against her leg, making her tingle.

"Father left everything to a cousin. Ev-ry-thing."

They rode on for a few minutes. Amelia tilted her head back to look at the stars. They sparkled, so bright and clear she could make a wish then reach out and pull one into her heart.

"That why you sent so much by freight train?"

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "I only brought what

should have come to Prudence and me. Cousin Oral will never know.”

He nodded absently. The horses pulled the wagon down toward the creek. They seemed in no hurry to get home. Amelia, on the other hand, was ready for sleep. Not since before the fire had she been near so many strangers. Fighting to stop herself from covering her face and hand took more effort than she’d expected. On top of that, she’d done more work today than she could remember. She rolled her shoulders, stretching out sore muscles.

“You came out here just to escape your cousin?”

She shook her head. “The only thing I ever wanted was a home where I belonged and children to love. For that, I needed a husband.” She picked at her dress, smoothing it over her thighs. “I knew husbands owned their wives and could do whatever they wanted to them. Just like fathers did to their daughters. I knew nothing about men, so it didn’t matter who I married, as long as he was kind.” She looked at Ross. “Prudence said her brothers-in-law were kind.”

“It wasn’t your choice to marry me.”

“No, but few women have a choice.” She leaned her head on his shoulder again. “That first night, I discovered a world I could never, ever have imagined. The way you made me feel when you touched me...” She flushed and looked down. “I could understand why women wanted to marry a certain man. Why I wanted to be your wife.”

“You could have the pick of every unmarried man within a hundred miles.” He looked up at the moon, almost full now. “Still could, if you wanted.” He almost whispered the words.

“Ross MacDougal, if I look back at every man I saw back East, on my trip, in town, and today, I would still choose you as my husband.”

He sat a little straighter. “Even without what we share in bed?”

She laughed and smiled up at him. “That would be difficult to do without.” She placed her hand lightly on his thigh. “I enjoyed watching you work today without your shirt. You showed those miners how a real man works.”

"I enjoy watching you naked." His eyes seemed to glow down at her. "Woman, you've been wearing far too many clothes all day. Take them off."

"Now?"

"Yep."

Her pussy twinged at the thought of riding naked in the warm air. She started at the top buttons of her dress. Noticing the hitch in his breathing, she put on a show. Slowly, seductively, she stripped off her clothing while the horses plodded slowly home. Auntie and Tillie had the babies at home. Nevin and Gillis were riding somewhere. There was only her and Ross and the moonlight. He almost choked when she rested her hand on his shoulder to slide her drawers off. She placed her things on the seat as padding. Of course, she kept her boots on.

She sat back down, wriggling a little just to hear the way his breath caught.

"Did you see Beth's bed?" Ross croaked out the words, almost like Trace.

"Yes. I even sat on it. Beth has a feather mattress. It's so soft." She plumped up her breasts.

"Tell me," he said.

"It's bigger than ours. Three big beds, pushed together. It takes up almost the whole wall. Do you think we might get a bigger, softer bed?"

Ross hooked the leather traces at his feet. The horses kept on plodding.

"What do you think of lying in the middle of a big bed with three men to pleasure you? One would suckle your breast." He wrapped his arm around her back, capturing a breast with his hand. "One would lie between your thighs and lick your sweet pussy. And your mouth would be full of the other one's cock. Open my pants, Amelia."

She shivered at the deep voice ordering her to do exactly what she wanted. She unbuttoned him and released his cock. Ever since she'd

looked at Beth's bed that morning, she'd thought about this cock.

"Sit on my lap, Amy. Ride me."

His hand supported her as she knelt on the hard bench. She raised herself up, lifted her leg, and felt him push into her. She settled down, face against his chest, his arm holding her tight. The rattling of the wagon sent vibrations into her pussy.

She stayed there, connected to her man, until they neared home. Only then did she haphazardly put on her skirt and blouse, missing half the buttons but not caring in her need.

"You head up to bed while I put the wagon away."

"Do you want help?"

"If you don't get upstairs right now, I'm going to toss you into the hay pile and make you scream my name."

"Oh!" She scrambled down from the wagon and ran for the house, clutching her undergarments to her chest.

* * * *

"I'll do this. You go to your wife. I think if you put one finger in her, she'll erupt."

Ross continued past Nevin and hung the harness on its peg.

"Beth took her upstairs and showed her their bed," said Ross.

Nevin groaned like a wounded animal. "I didn't need to know that. Tomorrow, I'm wearing a kilt. My cock's so hard all the time it's wearing a hole through my pants."

"So's mine."

"But you've got a pussy to fill. A night with Amelia ought to make you limp."

"That woman's so demanding, it'll be years before I get limp."

"Jay-sus! That's supposed to help?"

Together, they completed the job. When they finished and Nevin turned away, Ross caught his sleeve.

"Join us," he said.

Nevin rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. He looked at the ground.

"I don't need a pity fuck."

"No, you don't. But as you saw, I've got a horny wife. She's been thinking all day about whatever Beth told her they do on that room-size bed. One man can only come so many times."

Nevin looked sideways at his older brother. "Even horny women can be particular. Most women are scared of being with one big man, much less two."

Ross punched him in the shoulder. "My little wife told me she brought a pillow book from her pa's library. She's got a few ideas of her own."

The soft swoosh of a hunting owl passed overhead.

"And?"

"And the picture of two men with a woman makes Amelia's pussy clench."

"Fuck!"

"That's the idea, Brother Bear. She's been uppity today and needs a spanking."

Ross looked at the house. The second-floor window glowed with lamplight. The silhouette of a woman, standing sideways, appeared. Her full breasts jutted out from her chest. Her hair flowed down her back. After a moment, the window cleared.

"Tonight?" Nevin's voice cracked with eagerness.

"She's happy, horny, and eager. No better time to learn sharing."

"Only if she wants. I can go without." Nevin snorted a laugh. "Been going without for so damn long the fingers on my right hand curl up and jerk whenever a woman walks past."

"At the least, you'll have a woman's hand jerking you off. Or her breasts. They're big enough she can do you with them."

Ross slapped his brother on the back before taking long strides toward the house. Nevin's deep groan followed him.

* * * *

Amelia paced back and forth, her thighs rubbing against her pussy lips. She'd watched out the window as Ross and Nevin talked. She'd ridden Ross's cock and come close, but she needed more than that tantalizing friction. Watching Ross and Nevin work that day, both bare chested, she saw how much they resembled each other. She expected Nevi also had a long, hard, eager cock. She silently debated with herself whether to tell Ross she'd found the book. Seeing the Elliott and MacDougal men straining their muscles had made her hotter than she'd ever been.

"Why aren't you naked, wench?"

Amelia whirled around. Ross stood with legs apart, fists on his hips. His long, dark hair was free, its silky strands flowing over his shoulders. The front of his pants tented out.

She gulped.

He moved so fast that he was lifting the back of her skirts and pulling her bottom against his erection before she could take a step. He slid his fingers inside her, pressing in and out. She spread her feet farther apart to encourage him.

"You're going to get it tonight, Amy. Hard. All day, you flirted with other men. They wanted you. All of them. Whenever you twitched that ass or wiggled your breasts, they imagined throwing you to the ground, pulling up your dress, and taking you."

She shivered at his growled words. Never had so many men watched her. She knew she was safe and hadn't flirted, but it didn't matter. All day, she'd fought her fantasies of being taken, but by her own men.

"I think it's time you learn about two cocks at once. What if Nevin kneels behind your pretty little ass and fingers you? Just like this."

He moved his hand around to her buttocks. He slid a wet finger between her cheeks. He scratched lightly at her back hole for a second

before pressing into her. She quivered at the sensations, harsh yet so intensely wonderful.

Ross pulled free, lifted her, and carried her to the edge of the double-size bed. He set her down on her hands and knees then flipped her skirts over her shoulders. She waited, for what she wasn't sure. He slid his cock in her pussy. She groaned, encouraging him to go deep. She knew Beth had three men to pleasure her. All day, she'd thought about how it would work.

Ross pulsed inside her pussy. "I'm not going to last long," he gasped.

She tilted her bottom and squeezed his cock inside her. He roared and sped up, both hands on her hips, slamming her back onto his cock. It only took a minute to explode. She pounded back against him, both of them lost in the need, the satisfaction.

They didn't move for a long while. Ross held her snug, his sweating chest on her back, until he stood up and pulled out. He cleaned her with cool water. After putting the cloth back, he pulled her skirts down and helped her to lie on her side. He curled behind her, spooning.

He held her breast, squeezing her now and then. Her orgasm had taken some of the need, but she wanted more. Nevin wasn't spending the night in the Elliotts' barn. He was here. All day, when she saw him, he'd looked lost. Lonely. Delicious.

"Beth said it wasn't right that she sleep with Trace and leave Simon and Jack alone at night."

* * * *

Ross tensed at Amelia's words. Every nerve was taut, fighting to stay still, to stay silent. Long minutes he waited.

"Nevin is all alone," she continued.

"Um-hmm."

"Does he still, um, want me?"

He felt her nipple hardening in his palm. "He's wanted you since he first saw you."

"He hasn't said anything."

Ross unbuttoned her blouse as he spoke. Her breath caught, one of the tiny noises that proved how much she wanted him yet again.

"You're my wife. Unless we both tell him we want him to touch you, he will never, ever say anything. That's why he stays away from you." He waited, but she just looked at him. "Do you want him to touch you?"

"Would you mind?"

"He's my brother, and he's in pain."

"Does he know how to do all those wonderful things you do?"

"Nev has a wicked imagination. I expect he knows those and more." Under his palms, her nipples hardened again. "What are you thinking about, wife?" he growled.

"My wicked dreams."

Her breathing sped up. He murmured an encouraging sound and prayed she'd continue. Whatever her dreams had been about, they certainly aroused her.

"Tell me what happened."

"These men tied me up and did wicked things to me. I couldn't escape, so it wasn't my fault. All I could do was lie there as they touched me."

He slid his hand inside her blouse and rolled her nipple between his fingers to encourage her.

"Before our first night, I'd never seen even a man's bare chest. But a few times, I saw dogs in the streets, and once, I saw a stallion mount a mare in a field we were passing."

"Were you frightened? A stallion can get very violent when he takes his mare."

She shook her head. "It excited me. I wanted to feel the same, to scream like that mare."

He snorted a laugh. "Believe me, you scream." He caressed her

neck. "I like it when you scream my name when you come. What else?"

"Sometimes there's two men, sometimes three. I'm blindfolded, so I don't know what they look like. If I refuse to do what they say, they spank me."

"I owe you a spanking, don't I?" He nudged her bottom with his cock. "Something tells me you refuse those men."

"They make me take off all my clothes and theirs. Since I can't see, I have to feel my way around. But I never know what happens next, only that they'll do terribly wonderful things to me."

"Now that you're a married woman, do you know what they would do to you?"

"What you did. But more than one man at a time," she whispered hoarsely. "Do you think men's cocks all taste the same?"

Ross was surprised she didn't react to Nev's choked gasp. He'd heard Nev's sock feet approach when Amy started talking about her dreams. She had her back to the stairs and didn't see him appear. Nev would wait to make sure of his welcome or fade away again.

"Do you want to find out?"

She nodded, biting her lip. "I like licking your cock. I want to know what it would feel like to have you kissing my pussy at the same time. Do you think Nevin would, um, want—"

"I want."

Amelia squeaked in surprise. She rose on one elbow and looked over his shoulder at Nevin.

"You up for it, brother?"

"Only if Amelia wants me."

* * * *

She sat up and looked at Nevin. Really looked at him. Though he stood still, she could see the tension quivering in him. The hawk nose, flared like a bull, was the same as Ross's, but the dark eyes were his

own. He stalked forward like a panther on silent feet. He stepped even closer, staring down at her. She licked dry lips. Though she'd just been thoroughly pleased, Nevin brought a white-hot heat to her. It was if his eyes traced over her body, waking every cell to life again.

"You afraid of me?"

"You won't hurt me. Neither will Ross."

"Yes, I will," replied Ross. "I will turn you over on my lap and spank your bare ass if you sass me. I will make you beg to come, holding you on the edge until you think you'll die."

"That's different," she said. "That's playing."

Ross lifted his head and laughed. "I like the way you play."

Nevin reached out his hand to her. She knew if she took his hand, she'd be saying "yes" to something no decent woman should do. But the rules of Eastern society didn't work here. She shivered in anticipation. Nevin raised an eyebrow in challenge. She lifted her chin and placed her hand in his. He gently eased her to stand. He was about an inch shorter than Ross, still way taller than she. The intensity in his eyes, the tension of his body, sent waves of vibration through her.

"I'm going to kiss you now," he said.

She expected an assault, but he brought his mouth gently onto hers. She snuggled closer, wrapping her arms around his waist. He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue between her teeth and upper lip. She sighed and opened her mouth fully, wanting more.

But he pulled back. "Thank you for accepting us as we are," he said. He placed her hands on the bulge below his belt. "You ready for me?"

Chapter Sixteen

Ross watched Amelia nod to his brother. She might have a fantasy of being “forced” to do things, but no one would ever hurt a woman under his protection. Most of the men he attacked had hurt a woman or child. He made sure they could never do it again. Once he put his baby in Amelia and she accepted Nevin fully, he would ease away a bit. Nev would care for her while he went man-hunting.

He smiled when Amelia reached for Nevin’s belt buckle. Nev pressed his hand against hers to slow her down. “You sure, brother?”

Ross nodded. “If it brings pleasure and harms no one, it’s right. But there’s one rule.”

They both looked over. “Amelia’s first child will be mine. Understand?”

Nevin broke out in a broad smile.

“Amelia,” he said. She looked up, gulping at his expression. “That means I get your sweet ass.” He clenched a hand over each of her back cheeks and squeezed. “I’ve been watching you wiggle it all day. Thinking how I would stretch that little hole with a finger. After a bit, I’d add another and another until you can take me there.”

Amelia looked dazed and eager.

“You’re not ready for that tonight, but soon,” said Ross.

As her husband, he had some rights. Before he let Nevin’s cock anywhere near her ass, he would show her the joys. Since he’d already come and she was so hot, maybe tonight. He swelled at the thought. He padded to the corner wash area. The sweet oil was still there. He’d planned to use it on her skin, but it was slippery enough for her ass. He poured some into the tin cup. He held the cup in his

hand to warm and watched his brother with his wife.

“Strip,” said Nevin.

When she didn’t move at his order, Nev spanked her bottom cheek with his palm. She jumped and finished undoing her shirt. It fell off her shoulders. Her skirt followed right after.

“Boots.”

She bent over to unbutton them. Nevin walked behind her, tilting his head to see better. He grinned. When she stood up, barefoot, he placed her hands on his chest.

“Take off my clothes, wench. Carefully.”

She bit her lip in concentration as she worked at Nevin’s buttons. When his shirt landed on the floor, she dragged her nails over his chest and belly. He hissed as her nails scraped under his waistband. He had to help her undo the leather belt buckle, but her nimble fingers had no trouble with the buttons on his pants. He held them up with one hand and towed her behind him with the other. He sat in a chair and lifted up a foot.

“Turn around and take my boot off.”

Nevin stared as she lifted her leg high and straddled him. She shuffled forward, catching his boot between her thighs. She struggled to pull the boot off, bending forward and flashing her ass.

She tossed the first boot aside then straddled his other leg and started again. This time, Ross noticed that she rubbed Nev’s boot against her clit while she pretended to pull it off. Nevin noticed as well and finally placed his bare foot against her plump cheeks and pushed. The boot easily came off once she knew her game was up.

As much as Ross wanted to see her do that again, this was for Nevin. He stripped while Amelia slid Nevin’s pants down his legs and helped him step out of them. Once Nev was naked, Amelia stood up straight, shoulders back and breasts quivering.

Nev walked around her, letting his fingers trail over her breasts, her ribs, her belly, her lower back. He kept his touch light and slow and was rewarded with tiny quivers and hisses as her special places

reacted.

"Ross says you have the sweetest pussy," he murmured from behind her. He gathered her hair in his hands and tangled it around his straining cock. He let it trail over him.

Ross walked over and faced her. He kissed her mouth gently then more deeply. He told her through his kiss how proud he was that she wanted this. The person closest in the world to him was his brother Nevin. Amelia wanting Nev was second to wanting him.

He pulled back and held her face in his hands. She must be in control, especially as Nevin hadn't been with a woman in weeks or longer.

"Lie on the bed," he said to Nevin.

* * * *

Amelia watched as Nevin followed Ross's directions. Her husband's near-twin held his stiff cock in his right hand so it stood straight up. His nostrils flared wide. He stared at her with wide, dark pupils.

"What should I do?"

"Whatever you want, Amelia. You said you could hold your tits around my cock. I bet Nev would want that."

"Oh, yeah," gasped Nevin. "I'll take that anytime."

Amelia looked from Nevin to Ross. They were eager for her to do anything she wanted with them. She didn't think it was lack of females as either man could pay to have a woman do whatever they wanted. No, they wanted her.

The women she helped back East had no power. As their father or husband's chattel, they were forced to bow down to a man's will. Beth said that a man might have power over his wife, but when three men wanted the same woman, she held the balance of power. Tonight, she had the power.

She let Ross guide her to the bed. She crawled up Nevin's body

on her hands and knees. He stared at her breasts as they swayed. He licked his lips. His hands grabbed the bars of the headboard so tight she almost saw them bend. She stopped when her knees were at his hips.

His cock throbbed along with the pulse in his neck. It was about the same size as her husband's, thick and strong. She reached out one hand. Nevin hissed as she touched him, his whole body jerking in automatic response.

She thought back to the pillow book. In one drawing, the woman's face wasn't visible as she'd draped her hair over the man's chest. She adjusted her knees and leaned forward. She let her hair dangle across his chest for a moment then dragged it back and forth. Some caught on his cock. He muttered something she was sure was a swear word but didn't recognize.

"Did you teach her that?" Nevin spoke through gritted teeth.

"Nope," replied Ross. "That in one of your pictures, Amy?"

She bent down, holding Nevin's cock tight, and licked his tip. His whole body spasmed. He groaned like a beast in agony. She licked him again. This time, he kept more control, merely hissing like a steam engine. Someone pulled her hair out of her eyes. Ross. He used his fingers to comb it back so it flowed over her shoulders.

"Nev wants you to suck his cock," he said. "He wants to feel your lips and see you take him into your mouth."

She looked at Nev's grimacing face. His eyes opened wide as she engulfed the head. Though both hands held him tight and she leaned on him with her chest, he still pressed up, encouraging her to go deeper.

She twitched when Ross parted her pussy lips with his fingers. She groaned around Nevin's cock when Ross slid a finger into her.

* * * *

Ross got comfortable behind Amelia's lush bottom. He pressed

her butt cheeks wide with his palms. She clenched his finger when he slid one into her soaking, hot pussy. Nevin, staring at Amelia sucking his cock, looked like every one of his birthdays and Christmases had finally been rewarded with one big present.

Did he look so besotted when Amelia rode his cock? Likely.

There was something about an eager woman wanting a man that made everything seem perfect for a while. Gillis used to have the same look, and he saw it regularly on Trace. If he'd waited around until Simon came out of the Elliott kitchen after making Beth scream, he'd likely have seen the same satisfied, stunned look.

His cock rose valiantly. He didn't think he could come, but he was hard enough to stroke Amelia into another explosion. He swished his finger in the oil, coating it well. A pink ring appeared when he scratched Amelia's tight rosebud. He pressed in like a skewer, past her natural resistance. When he felt her relax, he withdrew.

She held Nev's cock tight with one hand when she sat up. Nev stared at her breasts as if mesmerized. Ross snorted to himself. He still did the same. What was it about those handfuls that meant so much to a man? Was it because they were so different from his own body?

She settled herself, rubbing her wet pussy against Nevin's cock as best as she could. She stared down at him. Ross saw the tension in his smile, the lines beside his eyes. Amelia lifted a breast and squeezed. Nev gulped, hard.

"Don't you want to touch these?"

Nev pulled his hands from behind his head and reached for her breasts. She leaned forward to help. Ross saw that Venus smile of power blaze as Nevin gazed up in awe.

"Mmm, that feels good," she said.

Nev must have done something to her sensitive nipples because she suddenly gasped and thrust into his palms. He groaned. She took control back, grasping him in a two-handed grip. She leaned forward again, mouth opening. Ross's view improved, her pussy shining and

wet right before him.

“Jehosephat!” Nevin grabbed the bars again.

Ross, remembering the feel of her mouth when she sucked him and rubbed his hand over his own cock. Nev was probably fighting to keep from exploding. Having Amy’s soft mouth and strong tongue on his cock was something to be enjoyed as long as possible.

He worked her until three oiled fingers easily pressed into her ass. She moaned when he twisted them, pushing back against him for more. She was ready.

He poured oil into his cupped palm and set the tin mug on the floor. He knelt behind her. Using his hand to guide, he pressed the head of his cock into her hole.

“Push out, Amelia,” he whispered.

When she did, he easily slid in an inch. He stopped to let her adjust. Even though he’d just come, taking her ass made him ready to go again. He pressed in another inch. She groaned around Nev’s cock.

Ross gave her slow, controlled thrusts. He worked until he was deep in her. Damn, she was hot! Hot and tight.

He slid his clean hand around her belly. She jerked when he found her clit.

Nevin, eyes wild, suddenly pounded up, knocking Ross’s hand from her clit. Nev roared, bucking like an unbroken stallion, thrusting wildly. Ross thrust a few inches each way to slam his balls against her clit. He heard a high groan, Amy’s scream muffled by Nev’s cock. He pulled out, still semi-hard.

Nevin finally collapsed, gasping for air. After a moment, he opened his eyes, the wild coyote grin back again. He pulled Amelia forward until their lips met. He kissed her deeply, molding her breast with one hand. Finally, she sighed and settled, resting her head on his chest.

Ross got off the bed and cleaned up. When he turned back, Nev had wrapped his arms around Amelia, asleep on his chest. His eyes were closed, his lips pressed tight. Ross blew out the lamp. He

wouldn't want to see his brother's fight to hold back tears.

How long had it been since Nev held a loving woman in his arms? Ross had never done so until the night he met Amelia. Why would Nevin be any different?

He threw on some pants and went downstairs for a snack. He waited until Nevin, fully dressed, came downstairs.

"She's still sleeping," said Nev quietly.

Though he kept his head down, Ross saw the raw look on his brother's face. They both knew that Amelia would call out for Ross and would hold her husband during the night.

Nevin quietly let himself out the door. He didn't come home the next day.

Chapter Seventeen

“Is Nevin avoiding me? He hasn’t been home in two days.”

Amelia lay with her head on Ross’s chest. She’d started the day with kisses as Ross, pressing her thighs apart, nibbled and licked her awake. She beat the rooster’s morning cry by only a few minutes, thanks to her husband’s nimble tongue. Warm fingers of rosy morning light lit up the valley outside the window. After two days of rain, she planned to wash some of the men’s heavy clothing. Baby things were washed every day and hung on lines over the stove when it was wet.

“Maybe, but he’ll be back today since it’s dry.”

“Good. He can help me with all those dirty pants, socks, and shirts.”

Ross’s smile reached his eyes, crinkling the corners. He kissed her forehead.

“Nope. We’ve got logs to saw. Need boards for Auntie’s home.”

“You can’t saw in the rain?”

“The blade binds when it’s wet.”

She nodded and rested her head on his chest again. His heart, which had pounded like a steam engine after their session, was steady and strong. He combed her hair with his fingers, tickling her when it dangled on her back. The clatter of pots and impatient cry of a baby made Amelia press her hand on his chest to lever herself up.

“Oof!”

“Stop complaining. You had me sitting on your chest a few minutes ago, so don’t complain that one hand is going to squish you.”

She skittered off the bed and quick-stepped behind the screen before he could reach out a long arm and haul her back to him. By the

time she performed her morning ablutions, he was gone. She sighed in relief that she could get dressed alone. He liked to lean a shoulder against the wall and watch her. He didn't care if she was putting clothes on or off or just brushing her long hair.

Amelia slowly dressed. It was going to be a hot day, and she'd be getting soaked with wash water, so she didn't want too many layers. She'd shortened a couple of skirts to wear with her new boots. Walking was much easier without wet skirts flapping around her ankles.

She had a husband who appreciated her as well as two brothers-in-law and a baby niece who needed her. She enjoyed the company, but Tillie would be leaving with her husband in the next month or so. How could she feel at home when there was so little she was good at? Ross liked her body, but what about her brain... or her heart?

She descended the stairs and into the busy kitchen. With Auntie at the stove and Tillie feeding a baby, she began the day by taking down the dried baby cloths. She took an armful onto the sunny porch. She inhaled the morning air, full of the aroma of flowers blooming. She set the cloths on the table and began folding. She hummed as she worked, bending over to smooth the folds.

"Now, ain't that a purty sight before breakfast."

She whirled around at the lazy drawl, pressing the cotton to her chest as if it could protect her. Nevin stood below wearing only pants and boots. Droplets fell from his dark brown hair to his chest. One ran down to his belly. She watched its slow trip. She licked her lips, imagining tasting the fresh creek water off his body. The drop reached his waist and was absorbed by his pants. As she watched, the fabric below his waist stirred, tenting outward.

"You asking for something, ma'am? I'd be mighty pleased to help."

She raised her hot face. He winked.

"You surprised me," she said. She pursed her lips.

He slowly looked to the left and then right. He leaned slightly

forward and dropped his voice.

“Anytime you want to surprise me by finishing up what those eyes of yours started, let me know.” He stood straight and fingered his still-wet hair straight back. “In fact, don’t tell me, just do it.” He came up the stairs and stood beside her. “How about a morning kiss, Mrs. MacDougal?”

Before she could reply, he stepped close and wrapped his arms around her. She gulped and looked at his chest rather than meet his gaze. He had a few hairs around his nipples, but the rest of his front was smooth. The pulse in his neck throbbed, as did her pussy. She’d barely left her husband’s bed, yet this man made her heart race and her legs quiver!

“Amelia,” he whispered. “Say, ‘Good morning, Nevin.’”

She swallowed and took a breath. Inhaling made their chests touch. Only one thin layer of cotton separated her full breasts from his broad chest. She looked up.

“Good morning, Nevin,” she managed to choke.

She tried to back up, but he held tight. He shook his head. A corner of his mouth tilted up. He waited a beat and then lowered his head. She knew what he wanted. Sighing, she closed her eyes and tilted her head. Nevin’s lips were cool, as if he’d stuck his whole head in the meltwater stream. They warmed quickly against hers. He was so gentle she relaxed her lips and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Mmm,” he murmured in his throat, lips closed on hers. She opened her lips for more, but he stepped back. His chest heaved as he kissed her forehead.

“You’ll have to ask for more than that later,” he said. He placed his hands on her bottom and squeezed her cheeks. He released them and moved toward the door. “Breakfast’s waitin’,” he drawled. He touched a finger to his forehead as if it was a hat then went inside.

Amelia turned back to the baby nappies. She stared at them for a moment, gritting her teeth. If she was a lesser woman, she would have a stomping fit right then and there. He knew he was stirring up trouble

when he kissed her. And when she responded, he backed away and left her high and dry.

No, not dry. Wet and needy.

She folded the rest of the nappies, muttering to herself. She was so immersed in her work that she shrieked when an arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her from her task.

"Got a kiss for your husband, too?" He turned her around to face him.

"What does he think he's doing, kissing me like that and then walking away?" She knew she pouted up at Ross but didn't care that her lip stuck out like a child's.

Ross answered with a kiss of his own. This time, when she opened her lips, he obliged her, deepening the kiss. His hand found her bottom and pulled her snug against him. She felt the promise of his hard cock. She rubbed her hips against him, eagerly showing what she wanted. They finally broke off the kiss to breathe.

"Nevin wants the same thing you do," said Ross. "He's teasing, seeing if you want more." He fondled her aroused breast, the hard nipple easily visible through the thin fabric. "Do you want more, Amelia?"

"Yes." The word was out of her mouth before she thought of what it meant. She wanted more of Ross, of course. But Nevin?

"Nevin told you he wants to taste you. He wants to lick that sweet pussy of yours until you come all over him."

She quivered, remembering how Ross had woken her with his tongue. She moaned when he rubbed her nipple.

"We're working up the hill today. We'd enjoy a mid-afternoon break from a pretty woman, especially if she's naked."

"Outside?" She squeaked the word.

"That's the way Mother Nature intended."

One more squeeze and he released her. She stepped back and leaned her bottom against the table. Ross entered the kitchen, leaving her hot, bothered, and terribly flustered.

Take off her clothing outside?

A flash of heat rose from between her thighs, shooting past her swollen breasts to her forehead. There was no way she was going into that kitchen until the only male in the room was Tillie's baby son, Peter.

She might as well get things together for the laundry. She left the pile of neatly folded cloths on the table. She gracefully descended the few stairs and crossed the yard. Tillie had shown her the huge, black washing kettle. They'd filled it with the men's dirty clothing and let the rain soak them overnight. The two Indian women could read the weather signs and insisted today would be sunny.

* * * *

Hours later, Amelia grunted as she poured out the last kettle of wash water. Clean socks, shirts, and pants hung over every possible surface around the yard. The way the sun beat down, at least the socks and shirts would be dry by evening. She'd grabbed breakfast and dinner on the fly, avoiding the men as they came in to eat. She hadn't missed the hot looks from both Ross and Nevin, however. She felt their eyes on her bottom while she bent over the kettle. They passed as she stirred the clothes with a thick stick.

A quiet walk up to the creek would be refreshing. She could take off her boots and dip her feet into the water. If no one was around, perhaps she could take a quick dip. Considering how cold the water was, it would have to be quick. Though it was late May, there was still lots of snow melting from the mountains surrounding the valley.

She walked uphill toward the regular sound of a saw cutting through a log. This time, Nevin was the one uphill and Ross pulled the blade down to create wide pine boards from thick trees. During the rain, they'd checked the cattle as well as other ranch work that she didn't yet understand. Perhaps once she understood all the women's work, she would learn about the men's. That might be a while,

though, considering everything that Auntie and Tillie did.

The caw of a raven announced her presence though she was going to wait until they finished before interrupting them. They didn't stop, however, keeping the rhythm going until they ran out of log.

Ross stood up and stretched out his back. He and Nevin windmilled their arms and rotated their shoulders. Muscles rippled over their beautiful brown skin.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?" Nevin tilted his head toward Amelia while looking at Ross.

"You here to watch us work or for something else?" Ross shook his head before scratching it briskly with both hands. Sawdust and wood chips fell out. Only then did he turn to her.

She clasped her hands behind her back. "I thought I might dip my feet in the creek."

Nevin snorted a laugh. "I was hoping I'd be the one doing the dipping."

She didn't understand what he meant until he shook out a leg and adjusted himself. The heat from washing clothes was nothing compared to the jolt that hit her pussy.

"She's blushing, Nev. That means she's hot." He turned and began walking toward her. "You hot, wife? I think a dip in the creek is a good idea."

He reached her and pulled her into his arms. His sweaty chest pressed against her perspiration-soaked dress. He smelled like a man who started out clean and worked hard all day. Her nostrils flared as his musky scent enveloped her along with his arms.

She licked a drop of sweat from his nipple. He groaned. He dropped his hands to her bottom and began pulling up fabric. She tried to pull away as the breeze touched the backs of her knees, but he held tight and kept lifting. In a moment, the sun's rays touched her bare bottom.

"That's one fine ass," groaned Nevin from behind her.

Ross walked his fingers over her bottom, pulling her cheeks apart.

He slid a finger between her pussy lips from behind. She clenched, moaning her need.

“That’s it,” choked Ross.

He lifted her by the waist and carried her uphill to the narrow log supporting the one they’d just cut. It reached her hips. Nevin tossed him a shirt, which he placed over the wood. The top surface was flat. Ross stood behind her, massaging her back cheeks.

“Tell me to stop, Amy. Tell me now or have both of us.”

Nevin faced her, rubbing his hard cock through his pants. The way he stared at her, as if he would die unless he saw Ross take her, sent a shiver of heat through her. Staring back at Nevin, she lifted her hands and began unbuttoning her damp dress. Ross, standing behind her, didn’t move, but his breathing roughened.

Nevin’s eyes followed her hands, mesmerizing her. She kept the fabric edges closed until she reached the last one at her hips. She held her lapels and opened her dress, revealing her breasts to the sunlight for the first time. Ross moaned and held them from behind, massaging them with his callused skin. She arched her back, thrusting into his hands. Her dress fell to the ground.

She dropped her right hand to her curls and parted them. Every movement she made increased the heat in Nevin’s eyes. He licked his lips, eyes flicking from her breasts to her fingers busy in her pussy.

“Damn!” he muttered. He opened his pants and drew out his cock. The sun caught the drop on the tip, making it sparkle. Better than gold. She licked her lips and circled her clit.

“She’s wet, Nev,” whispered Ross hoarsely.

“Amelia?”

The word was both question and plea. She nodded.

Nevin knelt in front of her. She opened her legs. He inhaled, closed his eyes, and moaned. He tentatively touched her clit with his finger. She tilted her pelvis forward, bending her knees to open herself up. His first touch was light, almost a tickle. She pressed her hips forward. He took her offer and kissed her pussy, inhaling deeply.

Ross turned her to face the log and pressed her feet apart. Big hands grasped her hips and lifted. Ross sighed as he slid into her pussy. Nevin, still kneeling, groaned. Ross's fullness stretched her, straining her senses to overload. Nevin stared at the place where she and Ross joined, the hand on his cock keeping rhythm with Ross's slow thrusts.

"Watch Nev," ordered Ross in a rasping whisper. "See how much he wants to fuck you. Hard and fast, Amy. That's what fucking as lovemaking is. He wants his cock to be deep inside you, like this."

She moaned as his balls slapped against her clit, tantalizing her.

"Nev wants to suck your clit to make you come."

She gasped and clenched at the thought. She loved Ross's tongue and his cock. But to have both at once!

"She wants it, Nev," gasped Ross. Nevin's eyes opened wide. "Don't you, Amy. Nod if you want my brother to lick and suck your clit while I fuck you. Do you want it?"

She nodded, eager for more and not caring how or why.

Nevin moved under her. She couldn't see his face anymore but, oh! She felt his tongue. Ross widened his stance. He grasped her thighs, lifted, and spread her wide.

Nevin's tongue slid over and around her clit. Ross tilted his cock so it scraped against something that revved her higher. Nev nipped her clit with his lips. She clenched, and Ross sped up. A hand brushed against her breast then squeezed. She wriggled, her body one mass of need.

Nev pinched her nipple and clit at the same moment that Ross plowed into her spot, and she fell apart. She shook with the spasms, fire running from between her legs out to every part of her body. She was so overloaded she barely noticed the loss of stimulation on her breasts and clit. Ross grunted and lost his rhythm, the jerking motion setting off an after-quake. She heard Nevin below her give a deep cry, and then something hot splashed her belly.

Ross pulled out, hauled her around, and pressed her to his chest.

She clung with her arms around his chest, her legs around his hips as his tongue plunged deep into her mouth. She fought his tongue with her own, forcing him back so she could impale him. She finally pulled out, gasping for air, crying and laughing at the same time. Ross held her, both of them shaking.

“If you’re finished, there’s work to be done, lads.”

Amelia peeked over Ross’s shoulder. Gillis, wearing boots, kilt, and a shirt, stared back with one red, bushy eyebrow high. With his legs wide apart and fists on his hips, he looked like a wild, red pirate. His face was redder than usual. Was it exertion, sunburn, or a blush of surprise at seeing the three of them standing in the clearing almost naked?

Or had he arrived earlier? How much had he seen? A rush of lust flashed over her. Had he watched Ross enter her from behind while Nevin licked and sucked her until she was crazy wild? What did he think about his brothers enjoying her while his wife, her sister, was gone forever?

“That took more out of me than a day of sawing,” gasped Nevin to Gillis. “I gotta cool down.”

Amelia turned her head. Nevin, naked as the day he was born, shambled over to the creek. Ross set her down, waiting until she could stand. He turned her in the same direction and slapped her back cheek. “You’d better do the same.”

Face flaming and tissues swollen, she carefully walked to the water. Her wet thighs rubbed against her pussy, making her already want more. She felt two sets of male eyes boring into her back.

Or backside, more likely.

“She’ll do,” she heard Gillis say over the post-orgasmic buzz in her ears.

Keeping her back to Gillis, Amelia took off her boots and approached the stream. She went upriver to where Nevin sat cross-legged. She caught the gleam in his eye too late. She managed to close her eyes before a handful of cold water splashed her front. She

wiped her face, eager to retaliate.

"Since I got you sticky, I'd better wash you off," said Nevin from right in front of her. Like Ross, he moved too quickly and silently for such a big man. He splashed more water on her belly and rubbed. She fixed her eyes on his scar.

"Touch it if you like," he said.

She traced one of the four grooves. It was deeper near his shoulder, as if a slash mark had hit there first. "Some animal attacked you."

"Black bear. *Padooa* is my totem," he replied calmly.

"How old were you when this happened?"

"Old enough to meet Bear and survive. Older than Ross was when he met Raven."

"I didn't see any scars on Ross that look like a bird pecked or scratched him."

"Raven has a lot of messengers. He keeps at least one near Ross at all times. I suspect Bear wanted to make sure I'd remember him."

"Hard to forget with that across your chest."

Nevin shrugged. "It's a part of who I am."

She looked back at Ross, busy pulling off his boots. Gillis held up his finger as if lecturing him on something. A splash of cold water between her legs brought her attention back to Nevin. He wagged his eyebrows and leered.

"That part I can wash myself, thank you," she replied. She knelt on one knee in the stream of snowmelt straight from the mountain and splashed herself clean. Shivering, she scampered out of the water. She climbed the bank and stood in the sun heating the clearing. Goosebumps covered her skin. Her breasts were hard and nipples jutting from the cold.

"Amy!"

She turned at the call. Ross rolled her dress into a ball and tossed it as he walked toward her. She caught it and shook it out, holding it to her front like a shield as she watched him approach. Dressed, her

husband was handsome, but this golden man at one with nature was magnificent. Long legs with strong thighs, a taut belly flaring out to a wide, muscular chest, and equally strong arms. Between his legs, a nest of black curls couldn't hide the pair of orbs and the cock that swung with every step. The cock that was, once again, growing. She shook her head at him.

"Cover that up. We've got work to do."

He laughed. "You don't know what cold water does to a hard cock, do you?"

She shook her head. He pointed behind her. She turned to see Nevin with a melodramatically mournful expression on his face. His cock lay limp. Just ten minutes earlier, it was big enough for her to wrap both hands around it yet still leave lots sticking out.

"Poor thing doesn't know what happened," Nevin muttered.

"Dinna worry, lad. It'll be back when ye need it," called Gillis.

Amelia turned to Gillis. His eyes flickered over her from toes to hair. She flushed, realizing he must have seen the three of them together. For a moment, she thought he smiled.

"Auntie sent me to tell ye dinner's ready," Gillis said. "Take yer time, lads. Ye can have whatever's left after I'm full. It'll take a wee bit for me to eat. I'm a mite hungry after watching all that hard work ye did with Amelia." After another thorough look at her, he turned and walked away, leaving her shivering and the men shriveled.

"Did you see the way Gil looked at Amelia?"

"He said he was hungry. I think he considered having Amelia for dessert," replied Ross to Nev's question. He dropped his head back, inhaled, then let it out. He smiled at her and took her dress from her cold fingers. She held onto his shoulder as he helped her step into it.

"Thank you," he said and kissed her bare shoulder. "Seeing us share you is helping Gillis get better." He walked past her to the stream and sat down, huffing at the cold.

"I can't believe I did that!"

Amelia bit her lip as she finished buttoning up her dress. She tried

to smooth the wrinkles, but it would need a good wash and ironing. Auntie and Tillie would know she'd taken her dress off but not with whom. "I wouldn't even have taken off my dress if I knew he was near."

Ross stood up, as shriveled as Nevin had been. "We could have done that without taking off your dress." He slicked his hands over his body, skimming the water from his skin. "One of these days, I'm going to press you against a wall and lift your skirts."

She watched his cock stir to life.

"I think it's time I started wearing a kilt. No buttons to undo or pants to trip over."

His cock grew, stretching down his thigh. He took it in his hand and lifted it.

"How about a kiss before dinner, wife?"

Chapter Eighteen

“You sure you don’t want company? I could use a trip to town,” said Nevin to Ross. He let the axe land on the chopping block so he could wipe his face. “Even better, how ’bout I take Amelia to get her boots, and you fill the woodbox.”

Ross sucked his teeth as he shook his head. “I want some time alone with my wife.”

“You have her every night,” groused Nevin. He set a chunk of alder on the maple block. He picked up the axe and swung hard in an arc. The axe split the wood with a loud crack. Two stove-size pieces fell to the ground. He had to push down on the handle to get the axe to release.

“I want her to be the one to ask for you to join us rather than us encouraging her.”

Nevin set up another chunk of wood. “I know. Doesn’t make it easier to listen to the two of you go at it each night.” The axe hit again, just as hard. “I don’t know how Gil can stand it.”

“He knows we put up with it for years with him and Prue.”

“That was our choice.”

“And Gil is choosing to leave Amelia alone.”

Nevin looked up at his slightly older brother. “You saw him watching her the other day in the clearing. The kilt might hide his hard-on, but the rest of his body showed he wanted her.” He rolled out his shoulders, stretching the muscles. “Not all of his pain is because you have Amelia and he doesn’t have Prue.”

“I asked. He says he’s not ready to share my wife.”

“That’s his mouth talking. And I don’t mean just his cock wants

her. You told me holding Amelia at night was almost as good as the sex.”

Ross nodded. He'd never before known what it was like to hold someone in the night. Amelia not only held him back, she depended on him. Knowing that made him work hard all day just to come home to her welcoming smile. He'd sworn he'd not get sucked into that trap, but he had. He'd enjoy it as long as he could then pass her on to Nevin.

“I don't know what that's like, but Gil does. He won't heal until a woman holds him to her breast and lets him cry.”

“Where did that bit of wisdom come from?”

Nevin bent over to stack the wood he'd split. Ross waited patiently. Before Amelia, no female had ever held him to his breast to comfort him. Not that he needed any comforting these days. He desperately wanted it as a child, though. He couldn't remember his mother holding him while he nursed, but who would? He did remember Father and his older brothers making sure he wouldn't be a sissy. He had a few scars from those lessons.

But comfort from a woman? The first night when Amelia fell asleep on his chest, trusting him, he kept still so she wouldn't move. Something in his soul began melting that night. A woman could weaken a man, making him want to take her in her body no matter what. Amelia's soft sighs, the way her arms wrapped around him in sleep after he'd fully pleased her, was life-changing. Losing that would turn his life a dark gray. That was what Gillis remembered and thought he'd never have again.

Nevin stood up. He rested the axe head on his boot and stared Ross in the eye. “I asked Lily. She said he'll eventually get over Prudence dying, but he'll need help.”

Ross looked up into the mountains. He wouldn't be free until the men he sought roasted in hell. The need for vengeance was the only thing that kept him going. Then Amelia showed up in that dim hotel room.

“Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

It was Nevin’s turn to look up and away. Ross waited until he sighed and turned back.

“It’s not you he needs. It’s Amelia. And Lily said it’s not the sex. We all know why he won’t go near the house after supper. But Lily said if he could hold Amelia and have her hold him, they could both grieve.”

“How the hell are we going to find a way to leave Amelia all alone here overnight?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Lily’s wrong, and he’ll come around.”

“You know how stubborn he is.”

Nevin nodded. “Almost as stubborn as you.”

* * * *

Amelia, wearing going-to-town underthings, settled on the wagon seat and smoothed her dress over her knees. It took her an hour yesterday to find the right dress in her trunks. Something good enough for town but not too fancy. The blue gown with strips of tiny pink roses gave her a lift, yet it wasn’t so fancy the other women would think she put on airs.

A half hour this morning with the sad irons made sure the store-bought white lace ruffles stood out from her bodice. Two petticoats fluffed out the skirt. Her corset supported her chest. Going without a corset when the wagon swayed and thudded over the rutted road was not comfortable.

“Don’t think you can haul me in your lap and kiss me,” she instructed Ross. “No playing until the way home. I don’t want to get all mussed up and have the townsfolk think I’m a hoyden.”

“You’re married to the MacDougal Devil. Not much you could do to make things worse.”

“What if I tore off my clothes and strutted down the center of the street?” She glanced at his groin. The erection that had poked her

during their get-in-the-wagon kiss had grown.

"That's one way I could come into town without anyone noticing me." He drew on the reins to ensure the horses didn't go too fast downhill. "Of course, I'd have to kill every man jack of them for looking at my wife."

"Hmph! Nevin and Gillis, too?"

"Nah," he drawled. "They've already seen you in nothing but your boots and wide smiles, top and bottom."

She flushed at the reminder. Every time she thought of that sunny afternoon, her thighs got wet. All the way home, she'd dreaded Auntie and Tillie knowing what she and Ross must have been doing. But Tillie smiled and sighed, saying she couldn't wait for her man to return.

When Amelia apologized to Auntie for not being there to do more of the work, it took her a while to figure out Auntie's reply. Only while folding the clothes did she realize Auntie meant her first job was to grow babies. Auntie didn't mind what she did with any of the brothers, as long as she made babies.

Auntie must have told Nevin the same thing. This morning, he looked at her like he wanted to bend her over and take her like Ross had. It made her hot. Worse, the man knew it. He saw her nipples harden and the way the heat flowed up her face. He winked, and she knew he was silently saying, "Anytime you want, I'm ready for more."

Was she ready? Her body certainly thought so.

A hand snuck under her dress and between her legs. Needy from Nevin's heated looks and Ross's kiss, she opened her thighs. When his fingers slid between the slit in her knickers, they both groaned.

"Damn, woman, you're wetter than a cat caught in an August thunderstorm."

She leaned back and tilted her bottom, wanting more of his callused fingers.

"You're remembering how Nev sucked your clit when I bent you

over that log.”

He chuckled when she clenched his fingers.

“If you want more of Nev, you have to ask for it. He won’t come to our bed otherwise. He wants you, bad. But it has to be your choice.”

He rubbed her clit, making her gasp as the tension coiled in her. She imagined Nevin licking her clit while Ross waited to pound. She moaned, wanting more, but he pulled his hand out.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded, no longer caring about wrinkles.

“Don’t want to mess up your clothes on the way to town.” He smirked at her.

“You’re making me crazy on purpose!”

She wiggled on the seat, rubbing her thighs together. He nudged the horses to speed up. They were on flat land next to the river, so it was easy going. The rumble of the wagon sent a vibration through her bones that wound her up even more.

He pretended to ignore her though she saw the hard-on pressing against his pants. He had threatened to wear a kilt to town but backed out at the last minute. She smiled at him having to suffer as well. She’d flirt with him in town. On the way home, she’d let him take care of her needs.

* * * *

Amelia’s new boots clunked on the boardwalk as she hurried toward the hotel. The hollow sound wasn’t as crisp as her heeled boots, but practicality had to win over fashion. Hemming her skirts up two inches meant her toes stuck out with every quick step. The advantage was she’d not have to wash the bottom six inches of her dress when it rained. She turned right at the hotel, following the path between red brick and the squared timbers of the bank.

Her objective, the privy, waited behind the building. Next time she went to town, she’d not have a large cup of tea for breakfast

followed by another with Patsy Tanner. The heavy tread of a man's boots made her pause. He entered the privy and shut the door.

She hurried past and climbed the stairs to the second floor balcony, holding her skirts high to move faster. She'd never heard of a two-story privy but was very glad of it today. Ahead of her, the open door beckoned. She heaved a sigh of relief and rushed forward. She bolted the door, grateful that the tiny room was deeper and therefore gave her more room to lift her skirts without wrinkling them too badly.

Five minutes later, she washed her hands in the basin Sophie McLeod kept on a rough board table by the hotel's back door. Now that her urgent business was taken care of, she took a moment to look around. The rattle of wagons and noise of people was subdued here at the back of town. The smell of horse dung was as strong as out front, and the privy added to it.

The hotel was deeper than the other buildings. From the corner of the verandah, she could see what lay behind each establishment. Baldy's Saloon, to her far right, had a pile of broken barrels and other garbage on the far side of the open back door. A small man followed a broom out the door. She recognized the sound of the broken bottles he swept the side of the step. His hairless head suggested he was the owner.

Next door to her right, close to the street, was the small assay office, then the bank. Neither had a back door or side windows. She hadn't been in either building yet. With no gold or money of her own, she had no need. The banker's home was next.

To her far left was Miss Lily's two-story business. A heavy wagon pulled by mules was parked by the door. Two men strained to unload wooden boxes. She couldn't read the words printed but expected they contained liquor. A big woman followed them out of the building and began arguing, gesturing at two more boxes and pointing inside. Rosa was hard at work, managing Lily's business as if it was her own.

Amelia descended the stairs, wanting to get back to the mercantile before Ross returned. He'd told her not to walk down the street without him, but she couldn't have waited a moment longer. She reached the bottom and turned to her right. A hand grabbed her around the waist and pulled her around the corner. Before she could scream, another covered her mouth. She flailed out with her right hand. It caught the corner of the brick, scraping her knuckles.

The man pulled her back to his chest. She inhaled the stink of old sweat, tobacco, and fresh whiskey. He held her mouth so she couldn't see his face. She struggled, kicking out with her new boots, but he just grunted when her heel connected.

"Stay still, or I'll use my knife."

She immediately stopped struggling.

"Ya shouldn't'a married an Injun when they's white men goin' wantin'."

She gagged when the smell of his whispered words passed her nose.

"I kin show ya what a real man does to a woman." He ground against her clenched buttocks. "Feel that? White meat waitin' fer ya." He inhaled deeply. "Mmm, yer gonna be mine. Me and my pardner, we'll show ya." He banged his groin against her in a disgusting parody of what she shared with Ross. "Ye'll soon be a widder, and mine. And don't tell about this warnin' or I'll kill yer sister's brat."

He pushed her forward. She stumbled on the rough ground. When she caught her balance and turned, the passage was empty. She leaned her back against the rough brick to catch her breath. She brushed away furious tears. She would not be scared by the ridiculous threats of a coward.

Beth had stood her ground and defended herself against three men determined to hurt her. She'd even shot two of them! Though the man who hired them, Big Joe Sheldrake, was still around, Beth hadn't been hurt since.

Ross said the MacDougals came from a long line of warriors. She

was part of that line now. God willing, she'd produce strong sons and daughters to carry the proud name forward into the future.

She would not be cowed by nasty words from a disgusting blowhard. And how dare he think the color of his skin made him a better person? Nevin and Ross on their most cantankerous days were from a different species as that beast! If he scrubbed his hide and mouth for a week, dressed as the finest dandy, and had enough money for hot and cold running servants, he would still be a brute!

Amelia set her shoulders back and stepped around the corner. Though she held the banister, she went upstairs with steady steps. She washed her face and right hand with soap, wincing but knowing it was needful to clean the scrape. Fresh water on her handkerchief, dabbed over her eyes, would hide her ridiculous tears. She then used her damp cloth to wipe away the few stains on the arm of her dress. She took another moment to put the whole episode behind her then descended the stairs as if wearing a Paris gown at the Christmas ball.

As she neared the street, she stumbled on a loose board. She caught herself, but the incident made her heart race once more. She rested her hand on the brick for a moment while she rotated her ankle to make sure she hadn't sprained it. A thought came to her. If Ross asked about the marks on her hand, she'd tell him she stumbled in her new boots, which was true. She'd say her hand got scratched by the brick, which was also true. He didn't need to know the two didn't happen at the same time.

After all, she had little to tell him. A smelly man a few inches taller had held her arm for a moment and said he wanted her. Considering the looks she caught from the miners while at the Elliotts', a lot of the men wanted to find a woman of their own. This one just happened to catch her unawares. That would not happen again.

She'd ask Patsy for a small knife in a sheath, one she could sew a pocket for under her skirts. Beth had done the same with her pistol and killed the beasts who threatened her. Her plan was women's

business, something Ross didn't need to know about.

She looked both ways, lifted her skirts high to avoid the dust and dung, and crossed the street to the mercantile.

* * * *

Ross pushed the mercantile's door open, causing the bell to tinkle. Everyone in the place, including his wife, stared at him. Patsy Tanner stared because he usually came in the back and spoke with her husband about his needs. The other women dropped their eyes and turned back to what they were doing though the volume dropped a bit. You'd think his being married and wearing white man's clothes would make them less skittish.

Amelia turned away as well, her color high. Had she been talking about him? Something was bothering her, something to do with him. His lip twitched. Maybe she was explaining why she'd screamed his name so many times that first night.

He wanted to haul her into his arms and show those flustered hens how a real man kisses his woman. Instead, he lifted his hat to them. Mrs. Dawes looked him in the eye and smiled. The shy woman had gotten to know the MacDougals better as Prue traded her handmade lace for preserves from Mrs. Dawes's kitchen. He nodded politely as he passed by.

He grabbed a big dill pickle as he passed the stove. Since it wouldn't be used for the summer, John Tanner stuck the pickle barrel on top. He held the pickle high so Patsy would see and add it to his bill. He crunched down, relishing the sour taste that zapped his mouth. It was gone by the time he entered the back room, the aftertaste sweet on his tongue.

John Tanner placed another hundred-pound bag of beans on a pile. He wiped his forehead and nodded at Ross.

"Ah put three bags of beans aside," said John in his slow drawl.

"My wagon's parked out front this time. I'll carry them through."

"Got yerself a wife."

"Yep."

"Good. Settle ye down some."

Ross followed John out the wide door to the street behind. The mule team was gone, but the heavy wagon wasn't yet unloaded. Both men lifted a bag onto their shoulders. Nothing else would get done until John had the wagon unloaded and everything put away.

They worked in tandem for fifteen minutes. Though John must have been over fifty, he worked as quickly and efficiently as Ross. The extra help wouldn't be mentioned, but John kept his eye out for those who knew how things should be done.

"Big order came through."

"Smythe?"

"Ah, yep."

"I don't trust the man." Ross set the last bag down. "Fool thinks to prove his worth by building a fancy house." He snorted. "I won't do business with anyone who bets their ranch on the turn of a card." He rolled his shoulders. "Unless he pays in gold up front."

"You tryin' to teach me to suck eggs?"

"No, sir. You may be old, but you've never been stupid."

Though Ross received a grunt in reply, the older man looked pleased. He picked up a broom. Ross lifted half-full barrels so he could sweep underneath.

"Saw a couple strangers. Think they're sneakin' into the Emslow place." He stopped to catch Ross's eye. "I get up for that fool dog at night. Last full moon, I seen 'em while he was doin' his business."

"I thought she locked the doors at nine o'clock."

He nodded. "One of 'em reminds me of her. Couldn't right tell with his nose drooping into his neckerchief."

Ross scratched his jaw. "Who was he with?"

"Some two-bit drifter. Covered the bottom half of his face just the same." John bent over to get the broom into a corner. "Seems to me you been lookin' for somebody a long time."

“Could be.”

“If’n I knew what to look for...”

Ross kept working. Only Gillis knew he wanted vengeance, but he didn’t know why. Nobody else knew, except the three men he would kill or die trying. Amelia had interrupted his plans. Stuck at the ranch, he couldn’t search or follow up rumors. John was in the right place.

“Three men,” he said. “One’s got the bottom of his nose sliced with a knife.”

“That would hurt.”

“I sure hope so. The other has powder burns on the bottom part of his face from way back. They might have faded some.”

“A woman?”

Ross nodded.

“How long?”

“Most of my life.”

John hesitated for a moment then kept sweeping. Ross let him work it out.

“That why you come back from your ma’s folks?”

“Yep.” The Tanners had welcomed his mother to the town they’d created. They valued her healing, especially when babies came. Her skin color didn’t matter a damn then, and his didn’t matter now.

John sucked his teeth as he worked. This time, he stood to look Ross in the eye. He had to tilt his head a bit to do it, but there was no loss of power because he was shorter.

“You said three.”

“My raven went after the other’s head. Blood was pouring down when he raced his horse away.”

“Grow back hair, wear a hat, and nobody’d know.”

Ross shrugged. “Maybe he’ll go bald. Lose his hat.”

John nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He turned his back and walked away.

Ross picked up a bag, put it on his shoulder, and headed to the front of the store.

Chapter Nineteen

“Yer Pa’s drunk agin’.” The barefoot boy whispered the words to his ragged companion. “Ya gotta run away.”

“I cain’t, Billy. If I run, he’ll find me, lock me up where nobody’ll see, and beat on me regular. I’d rather be dead.” The second boy’s harelip made him mumble the words.

“What’cha gonna do? He’s got such a mad on, he’s like to kill ya.”

Ernie looked around. Their hiding spot, behind two barrels separating the mercantile and Mrs. Dawes’s dress shop, was almost useless. Baldy’s Saloon was across the street and down a bit. His father was inside, spending the gold dust someone had given him. He sure as heck hadn’t worked for it. Work was something other men did.

He had to get out of town without being seen. In front of the mercantile was a wagon waiting to be loaded. As he watched, a tall, dark-skinned man came out of the door with a hundred-pound burlap bag over his shoulder. He set the bag in the wagon with a thump and went back inside. Everyone knew that man always carried at least three knives and that he could throw them in a flash.

But he saw the same man rescue the Tanners’ old dog. A pair of drunken cowboys, yelling and shooting, had raced their horses through town as the dog crossed the street. Everyone knew the dog was deaf and half blind. He watched in horror as the horses raced toward the dog. Suddenly, a man ran into the street, swept the dog into his arms, and ran across the street just before the horses flew past. When he let the dog into the mercantile, light shone on his dark face.

He looked directly at Ernie. He touched his finger to his lips and walked toward the hotel.

When it was full dark, Ernie stopped by the hotel to see if they'd tossed any scraps out. Instead of fighting the dogs for a gnawed bone, he found a wooden bowl and spoon set on a barrel. Stew, still warm, with a handful of biscuits to dunk in it. Since then, every night, there was a little something for him in the bowl. Mrs. McLeod had even hired him to do some chores now and then. Thanks to Mrs. MacDougal giving him a nickel for hauling water, he almost had enough for a new pair of pants. If she was that nice, maybe her man wouldn't kill him.

"I gotta get me a job."

"Pa said a rich dude hired him to build a fancy house. Maybe you could work there."

"Naw, it's gotta be somewheres else."

Billy stared from the wagon to his friend and back. "Not with the MacDougal Devil?"

"Yep."

"He'll kill ya!"

"Cain't be worse'n my pa." He scratched at the healing scab on his shin. "Ya better leave afore he sees ya."

Billy heaved a sigh. "Wish ya could get a job with my pa." They stood up. Billy held out a dirty hand. They shook solemnly. "Hope ye don't get killed," he said before running away.

Ernie brushed off his ragged clothes as best he could. He used both hands to push his long, matted hair out of his eyes. He raised his head high. Pa hit him whenever he saw his ugly face, so he grew his hair long and tilted his face to cover his ugly lip. No more. Mr. MacDougal never let anyone push him around. That was the type of man he wanted to be if he lived to grow up.

He pushed his shoulders back and walked over to the wagon with fists clenched and chest tight. Even though the man had saved a dog, it didn't mean he would want the spawn of the devil working for him.

If his father hated the sight of his face, why would a stranger take him in? The man set the second bag in the wagon. He stood up, facing away.

"You tryin' to sneak up on me, boy?"

"No, sir, Mr. MacDougal. I come over askin' fer a job."

The huge man turned and glowered down at him. Ernie automatically ducked his head then forced himself to look up. He'd never seen anything other than hawks with those strange, gold eyes. He felt like a mouse right before huge claws caught him and carried him away to eat.

"You scared of me?"

"Yessir." He heard the tremble in his high voice. He swallowed and tried to sound older, more confident. "But I need a job. I'm small and skinny, but I kin do lots of chores. I don't eat much, and I kin sleep in the barn."

"Yer pa found some dust?"

Ernie nodded, his face heating.

Mr. MacDougal suddenly had a knife in his hand. A long, thin, wickedly sharp one. He held it near the tip and dug out a sliver from his palm. Ernie imagined that knife sliding between his ribs, killing him faster than he could think. He gritted his teeth to stop them chattering and locked his shaking knees. Those eyes flashed at him for a moment, and the knife disappeared.

"Mrs. MacDougal's from the city. She's not used to hard work." The big man spoke over Ernie's head, gazing down the street as if watching one of the stray dogs scratch fleas. "Can you keep the wood box and water barrels full, do chores, and keep the barn clean and tidy?"

The man's golden eyes suddenly bored deep enough to see into his soul. Unable to speak with his throat so tight, Ernie nodded. He was careful to keep his hands still and in sight.

"Git in the wagon between the beans and settle yourself. Then don't move no matter what. Understand?"

Ernie's breath shuddered out in a gasp. He blinked hard. At a nod from his new boss, he scrambled into the wagon. He had to lie on his side to fit between the bags. The stink of fresh burlap clogged his nose, but nothing was going to stop him from escaping. A prickly blanket settled over him. It smelled of sweaty horses. He heard the footsteps of his new boss fade as he walked back into the store. Though the sun shone down hot on that blanket, he shivered.

He waited, hot and thirsty, as things were piled around him. Some light packages were even set on top of his shoulder. He didn't move. Finally, he heard the high laugh of a woman approach. The wagon barely moved as Mr. MacDougal set her on the seat. The wagon shook when he climbed up. The wagon jerked a bit before rolling forward.

"Where's that ugly brat of mine? You git here now, or I'll tan your hide!"

Ernie's heart spasmed as the familiar slurred voice erupted almost beside him. The saloon was in the wrong direction out of town, which meant his pa had come looking for him. Though it was dark under the blanket, he jammed his eyes shut and pretended he wasn't there. The wagon kept on rolling, leaving the yells of rage behind.

"Soon as it's safe, we'll stop and let you out," said Mr. MacDougal quietly.

"What are you talking about?"

When the woman spoke, Ernie could almost hear a laugh in her voice. Had his ma ever sounded like that? He would never know as he'd killed her by being born.

"I hired a boy to help with the chores."

"But—"

"He can do chores a he—heck of a lot better than you. If you have more time, maybe you'll learn how to cook." The missus sputtered. She was suddenly silent for a minute then sighed. When Mr. Ross spoke again, he sounded like he had a frog in his throat. "We'll have more time to work the ranch. It'll be good to have a man around to

see to you when we're away."

Ernie stopped himself in time when Mr. Ross called him a man. He'd almost inhaled deep. The dirt and straw dust from the blanket would have started him coughing and choking. They'd know he listened in on their private conversation and toss him out of the wagon.

"I'll have you know, Mr. MacDougal, that I can cook just fine!"

She spoke so uppity that Ernie winced, waiting for the slap and cry of pain. Any woman or child talking back got hit. Men got punched or shot.

"Your biscuits are getting a mite better, but I didn't marry you to get a cook."

Mr. MacDougal didn't sound angry. Ernie heard quiet murmurs and...kissing? He gulped. Too bad he couldn't close his ears like he could his eyes.

Finally, Mrs. MacDougal cleared her throat. "I *do* have more than one talent. I know how to draw, though I need more practice, and—"

"That's not what I want to practice with you, wife."

She laughed at his growled reply. Ernie wasn't sure why, but hearing that laugh made him wish his mother had lived. Maybe then his father wouldn't be so mean.

It was another half hour before the wagon stopped. His right shoulder and hip were sore from being knocked against the wooden boards of the wagon, and half his body felt cramped. The light packages were lifted off, but he still waited.

"Don't move," growled a deep voice.

He heard a ripping sound. Sunlight poured down between the slices of thick blanket. Mr. MacDougal stood over him holding a large knife in his hand. Ernie blinked in the light. The big man smiled, and Ernie tensed. He knew men who did that right before they attacked. But Mr. MacDougal winked, twirled the knife, and made it disappear. When he held out his hand, Ernie grabbed for it. A strong grip lifted him high and set him on top of his temporary hiding spot. He gulped

fresh air, shuddering in relief.

“This is Mrs. MacDougal. You’ll call me Mr. Ross. What’s your name, boy?”

“Ernie Thompson.”

“I think it best you get a new name. That way, we won’t forget and use it in town and find your pa showing up one day, stomping mad.”

“I’ve always like the name Daniel,” said Mrs. MacDougal.

“That’s a pretty powerful name,” said Ross. “You up to fighting off lions like in the Bible story? They don’t have shaggy manes in these mountains, but they’ll kill you just the same.”

“Don’t know Bible stories, but I’ll fight lions and rattlers and anything else, sir.”

Ross pointed to the bags of beans. “Take a seat. Amelia, where’s that lunch basket Mrs. McLeod sent? I think Daniel could use some breakfast.” Mrs. MacDougal leaned under the seat. Mr. Ross tilted his head and watched her. When she began to straighten up, he winked. “How old are you, Daniel?”

“Ten, sir.” Both adults raised their eyebrows. “I’m small for my age. I don’t eat much.”

“You will now,” said Mrs. MacDougal.

She pointed to a wicker basket covered with a red-and-white-checked cloth. Mr. Ross opened it up and looked inside. He lifted out a white cloth, the corners tied over something inside, and handed it to Daniel. “Some hard-boiled eggs ought to keep you going until we get home.”

“Thank you sir. Ma’am.”

He stared at the clean cloth. His stomach growled at the potential of real food instead of scraps he had to fight for. He waited until the wagon was rolling again before he opened it up. Four beautiful, white eggs lay inside.

Four, all for him! He carefully cracked open the first egg, saving the shell in the cloth, and nibbled the top. Though he wanted to stuff

all of them in his mouth at once, he would take his time. Not only would so much food bounce back, he wanted to enjoy it. This wouldn't be the first time he'd been promised something and gone without. While he slowly ate the eggs, he imagined what else was in that basket. He didn't expect them to share the good stuff with him, but he could hope.

That was more than he'd had in a long, long time.

Chapter Twenty

“What do you think of your new helper?”

Amelia looked over her shoulder to see if the boy had heard.

“Don’t worry, he’s so tired from living rough that a bit of food in his belly and the rolling of the wagon will keep him out cold until we stop for dinner.”

“Speaking of stopping for dinner...”

She pursed her lips and blinked up at him like a coquette. He smirked.

“Too bad. No fun and games while we eat. I’ll have to make it up to you tonight.” He bent over and gave her a quick kiss. She grabbed his head and pulled him down to deepen it. He explored her mouth for a moment before pulling back. “Dammit, woman, now you’ve got me all hot and bothered!”

“Good,” she said. She settled on the bench. She moved her shoulders so that her breasts shifted under the cotton. His eyes followed. “Now, both of us are in the same shape. I’ve been looking forward to the trip home all day.”

She looked over her shoulder. She recognized the boy who’d filled her tub by his shoulder-length, matted hair. He lay curled on top of their bags, facedown. He’d outgrown his shirt long ago. The few buttons still left didn’t allow the thin fabric to hide his ribs. At first, she’d thought he was filthy, but he was clean under his rags. At least, as clean as a boy could be without soap or someone to care about him.

“I can see why you wanted to bring him home,” she continued. “The poor child needs a bath, a haircut, some new clothes, and lots of food and sleep.”

"That's not the only reason why I hired him. Tillie will be leaving in a few weeks, and I want someone to help you with chores. When his father drinks, he likes to beat on him. Today might be the time he finally kills the boy."

She remembered her father's beatings, often for trivial things when he came home angry. While she was often well bruised, he was careful to not break a bone. He would have to bring in the doctor, and that would prove embarrassing to him socially.

Poor men who beat children and women didn't care about social niceties. She'd seen so much brutality. After a few weeks to prove herself, the doctors let her take over the wee ones as the sight of a big man put terror into them.

Tanner's Ford had a doctor, but she had yet to meet him. Beth said Dr. Henley seemed to know what he was about. Amelia would talk with him before letting him near anyone she cared about. Too many doctors were drunks who didn't boil their instruments or wash their hands.

"Is it sheer meanness, or does he make up reasons to justify it?"

"He thinks he has a reason."

"To beat a child to death?"

"The boy has a hare lip. His mother died birthing him, so his pa says he's cursed by the devil. Every time the man gets drunk, he tries to beat that devil out of the kid. Somewhere in his mind, he might think he's doing the right thing."

"That's preposterous!"

Ross stared straight ahead. "Some folks are superstitious and agree with him. When the boy's older, he'll grow a moustache to cover it, but he'll never be able to kiss a pretty girl."

"Oh, yes, he will!"

"Amelia, there's nothing we can do about his split lip. He'll manage."

"If it's only his lip, a good doctor can sew it together."

"Is this one of your Eastern city things?"

Though Ross was a reasonable man, she wasn't yet comfortable telling him about helping at the clinic. If the town doctor found out, he might refuse to come if someone was sick. Though she knew how to sew and bandage cuts and wounds, she knew little about medicine.

"Yes, I heard about surgeons operating on children like this in England and Europe."

"We won't find one of those here or in Bannack City."

"Then we'll go to Virginia City if we have to, or even farther!" She pulled on his arm. "When you take on a child, you do whatever you can to help them. With food, teaching, and proper discipline, he could turn out to be a good man."

Ross gazed down at her with a half smile. He shook his head and faced forward again. "You're right. We'll find some way to help the boy."

* * * *

"Who's this ragged set of bones?"

Daniel hesitated for a moment before continuing to fill the kindling box. He brushed off the chips of wood before he stood up and turned. The tall man, so like his brother but with brown eyes, leaned one bare shoulder against the kitchen wall.

"My name's Daniel, Mr. MacDougal, er, Mr. Nevin."

"Saw you in town. Thought you were Ernest Junior."

"Not no more, sir." He shook his head. "I left that behind."

"Along with your pa?"

"Yes, sir."

"Smart lad." He sniffed and curled his lip. "You stink. No one comes into Mrs. MacDougal's home who stinks. You need a bath."

Shame heated Daniel's face. Though he washed as best he could whenever possible, he had to put the same dirty clothes back on.

"Yes, sir, but I wanted to fill the water and wood box before Mrs. MacDougal came in. I don't got nothing else to put on."

Nevin looked up as Ross walked into the kitchen.

"I hired Daniel to help the women with chores," said Ross.

"He's pretty skinny."

"Auntie's cooking will soon put muscle on him." Ross pointed to a package sitting on the table. "Take that and the soap to the creek."

Daniel looked at the package. The crisp brown paper wasn't wrinkled, and the string was long and clean. He'd seen people carrying packages like that out of the mercantile. He swallowed, keeping his hopes low.

"What is it, sir?"

"Mrs. MacDougal doesn't hold with her men walking around bare assed," said Nevin with a laugh.

"I'd never do that!"

"Those rags you're wearing will rip if you bend over again. I got you pants and a shirt," said Ross.

"They're for me?" His throat was so tight he could barely whisper the words.

Nevin snorted. "Hell, boy, you're so skinny those clothes won't fit anyone else."

"Pick 'em up, and let's get going."

Daniel's belly growled, loud and long. When he first opened the kitchen door and smelled the tiny berry pies cooling on the table, he forced his hands to stay far away. They were the smallest pies he'd ever seen, the perfect size to pick up in your hand. Something he could not do and be allowed to live there. He picked up the package and turned away.

"You got a hand free. Might as well take one of those tarts with you," said Nevin.

"Sir?"

"That belly of yours is so loud you'll scare away my ravens." Ross strolled to the table and picked up one of the tiny pies. "Mrs. MacDougal expects a few of her berry tarts to disappear every time one of us comes near the house."

“That’s why I stopped by,” said Nevin. He swung past the table, scooped one up, and left the kitchen.

“Don’t bite into it until you get outside. If you get crumbs on the floor, you’ll have to wash it. This is your home now, and you’ll treat it right.”

Home? As he followed Ross out the door, Daniel came closer to crying than he could ever remember. He blinked furiously, but a tear still slid out of his left eye. He shifted his package so he could wipe away the evidence before anyone saw it. *Don’t get your hopes up.* One time, a woman lived with them for almost a year. She was nice and cooked real good. But Pa beat her once too many times, and she walked out. She kissed him on the cheek before she left, though. Everything good ended, but he could enjoy it while it was there.

Since Ross didn’t bite into his pie, neither did Daniel. His belly should be full after the dinner they shared on the way to the MD ranch. When Mrs. MacDougal handed him a whole leg of roast chicken without dirt or anything on it, he thought he’d die happy, right there. Though he turned his back to eat, neither Mr. or Mrs. MacDougal said anything insulting because he couldn’t close his mouth.

He couldn’t remember ever eating a tiny fruit pie like the one in his hand. No, not a small pie. Ross called it a tart. Daniel decided he’d listen hard and learn all he could before they sent him away. He scrambled to keep up. The man had long legs and moved fast.

“Did you bring the soap?”

Daniel gasped in horror. He had his mind so full of tart and new clothes that he’d forgotten. He set his package on the bank of the stream and put his tart on top. He eyed the treat, expecting it to be gone by the time he got back. He hurried past Ross, but the man yanked the back of his shirt. It ripped, leaving Ross holding the collar as the rest slid to the ground.

“Told you those rags were falling apart. Here.” Ross held out a bar of yellow soap. “I figured you had your mind on other things.

We'll eat after we're clean." He lifted a blue and green blanket off his shoulder and set it down. He shrugged out of his vest and set it aside.

Daniel quickly walked uphill as if searching for the right place to enter the creek. When Ross reached for his belt buckle, Daniel stepped closer to the trees. It was bad enough being walloped by a belt with clothes on. He was not going anywhere near the big man without them. He turned his head enough to see any flashes of movement. When Ross dropped his pants and walked into the water, Daniel turned his back and moved farther away.

"No one will touch you, boy," said Ross calmly. "Not here."

Daniel made sure he could see Ross out of the corner of his eye. The man sat in the middle of the stream and washed his arms. He kept his eyes on what he was doing.

"I expect it'll take you a while to learn you're safe. If it makes you feel more comfortable, I'll head back to the house and let you wash up on your own."

Daniel shuffled closer to the water. Ross tossed his head, flipping his hair to his back. He reached back and wrung it out with his fists. Muscles bulged. He had scars, lots of them. Was that why he carried so many knives, because someone had hurt him when he was smaller?

"You're on MacDougal land now," continued Ross. "We don't hurt children, animals, or women. If you do something bad, we'll thrash you to help you remember, but we don't do it angry or drunk. Apart from that, no one touches anyone who doesn't want to be touched."

Daniel stared at Ross. With him sitting, Daniel was taller. He'd seen Ross move faster and more silently than the wind, but it would be hard for him to do it when sitting in the middle of a rushing stream.

"Either get in the water or tell me to get out. You can trust me or not, but make up your mind because this water is colder than a witch's tit!"

This silent killer sat on his butt in cold mountain water, waiting while Daniel decided whether to trust him or not? Daniel laughed, his

chest easing from a weight he'd always known. He quickly shucked off his pants and stepped into the creek. He sat down, gasping as the cold water pulled at him. Ross stood up and tossed him the soap. He managed to catch the slippery thing. Because he was so much shorter, he had to stand up to scrub at his arms and legs.

Ross kept his back turned as he sluiced off the water. He picked up the blanket, wrapped it around his waist, and belted it. Daniel scrubbed as best he could, but only the surface dirt came off. On the bank, Ross pulled on his pants and a deer hide vest. Daniel ran the bar of soap over his hair, rubbing hard. Ross held out a hand for the soap. Daniel tossed it and ducked underwater to rinse off, forcing his fingers through his wet hair.

When he came up for air, Ross hadn't moved.

"You want me to cut it off?"

"My hair hides the mark of the devil." Daniel pointed to his misshapen lip.

"That's your old life talking. You can decide to hold your head high and look the world in the eye today." He shrugged. "It's up to you."

"I get hit 'cause I'm ugly."

"First, you're not ugly. Yes, you've got something the matter with your lip. Nevin has claw marks across his chest. You can see my scars. Amelia, that's Mrs. MacDougal to you, has burn marks all up one arm and over part of her face. None of us are ugly, and neither are you. We just had a bit of life happen to us. We're still here, still alive. That's what matters."

Daniel found himself nodding agreement. He shuffled to the edge of the creek. Ross waded in, not caring that his pant legs got wet. He slid his hand under his vest and brought out the long, narrow knife he'd used to pick the sliver out of his hand. Daniel shivered in the cold water as Ross sliced away his protection. He watched his matted hair float down the stream like leaves in autumn. It took him a moment to realize Ross was back on the bank.

Daniel shook his head. He still had hair to his neck, but it stayed away from his face. He suddenly realized he was frozen.

"Take your time. I'll see you back at the house," said Ross.

"I didn't know you could talk fancy."

Ross turned his head and raised an eyebrow. "The people in town think I'm a dumb Indian. They expect less of me, and that gives me an advantage. You never know when something like that will save your life."

"Pa called you bad names, and you never said nothing back."

Ross's face seemed to turn to stone. Daniel wished he hadn't spoken.

"Here's a lesson, Daniel. You can't teach people to see when they refuse to open their eyes. Your pa only sees evil because that's what he believes in. I believe in good, but I kill evil when I see it."

"Mr. MacDougal, sir?"

"Mr. Ross will do, Daniel."

"Thanks for helping me see."

Ross nodded in reply. "I left my tart for you. I figure you need it more than I do. See you at home." He turned away, his long legs soon making him disappear.

His head had barely disappeared into the scrub when Daniel rose from the water and shivered his way to the shore. He huddled against a sun-warmed rock and sighed. After a moment, he flapped his hands to get the water off them. He took the tarts off his package of clothes and brought everything back to his rock. He ate the first tart quickly, letting the flavor burst in his mouth. He didn't know anything could taste so sweet. The second tart he set aside until later.

He took his time undoing the knotted string. When he peeled back the heavy, brown paper, he saw a white shirt on top of pants. He moved it aside and discovered a blue and white cotton necker and suspenders underneath. He savored his second tart as he admired his clothes. *His* clothes. No one had ever worn them before. When he'd licked the last of the juice off his fingers, he washed them and came

back to his clothes.

He ran his fingers over the soft cotton shirt. He quickly dressed, discovering everything was far too big to fit him. At first he was disappointed. Then he realized that Mr. Ross expected him to grow. Could he live here long enough to fit his new clothes? He rolled up the pant legs and folded back his cuffs. He combed his fingers through his hair and pushed it behind his ears. He hurried home. He hadn't finished filling the wood box, and Mrs. MacDougal or the other two women might need more water for supper.

For decent clothes and food, he'd work from dark to dark for the rest of his life.

He'd do anything for a home.

Chapter Twenty-One

"You clean up pretty good," said Nevin to the boy at the far end of the bench. He almost got a smile in return.

Auntie was in the bedroom with Tillie and the babies while the rest of them finished supper. Daniel kept his face turned while he ate, hiding his mouth with his left hand. The shirt he'd carefully folded back slid to his elbow whenever he lifted his arm. The kid was built like a damned scarecrow!

Nevin wished he could go up to the boy's father and plant his fist squarely in his nose. Unfortunately, that could give away the secret of where the boy was. Before supper, Ross took him to the barn and told him about Daniel's alarm at the stream, as well as the bruises and scars that marked his too-thin body. The remembered pain in Ross's eyes made Nevin ache. He was too young to help Ross when their older brothers, Finan and Hugh, would set on him. While he missed Ross terribly whenever he was sent away, even then he knew Ma had to do it.

He remembered when Ross returned from living with the Bannock Tribe. On his annual winter visits before that, Ross had been wild and free. Ever since, he was haunted by something terrible, something so bad Nevin had never asked about it. Maybe taking Daniel in would knock a few rocks off Ross's shoulders.

"Anything new in town?" Nevin looked to his left. "Other than the squirt being here."

Amelia pushed back her chair and jumped up from the table. She picked up the cloth Auntie had been using and scrubbed furiously at a pot in the sink. She kept her back to them. Ross frowned but didn't

comment.

“There’s a new house going up. Frederick Smythe, the one who lost the Double Diamond Ranch, bought a parcel of land off Mayor Rivers. He wants to build something even fancier than Sophie’s hotel.”

“Orville actually sold land in town to someone?”

“I haven’t met the man, but I don’t trust him. He’s staying at Mrs. Emslow’s boarding house. Maybe the mayor was in town one night and cornered him on the way to the privy.”

“Why doesn’t he stay at the hotel? The food’s better, as well as the company.”

“Patsy thinks he tried something on Sophie and got the bum’s rush.”

“Serves him right,” said Nevin. “He’ll have to mind his Ps and Qs or Mrs. Emslow will toss him out.”

“From what I hear, she’s fawning all over him.” Ross frowned. “Either she wants some of his money or there’s something else going on.” He licked his spoon and used it to point. “Daniel, you know anyone interested in keeping his eyes and ears open and mouth shut?”

“Me?” Daniel flushed when he realized everyone was looking at him.

“Who can we trust to tell us what loose lips brag about?”

“Billy might do it for a nickel.”

“Billy?”

“Billy O’Keefe was my friend. His pa don’t beat on him much, but he’s awful hungry since his pa had to sell his claim.”

“Can he be trusted to keep himself safe, as well as not tell?”

Daniel nodded. “He told me his pa was doin’ some building in town. They might git enough money to go back home. He showed me his pa’s saw. It’s real sharp.”

“If he has a decent saw,” said Ross, “he might know what he’s doing.” He turned to Daniel. “Would Billy be his pa’s helper? When you’re building, it’s good to have a boy to fetch and carry and to hold

the other end of the board.”

“He was hopin’.”

Nevin looked at Ross. “If a man suggested that a fellow could find the full fare home by train, he might agree to keep his ears open.” He frowned, thinking. “Didn’t a Paddy O’Keefe sign over his claim to that Smythe character after swearing he’d never sell?”

“There’s been a few too many men doing the same,” said Ross. “They sell then disappear.”

“But do they go back East, to California, or end up in a dry gulch back of beyond?”

“I think it best that you approach Mr. O’Keefe, Nev.”

“If your belly is full, young man, you may clear the table,” said Amelia.

Ross and Nevin pushed back their benches and pushed each other out the door. Nevin headed for the barn while Ross went uphill.

* * * *

“Can you read, Daniel?”

“I kin spell my name. Ee, are, en...” He paused, frowning. “I’m gonna have to learn a new one now. Um, don’t it start with ‘dee’?”

Amelia sat on the bench beside him. “You, my boy, are going to learn to read.”

“But I’m stupid.”

“Who said that? Your father, who beat you and said ridiculous things?”

He nodded.

“Can your father read?”

Daniel shrugged. “Never mattered none.”

“I suspect no one has ever read you a story. Well, after we clean up, I’m going to show you why reading is a wonderful thing.”

“Ain’t it hard?”

“Yes, but it’s like anything else. What you get out of it is worth

the work.” She gestured around the kitchen. “Building this big house was hard, but the MacDougal family will be safe and warm for generations. It was worth it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I ain’t never been in a place like this.” He looked around the kitchen. “If I’m still here, kin I sleep on the floor by the stove come winter?”

“I certainly hope you are still here when winter comes. But you won’t be sleeping on a floor. Did you see the cabin the men are building for Auntie?”

“It’s back in the woods a bit.”

“Yes. Auntie’s old and likes her quiet. But she also likes a bit of company. She won’t slow down. She’s a proud woman and doesn’t want anyone to fuss over her. But if you stayed with her, you’d make sure the wood box was full and the stove warm all night.”

“I could do that.”

“And you are going to learn to read and write and do sums. Plus you will sew on your own buttons, fix tears in your shirt and pants, and make biscuits and gravy.”

“Sewin’ and cookin’ is wimmen’s work.”

She raised an eyebrow. “How many men are there in Montana Territory? And how many women? Remember, Mr. Ross, Nevin, and Gillis lived alone here before my sister arrived. They took care of themselves. Real men not only love their biscuits with sausage gravy, they know how to make it themselves.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I saw some McGuffy’s readers in the parlor. That will do for tonight’s bedtime story. Tomorrow, I’ll go through my book trunk. I’m sure I brought something a boy would like to read.”

She smiled at Daniel. He blinked, his chin trembling.

“I don’t think anyone’s been nice to you in a long, long time,” she said quietly.

“Pa said I don’t deserve to be treated nice.”

“Why?”

"I—" he choked and looked away. "I kilt my ma when I got born."

She placed a hand on his bony shoulder. "Daniel, many women die in childbirth."

"Not birthin' someone with the Devil's mark."

"I've seen other people with a lip like yours. They weren't from the devil, and neither are you. Sometimes babies are born with a club foot, or they're blind, or something else. I don't know why God makes people like that, but it happens."

"I never heered of anyone like me," he said to the floor.

"How many people have you seen, Daniel? There are more people in a square mile in New York City than in all Montana Territory. You're a young man. Someday, you'll travel and see all types of people. Trust me, you're not the only one."

"I don't wanna go nowhere."

She gently lifted his chin. He stared at her with a mix of hope and fear. "As long as I live on the MD Ranch, you can live here, too. That's a promise."

"Yer a girl. They don't have a say."

"You're right. In law, they don't have a say. But I'm the only wife on this ranch, and I will make sure all three MacDougal brothers tell you the same thing."

"Why d'you wanna help me?"

She couldn't tell him about all the children she'd desperately wanted to help but couldn't. The babies who died in her arms, the beaten and abused ones with nothing to look forward to than more of the same. The beatings her father gave her were nothing in comparison. At least she had a warm house to live in, clothes, and food.

"It's not so much me helping you as all of us helping each other. Mr. Ross said you're going to help with all sorts of chores. Hope is just a baby. Someday, there'll be more babies. They'll need a strong older brother to guide them." She patted his shoulder. "And I like

your company. Tillie's husband will be coming soon to take her home, and Auntie doesn't say very much. It will be good to know you're nearby to protect me and Hope."

He sat up straight, swallowed, and stared her full in the face.

"I'll protect you and your babies forever, Mrs. MacDougal."

"Thank you, Daniel. I'll clean up here. You go help Mr. Ross."

After Daniel left, quietly shutting the door before jumping in the air and racing away, Amelia dropped her face in her hands. She'd come out here to marry Nevin and care for Hope. Now, she had a baby and a boy, as well as an elderly aunt, a husband, and two brothers-in-law, at least one of whom wanted to share her bed.

And a dirty kitchen. She rose to her feet. Having Daniel around was a blessing. He'd be the one collecting eggs from nasty chickens, milking the goats, and chopping kindling after Tilly left. He'd be company, as well. Knowing a boy was around, perhaps the MacDougal men wouldn't be after her day and night. And now, she'd have a reason to tell herself "no" when her body wanted the same thing they did.

* * * *

"We can't—Daniel might hear us!"

Ross looked down at his wife with the look that had stopped many two-legged varmints in their tracks. Amelia poked him in the stomach to emphasize her point. He caught her hand and shook his head. No boy of ten, asleep or not, was going to keep him from bedding his wife.

Gillis had told him to expect this reaction. When Prudence first arrived, he and Nevin had disappeared between supper and breakfast for most of the summer. At first, it was to let the newlyweds be together. All that billing and cooing had both him and Nev gagging. But Prue's cries of release accompanied by Gillis's bellows kept them away.

They lived in the bunkhouse that first winter. By the second year, they'd all grown used to each other well enough for Ross to share the upstairs with Nevin. It was far warmer than the bunkhouse since the kitchen heat rose up the stairs.

"We can, wife, and we will. Tonight and every night."

He turned her around and began unbuttoning her dress, starting at the neck. The first inch looked so tasty that he nibbled it. She shivered.

"But you said I make noise. It might frighten him."

Ross sighed. He turned her to face him. "First, the boy's so tired from trying to prove his worth that he'll sleep through anything. Second, he ate enough to knock out a family of coyotes for a week. Third,"—he caught her nipples with his knuckles—"I want my wife, and she wants me."

"That's three and four."

"And fifth," he continued past her frown, "we had a man-to-man talk."

"You talked to a ten-year-old boy about our relations?"

Ross shook his head at her squawk. "He may be ten, but he's not a child. His pa had women. They'd drink, not caring a small child lay a few feet away." He rubbed his knuckles over his bristly chin. "I had to straighten the lad out on a few things."

"What things?"

"I explained that a real man cared for his woman. He never hurt a woman or child. Anyone who did otherwise was lower than a snake's belly."

Her mouth dropped as realization hit. "Did the boy see them—"

"Yep. Both the beating and the other. A couple years ago, he started hiding in the bush when his pa brought a woman to whatever shack they lived in."

"Some people are not fit to have a dog, much less a child," she said with a sigh.

Ross tugged Amelia hands. She followed him over to the bed. The

mattress dipped when he sat down. The ropes complained when he pulled her across his lap, reminding him it was time to tighten them. She leaned her head against his chest. Her hair pressed under his chin. He inhaled her fragrance. When he exhaled, most of the day's tension flowed away with his breath. He wrapped his arm around her.

"I told the boy we do things different at this end of the valley. There's not many good women to go around, so we have to share. He said he's never seen a woman laugh as much as Beth. I told him she's happy because she has three Elliott men to take care of her."

"Did he think you meant more than protection?"

"He asked if all of us kiss you like they do Mrs. Elliott."

She lifted her head to see his face. "And you said?"

He couldn't help the smile. "We're working on it."

He returned to the buttons running down her back. He was getting better at undoing small dress buttons. When he threatened to yank them all off, she replied that she'd double the number of them if he did. He told himself it added to the anticipation. Now that he knew he could have her anytime she was willing, he wasn't in as much of a rush.

"I told Daniel when you or Mrs. Elliott screams in the night, it's because she's really, really happy."

With the buttons undone to her waist, he slid his hand against her flesh and around to her breast. He kneaded it, feeling it harden at his touch. Wanting more, he peeled off her bodice, pulling it down her arms until both breasts quivered in front of his nose. He sat back and looked at them. Full and rosy white, centered by big nipples. This time next year, would he watch his son sucking hard on them while his wife smiled down at their child?

He curled his tongue and drew her nipple into his mouth. She arched her back, pressing her breast into his face.

"Happy?" She panted the word. "Is that what you say when I explode?"

Ross swept her off her feet. He looked down at his woman. Her

nostrils were wide, her pupils large. Her naked breasts rose and fell with each breath. He shook his head.

“No,” he whispered. “I say, ‘Mine!’”

Chapter Twenty-Two

A few days later, Amelia finished tidying up the kitchen for the night. Gillis and Daniel went to the bunkhouse. Everyone said they enjoyed her reading *Ivanhoe*, supposedly to Daniel, before bed. Everyone except Ross, who'd gone up to bed early again.

When she closed the book after “just one more,” Tillie and Auntie went to their room, talking softly in their own language. Nevin headed out somewhere to do something. Lately, he'd been looking at her in a way that made her tingle. It didn't help that Ross had slept through the last few nights, not even giving her a fall-asleep cuddle.

She checked the water reservoir and kettle. Daniel had filled both, ready for the morning. She'd already sent a letter to a doctor in Virginia City. Doc Henley knew him well and thought he could help Daniel. The town doctor even added a note to Amelia's letter explaining the problem in medical terms. Doc Henley said it should be a fairly simple procedure because there were no cleft palate issues. Daniel knew nothing about it. Luckily, the doctor had examined the boy some time ago when his father had hit him badly enough to require stitches.

She didn't check the stove as she'd watched Auntie bank the fire. She'd have to force herself to do it as well as start the stove in the morning. Auntie and Tillie were going to dig sweet roots for a week or so, and she'd be the only woman at the ranch.

That meant she'd make all the meals. Over hot, crackling flames.

She leaned her forehead against the cool doorjamb. *You can do it. You have to do it.* It wasn't as if the fire could escape the stove box. It wasn't a fireplace, like at the house she'd rushed into. She looked at

her hand, but the sun had finally faded into dusk, and her scars weren't visible. The scars that no one saw, the ones inside, still hurt.

Stop complaining and go to bed!

A bed she'd lie in, frustrated with longing, while Ross snored beside her.

With the June sun hanging in the sky for so long, he tired himself out working. He went to sleep before her and was gone before she woke. Last night, Ross moved the beds apart so he wouldn't disturb her. Was he ignoring her? The look in his eye when he saw her during the day showed he wanted her, but by night, he was too exhausted.

She desperately wanted some loving. She'd even bathed in the cold creek during the hot afternoon to be fresh. Was it fair for a woman to seduce her tired husband? Would he even wake enough to meet her needs?

Before she blew out the lamp in the kitchen, she crept upstairs to check. Halfway up, she heard snores. Deep ones. She dropped on the stair with a thump.

Her pussy tingled with need. Her breasts, already swollen in anticipation, throbbed. And her husband, dead to the world, snored away the night. The one to solve her problems was oblivious to her needs.

She heard the kitchen door open and quietly shut. Footsteps crossed to the far shelf. The coffee pot scraped on the stove. Her heart pounded. Her pussy swelled. She pressed her thighs together and bent forward, hugging her knees.

Ross wasn't the only man who could help. He said he wanted her to bring Nevin to their bed. She was too shy to do it with Ross watching, but he was asleep. She knew Nevin wanted her. The looks he gave her, both hot and longing, made her eager for Ross's touch.

No, she must be honest with herself. Nevin's looks promised something different from what Ross gave her. And she wanted it. She wanted him. Not as a temporary replacement for Ross, but for himself.

She, Amelia Smathers MacDougal, wanted a second man in her bed. She wanted to wake in the morning sandwiched between them. To have them both turn to her in need. To meet her needs in return.

She wanted everything she saw in that book and more. More because there was no love shown with the people in the drawings, only bodily contact. She loved Ross as a husband and was learning to love Nevin. As his brother and as her lover.

Could she ask Nevin to join her tonight? Her pussy throbbed the answer. She pressed her hand against the wall and stood up. Five steps down to the kitchen, each one slow and steady. Another ten across the hall to the kitchen door.

Nevin, head bent over with the mug halfway to his lips, stared at her. Only his eyes moved. After flicking over her once, they zeroed in on her breasts. She pushed her shoulders back. Her breasts thrust out, her protruding nipples hard.

“Amelia,” he warned, his voice deep and hoarse. “Unless you’re here to ask me upstairs, you’d better get out of my sight.”

She stared at the bulge below his belt. He wanted her. And she wanted him.

She slowly lifted her hand, palm open toward him.

“Come to bed, Nevin.”

He put his mug on the table. It rattled, his fingers shaking as much as hers.

“I can hear Ross snoring like a pig again. Are you asking me because he’s not capable?” He crossed his arms and glared at her. She let her hand drop at the rejection.

“I am not going to rut with you then get thrown out of bed right after. I want you. God knows how much I want you.” He bit his lip. “But not like that. I’m not your man-whore.”

A hot flush rushed up from the burning place between her legs. Her pussy throbbed harder, masking her shame. Was the fact that Ross slept just an excuse? Could she admit she wanted what was so wrong, yet so right? She clasped her hands together and dropped her

eyes.

"I was told that a proper woman tolerates relations with her husband in order to have children." She waited, but he said nothing. "I..."

She raised her eyes to Nevin. She owed him this truth. A truth that she had to speak aloud.

"I very much enjoy my marriage bed. What we did in the meadow excited me. I liked it when you ordered me to undress and when I sucked your cock."

Nevin's inhale sounded like a hiss. His fingers bit into his arm muscles.

"I admit that going without the last few nights then finding Ross asleep again made me think of you. I love Ross as my husband." She clenched her fingers so hard it hurt. "I want to love you as my brother-in-law. And my lover."

"For tonight?" He croaked the words.

She slowly shook her head. "For all nights. I want to wake up with you. I want to have you hold me. But I also want Ross."

He released his hands. After flexing his fingers, he shoved them in his front pockets. His shoulders lowered as he exhaled, long and hard. A hint of a smile appeared.

"You wearing anything under that dress?"

A ripple of heat flowed through her. Her heart sped up. She shook her head.

He curled his finger. "Come here, Amelia."

She looked behind her. SnORES continued to drift downstairs through the open door. Nevin lifted his mug from the table and set it deliberately in the sink. He lifted the bench from the table and carried it to the far side of the room.

"Get the quilt from the parlor." His smile was like a wolf. Demanding and eager. "Unless you want to get splinters." He rested a hip on the table and crossed his arms. This time, he looked relaxed, as if discussing the chores for the day. "Your choice, Amelia."

* * * *

Nevin watched Amelia scuttle out of the room. So, she liked it when he gave her orders, did she? He sure liked it when she sucked his cock that night. Ross had taken her virgin ass at the same time.

It was his turn tonight.

When Gillis said Ross was to marry Amelia, he figured Prue's sister would be the same. They had the same color of hair but everything else was different. Amelia had a spark for everyone, while Prue could only see Gillis.

It was Mother Nature's way to call the sick back to her embrace. It was sad that Prue's bad lungs finally took her life, but the rest of them had to keep living. Prue loved Gillis and gave the Clan her daughter Hope, but Amelia would provide more, to all of them.

He loved the way she blushed like a virgin one moment and demanded a hard cock fill her the next. His life belonged to his Clan, as now did Amelia. Gillis would never marry again, though they'd do everything to help him accept Amelia.

As for him, he'd already accepted her. He liked her body, her spirit and her mind. Now that she knew she wanted him, he would show her what he demanded in a woman.

He heard her soft, quick steps approach. She stopped in the doorway, the quilt pressed against her chest. She panted, her mouth open. The mouth that had given him the best orgasm of his life.

Until tonight.

"Dress off. Boots on."

She hesitated at the door and then stepped forward, head high. She placed the quilt on the table beside him. She turned her back to him and dropped her head. He frowned until he noticed the buttons down the back of her dress.

"Please," she said.

He wanted to rip the fabric open, buttons flying everywhere. Not

this time. For now, he would be gentle.

He started at the nape of her neck. She lifted her arms to hold her hair out of the way. Though she hadn't yet let it down for the night, some pins had fallen, letting soft tendrils escape.

"Keep your hands there," he said.

He played with the buttons before undoing each. He kissed her bare flesh, inch by inch, as he revealed it. Her breathing, fast to start with, roughened. When he reached her waistband, he waited a moment. A V of white skin spread from her shoulders to her waist. The lamplight made her skin glow.

"Drop your arms."

He pulled her top halfway down. The dress caught her arms but left her breasts free. He slid his hands around her ribs and caught her breasts. Soft, warm, and welcoming. They both moaned. She was his, to take as he wanted. He'd be gentle, but forceful.

"Don't move."

He took his time spreading the folded quilt over the table. He made sure it covered the edge to protect their thighs. She watched him move. As he turned, her eyes flicked from his chest to the cock hard behind his pants to his ass.

He hadn't realized the power resulting from an eager woman wanting him.

"How should I take you tonight?"

He wouldn't enter her pussy until she'd created a baby with Ross. How could he take her ass in the most comfortable way for her? He was a tall man and the table short. Usually, he cursed it, banging his knees when he sat on the bench and tried to fit under.

Tonight, it was perfect.

Ross had entered her ass from behind, but he wanted to watch her take him this first time. He wanted to touch every part of her, sliding in and out until she screamed. He'd kiss her then, taking the sound into himself before he exploded.

Could he last that long?

He stood behind her. She panted, dainty little gasps that sped up his heart. He placed his hands on either side of her hips. He hauled her dress up, letting it drag against her legs in slow anticipation. He stopped when the hem reached the cheeks of her ass.

“Know what I’m gonna do to you tonight, Amelia MacDougal?”

She shook her head so fast a few more hairpins escaped.

“Remember when you sucked my cock like a greedy pig?”

She nodded once, sharp and direct.

“What did Ross do to you that night?”

He felt more than heard her quick inhale. He lifted her dress to bare her plump, white cheeks. He held the fabric with his left hand. With the other, he reached around to her front and pressed between her legs. She was so wet his hand slid easily between her thighs. He let his finger graze her clit. She twitched. He slid his fingers into her. He cupped them so his thumb pressed against her clit. She grabbed his fingers with her internal muscles.

“Ross took you here, didn’t he?”

He slid his wet fingers from her pussy into her ass. Gently, but persistently, he pressed. They slid farther in than he expected. Either Ross had taken her often or she was so damn hot she wanted him any way she could get.

“Want me to take your ass tonight, Amelia?”

She shuddered and then nodded.

“You can tell me no, and I’ll have you suck my cock. But”—he leaned close to her bad ear to whisper—“I really, really love your ass. It’s so round and plump, like your breasts but bigger. You want my cock there, Amelia?”

She nodded, her head bobbing. He stepped back, letting her skirts fall.

“Strip.”

He washed his hands well, scrubbing as she scrambled to get out of her top and skirt. Why would a woman make a blouse that had to be buttoned up the back? She’d need servants because she couldn’t

count on a husband dressing her in the morning. Night was a different matter.

He heard a soft noise in the hall. The fourth step from the top always squeaked. Amelia was busy struggling out of her clothes, her eagerness making her clumsy. He took a step to the door. Ross, naked and erect, stood on the bottom stair. He nodded his head toward Amelia and held out something. Nevin caught what Ross tossed. He tilted it into the lamplight. Sweet oil.

Ross settled on the stairs and gestured for Nevin to continue. Nevin turned back to the kitchen, glad Ross was near in case Amelia wanted him. He set the vial on the table beside the quilt. The noise, though slight, seemed to echo. Amelia stared at it then looked up. He held out his hand.

She came over, shy and hesitant yet eager. He faced the hallway and pulled her against him. The top of her head barely met his chin. He wrapped his arms around her, sliding them under the hair that reached her lower back. He held her tight and let all the tension release.

He knew she wanted him. But he hadn't been sure she'd ask for him with an open heart.

She looked up. Her eyes, blue-gray in the sun, seemed silver in the lamplight. She opened her mouth. He leaned over and met her eager lips. Her breasts pressed against his chest, searing him. His balls clenched in warning. He'd come in his pants if this lasted too long. They both strained to breathe when he pulled away.

"Take off my pants," he ordered, his voice hoarse. "Carefully."

She unhooked his buckle. He held his hand out for the belt. She frowned, but slid it through its loops. When she yanked, it pulled his hips forward to brush against her belly. She rolled the belt and handed it to him. He set it on the table and sucked in his belly so she could unbutton his pants. He helped her ease them down his legs.

His cock, stiff as the logs they sawed, throbbed.

He arranged the quilt so that the top of her head would face the

doorway to the hall. The lamp flickered as he moved it to the counter. It lit up her left side, so bright she wouldn't see Ross if he stood behind it.

"Lie on the quilt."

He took her waist and lifted her onto the table. She shifted back until her knees touched the edge. He pressed them far apart. Her aroma drifted up. He inhaled, eager for a taste.

Her hair fell around her face like a curtain. He brushed it over her shoulders, revealing her breasts. She pushed her shoulders back, thrusting them proudly.

"Beautiful," he said.

He flicked a nipple. She hissed at the slight ting of pain. He stepped between her knees to lean forward and capture it with his tongue. He soothed it by sucking gently. She pressed his head to her, holding him close. He opened his mouth and took more of her in. He flicked the tiny bumps around her nipple. He rasped the other side with his hand.

He'd kissed other breasts before, had enjoyed pleasuring the woman before he took his own. But nothing had prepared him for the connection he felt with Amelia. He pulled back to breathe before licking the salty sweat from the valley between them. She pressed them against his face as she'd done with his cock. He rested his forehead on her chest as she massaged the soft pillows of flesh against his face.

He had to kiss her. He raised his head to her lips. He nipped her lip then licked it. His tongue slid along the soft skin between her lower lip and teeth. She yanked on his hair, and he drew back.

"Kiss my other lips," she said. Her silvery eyes looked glazed.

"Who's giving the orders around here?"

She placed her hands on the table behind her hips, leaned back, and spread her knees farther apart. Her scent drew him, a mix of roses and herbs and herself. The smile she gave him could have come from Eve.

He tugged on the quilt, pulling until her pussy cleared the edge of the table. She had to lie down and lift her legs so she wouldn't teeter off. It revealed her dark pussy hair, glistening with dew. Swollen pink lips waited for his touch.

He watched her face as he slid the first fingers of each hand between her lips. He scraped very lightly with his trimmed fingernails. She pulled in her stomach, curling her pussy up and toward him.

"I want to put my cock right here," he said.

He pressed two fingers into her and curled them forward. He felt a spongy area and scraped against it. She gasped, slammed her palms on the table, and arched her back. He did it again, and she pressed her legs closed to catch his hand. He pulled back, shaking his finger at her pout.

"Open wide for me."

She let her thighs fall apart again. He knelt on the floor. She put her arms behind her head so she could see his face. He slid his tongue between her inner lips. He groaned at her taste, the flavor swirling into his brain, embedding itself.

She was his woman. One he shared with his brother, but still his. To lick and suck and tantalize. To make her groan and gasp at his touch, to scream his name when she came.

She shuddered as he let his tongue slide over her swollen pussy. He flicked his tongue and curled it into her. He caught her clit in his lips. It was so swollen that she trembled when he flicked it with his tongue. His cock responded, twitching.

He stood up, opened the oil, and dribbled it into his left palm. He rubbed it over his right hand. She licked her lips, eyes wide. He watched her carefully as he pressed one finger against her asshole. It slid in easily, so he used two the next time. He pulsed, adding a third and twisting back and forth. She bit her lip, a soft moan escaping.

Now.

He poured more oil in his hand and slid it over his hard cock. It

twitched with each heartbeat.

“Pull your knees to your chest.”

When she did, it tilted her ass and spread her cheeks. A wide ring of pink appeared inside her tight, brown hole. Setting his feet wide, he braced himself to enter her ass. He looked over Amelia’s head. Ross leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb. His cock pointed to Amelia as if wanting to take over. Ross nodded, motioning that he’d take his turn later.

“Push out,” said Nevin.

He nudged her with the head of his cock. When a tinge of pink appeared, he pressed forward. A moment of pressure, then he passed the tight ring of muscle. After a moment, he pressed another inch so he wouldn’t slip out.

She groaned. She had her eyes closed, but he saw no sign of pain on her face. He caught her nipple in his left hand. She looked up at him.

“More,” she demanded.

He held her hips and pressed. Forward and back he went, deeper each time. Her hot, tight passage held him like a velvet vise. It felt so good, and she looked so eager, that half his cock was in her ass before he knew it.

He stopped for a moment and looked at her. She’d closed her eyes again, her tongue protruding from her lips like her clit did from her pussy. Her face was flushed, as were her breasts, held in by the legs she bent to her chest. She clenched her pussy as he watched, feeling the extra pressure around his cock.

That and the sight of his dark cock half impaling her white ass almost made him come. He jammed his teeth together, held his breath, and fought to hold back. The need faded just enough to keep it in control.

It wasn’t that he was overpowering her. She was the one demanding more.

No, it was that she offered herself to him so willingly. Wanting

him to take her this way, to make her come with his cock and his fingers and tongue. Her scent, rising from her wide-open pussy, overpowered him, its allure greater than anything gold could provide.

He pulled her against him, slowly sliding to take her to the hilt. He pulled almost out, slow and steady, then back in. Again and again. She twitched, little quivers sending messages of enjoyment. Her face screwed up as he slid forward. She inhaled as he slid back.

He sped up, faster and faster until his balls slapped against her with each stroke. She grasped her breast with one hand while the other dipped into her pussy.

He felt her clench again, trying to hold something that wasn't there.

Yet.

Soon, she'd have Ross's cock in her pussy while he took her ass. His balls tightened, the tension coiling. The thought of sharing Amelia with the man he'd looked up to all his life was more than he could take. He leaned over and kissed her to cover the expected scream. She grabbed him with both hands, holding him close. He slid his hand between them and rubbed her clit with his thumb.

He felt her explode and could no longer hold back. She screamed into him as he erupted deep inside her, his balls contracting again and again. He held her trembling body tight, his arms over hers, as they got their breath.

Finally, he stood, chest heaving. Ross, standing by his side, handed him a cloth to cover himself. He motioned for Nevin to move away. Nev, dizzy and still trying to draw breath, leaned a hip against the counter. Ross wiped the oil off Amelia with another cloth. He picked her up, quilt and all, and cradled her in his arms. She opened her eyes and gasped up at him.

"My turn," he growled.

"But—"

"My wife," he growled down at her in reply. "Mine to share."

"Yours," she sighed.

“Get the door, Nev.”

Nevin, legs still shaking from the massive orgasm, opened the door to the night.

“Get the bed warm. Amy will be chilled when we get back.”

She clutched his neck, struggling. “Ross, where are you taking me?”

“Remember, Amy?” His dark eyes bored into her. “Wherever I want. Whenever I want. However I want.”

“I remember,” she said. Though she sounded shy, her eyes shone in eagerness.

“Now, we do it my way.”

Nevin closed the door. He heard Ross say something about a dip in the creek to start. He wasn’t sure of Amelia’s squeaked response but knew Ross would win the argument. He washed up, whistling quietly, and blew out the light. He carried their clothes upstairs, hung them on the pegs, pushed the beds back together, and dropped into a deep sleep.

Sometime later, a chilly arm snuck around his. A pair of cool breasts snuggled against his hot back. He let her settle against his bulk. Her body would be warm in no time. In return, so would his heart.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amelia hugged the warm chest she lay on. A large hand slid down her back to cup her bottom. As her legs were bent, he had easy access between them. She'd been dreaming of the book again, having two men playing with her. Fingers slid into her wet pussy.

"Mmm, wet enough to play."

She lifted her head and looked into brown eyes. Crinkles from a smile framed the dark eyebrows.

"Morning, Amelia."

Heat flared at Nevin's lazy, mocking drawl. His arms tightened around her before she could scuttle off the bed.

"Don't you go running away, now. Let's get acquainted."

"After what you did last night, I think we know each other!"

"After what *we* did, we need to talk."

He raised his head to make his point. She worried her lip for a moment before nodding. Heat flooded her face at the memory. He ran a finger over the edge of her breast. She shivered.

"Is that a blush because you want more of my handsome body? I sure hope you don't feel any shame."

"I..." She couldn't think of what to say in reply.

"That's why we need to talk. I don't know what you and Ross did outside last night, but he got up this morning so darn cheerful that Auntie didn't know what to do."

First, he bathed her in the stream as she complained of the cold. He kissed her all over. By then, she was desperate for his cock. He lay on his back on the moss, and she rode him, grinding her clit against him until she came. Then he turned her onto her hands and knees and

entered her from behind, claiming her as a stallion would his mare. When he exploded, calling her name, she came again, even harder.

“From the way your chest hardened up, you must’ve had fun.” He teased her swollen clit with his finger. “Maybe next time, you’ll invite me to join you,” he whispered. “You can ride Ross’s cock, and I’ll do what I did last night. We’ll fill you front and back. You want to try that, Amelia?”

She nodded. He rewarded her by rubbing her clit again.

“That’s good.”

He sighed and wrapped both arms around her. She relaxed in his embrace, knowing his pounding heart meant he wasn’t through talking.

“I love that you want my body,” he finally said. “But this is what matters more. Holding you. You holding me. If I had to choose, I would go without the other to have you hold me at night.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Does the cock nudging my hip agree with that?”

He gave a rueful laugh. “Just because we did that last night doesn’t mean I expect it again anytime soon.”

Amelia heard both his disbelief that she would want more and his plea that she would. She finally had a chance to talk without him running away or someone interrupting.

“Why are you so different from Ross? You have the same parents and grew up together.”

His shriveling cock tickled her thigh, and his heart thudded harder under her cheek. She waited until he shifted onto his side, taking her with her. He wrapped his arm around her waist, her bottom tucked into his groin. The hair tickled her.

“We didn’t grow up together. I stayed with my parents until we came back here to the MD. Ross went to our mother’s people when he was five. Something happened, and he came home a few years later. He’s never been the same since. He’s working toward something, but I don’t know what.”

"He wasn't much older than Daniel. Just a boy."

"I never thought of it, but yes. Though I don't know if Ross was ever a boy. He was the first of my mother's children and suffered for it." He lifted his arm from her to scratch his cheek. "When he came back, he still didn't get along with Pa and the two oldest, but he knew how to fight back."

"Did they hurt him a lot?"

"Far as I can tell, the reason they first sent Ross away was that Fin and Hugh damn near killed him. Those two might be my half-brothers, but they're meaner than a wild pig with a sore tusk."

She twisted her back to see Nevin's face.

"They tried to kill their little brother, so he was sent away? What happened to *them*?"

"Probably nothing." He pulled her against him again. "Their ma treated those two like they were perfect. Mrs. Elliott, that's Trace's ma, said they were banned from the Rocking E because they caused so much trouble."

"I thought all boys cause trouble."

"Those two whipped horses for the hell of it. Ross saw it but couldn't stop them. He told Pa, and they got a whipping. Ross got whipped, too, for telling tales."

Amelia let the vision settle into her view of Ross.

"Your father didn't punish them for hurting their brother, just the animals."

"Animals are worth something. He could always have another son."

Amelia heard a trace of bitterness in the statement. Ross was likely not the only one targeted.

"I thought my father was a brute for beating me because he couldn't marry Prudence and me off to raise himself in society."

"You've got to understand, Pa was raised to be The MacDougal. The word of the Clan Chief is law. If he says you're banished or even killed, the Clan does it."

Amelia saw that Nevin didn't have the same darkness in his soul as Ross. Each of them had remembered pain. Who could grow this old and not experience bumps on the road? But Ross's went deep. Whatever happened to him had never left.

"Is Gillis the Chief here?"

"As the oldest brother, yes."

"He ordered Ross to marry me instead of you. Both of you obeyed, even if you wanted something different."

Nevin moved his shoulders, resettling farther from her. "Clan rules keep everyone alive. No person, even the Chief, is worth more than keeping the Clan alive."

"And because Gillis thought no woman would ever want Ross, you couldn't have me."

Nevin shuffled closer again. His cock, now between her bottom cheeks, twitched.

"Ross has changed a lot since you got here. I expect now he knows the advantage of a wife, he'd want one. And anyway, I've got you as well. Right where I want you. In my bed."

She let him roll her onto her back. She ached for him to touch all the places his brown eyes travelled. Her lips. Her neck, her breasts, and more. He slid his tantalizing fingers around her breasts and over her quivering belly. She pulled her knees up and apart to make it easier for him.

He slid his fingers into her and captured her mouth with his. Blood pounded in her ears, growing louder with each thud.

"You two at it again? There's work to be done, and daylight's wasting."

"Ross?" She gasped when he pulled at her toe.

"This is hard work, brother Raven," said Nevin conversationally. "My cock's hard, and I'm breathing like I just ran home from town."

"Guess Amelia's hearing isn't as keen as yours, Bearclaw. I stomped loud enough."

Ross hauled on her foot. Nevin released her, grinning as she slid

past to the foot of the bed. Ross held her foot in the air, her bottom lifted off the bed a few inches. He tsked and shook his head as if catching her with her finger in the sugar jar.

"You wanted him in our bed, husband. What's your complaint?"

His blue-gray eyes widened as a slow, wolfish smile grew.

"Oh, oh," said Nevin. "You're in for it now." She shook as he climbed out of bed. He smacked the bottom cheek still raised off the bed.

"Ouch! Whose side are you on?" she complained.

Nevin chuckled as he stepped into pants and a shirt. "I'm the youngest brother here. Take it up with the boss." He grabbed boots and socks and thumped down the stairs.

She clenched her fingers into the sheets, unsure what Ross would do. She knew he wouldn't hurt her, but she'd never seen that look on his face. It made her pussy twitch. She felt like a maiden captured by a pirate eager to claim her. She gulped.

"You're thinking something wicked, aren't you, Mrs. MacDougal," he said in a soft, deadly voice. "Something that's made you very wet."

She licked her lips and scrambled to get loose.

"Save that thought for tonight." He lowered her foot to the bed. Gripping her other one, he placed the bottoms of her feet together. The wolfish smile widened more as she opened for him. He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her clit.

"I want you ready for me tonight, wife."

"Are you going to fall asleep on me again?"

He stood up. With her on the bed, he was so tall and broad. "All you had to do was ask. Keep that in mind."

He was down the stairs before his words penetrated her mind. She sat up slowly. Had he been faking those snores? She stood up and went to wash. Did he do it on purpose so she would ask Nevin in frustration? She grumbled at the answer, obvious now.

"That man sees too much and figures things out he has no

business figuring,” she declared. She put on her gray work dress and went down to face the day. She had to get through that before she’d share her bed again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"I don't like it that Gil still avoids Amelia," said Ross to Nevin.

Nevin had shared the bed for a week now. He hadn't realized how much it meant in his life to hold a woman in the night until he had one. Amelia was more than a woman. She was the wife they shared. But it wasn't enough. Not until Gillis joined them would their life be complete.

He looked out over the herd of MacDougal cattle quietly munching in the high meadow. Wisps of white rose as the sun burned off the morning mist. Ross had the eyeglass, searching for anything amiss.

"I don't have any ideas," replied Nevin. "Gillis bolts from the kitchen right after supper unless Hope calls for him. Then he skedaddles away as soon as she's asleep. I see him watching Amelia during the day. He still misses Prudence, but he wants Amelia. He just won't admit it. Something's got to force him to wake up, but I don't know what."

They rode on for a while.

"Amelia gets nightmares about the fire," said Ross. "Ever since she started using the stove."

"I haven't noticed anything."

"It happened when you were at Trace's the other night. You know how I go out for a walk in the night. I came back and found her moaning and shaking, muttering about fire. She stopped when I held her. She didn't remember in the morning, and I didn't say anything."

"Did you see her when Auntie asked her to stoke up the fire before supper yesterday? Her face went so white I thought she'd

faint.”

“And?”

“She gritted her teeth, opened the door, and tossed in a log. But she shook the whole time. Right after, she went out to the privy. She didn’t come back for some time.”

“If Tillie and Auntie weren’t there, she’d have to cook. That would bring on the nightmares.” Ross nodded. “That would work.”

“What are you getting at?”

“If only Gil and Amelia were home and she got a nightmare, there’d be no one else to comfort her.”

Nevin’s smile took a while to arrive while he thought over the implications. “Good idea. How?”

“How long since you’ve been to Virginia City?”

“Since I saw Ace win the Double Diamond off Smythe. Too long. Why?”

“Amelia’s arranged for some fancy doctor to look at Daniel. She thinks he can sew up his hare lip so the boy can at least close his mouth. It hurts her that he turns away, like a dog ashamed to eat in the same room with his master.”

“If we bring Danny boy with us, Gil will have to take care of the women.”

“Just Amelia. Auntie and Tilly are taking the babies to the camas digging. They’ll be gone at least a couple of weeks.”

Nevin rubbed his stomach, grinning. “Fresh, sweet camas! One of my favorite times of the year.”

“You want to show off your hunting skills to the pretty girls.”

“And what’s wrong with that? You did the same. I saw a lot of girls dig heaping piles of those roots, hoping you’d notice what good wives they’d make. You broke their hearts when you refused to look at any of them,” he joked.

Ross winced. His horse jockeyed around until he calmed it. “The elders would not have allowed it,” he stated. He pointed west. “We’d better check out that herd.”

Nevin opened his mouth to speak and then nodded. Ross would talk when he was ready. One thing he knew about his older brother was that the man was stubborn.

"You never told me why," said Nevin an hour later, his patience exhausted. Ross didn't acknowledge the question, but his shoulders tightened. His horse shied at the tension, dancing sideways until Ross calmed him. He pressed his lips tight.

They rode for hours looking for predators, counting the branded cattle. As the sun dropped toward the west, they headed home. A family of ravens paced them, strangely silent. Finally, Ross spoke.

"A girl died. I was at fault. I was banished from the People."

"Was that when you came back?"

Ross, face turned away, nodded his head.

"Dammit, Ross. You weren't much older than Daniel! How could you be at fault?"

"A girl died because of me. Badly. It didn't matter how old I was. Those are the laws of the People." Ross turned his horse aside.

Nevin let him leave. He shut his mouth and set his brain to work. When big brother Ross returned he was no longer the helpful older brother. He was withdrawn and angry.

Ross learned a lot from their Bannock and Shoshone relatives in the years he was gone. When he returned and Hugh started beating on him as usual, Ross put an arrow into the flesh of his ass. Nothing to kill him, but painful and very, very humiliating. Everyone but Pa, Fin, and Hugh thought it was fitting. But once again, Ross was sent away. This time, to the Elliotts. Ever since, he'd had that one-step-removed attitude, as if his time on the earth was short and he had only one purpose in living.

Nevin now knew that purpose was revenge. Against whom, how, or exactly why, he neither knew or cared. His brother, part of his Clan and Tribe, needed him. He followed Ross, easily catching up.

"Gillis said something about you needing revenge. I can help," said Nevin quietly.

“Don’t need any help.”

Nevin shrugged. “Maybe I need to help you.”

“Help by caring for Amelia while I’m gone.”

Nevin understood Ross’s attitude. If a man had a problem, he solved it. Alone. Ross had had a hell of a time growing up and had every reason to be mad at the world. But Nevin’s skin was the same color. Their children’s would be as well.

Instead of butting heads at every opportunity like Ross, Nevin had learned to get along by being easygoing. He kept the peace by giving in when he had to. Ross, on the other hand, would fight to the death before he’d give an inch. Nev didn’t have as many scars as his older brother, both inside and out, but he had enough.

“Raven, I’m your brother Bear. You left right after to taught me to ride a pony. I remember waiting for the first snow, for you to come home for the winter. You were my hero. An older brother who looked like me. Someone tough, who stood at my back.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Ross with sarcasm. “But I don’t need you.”

“Dammit, if I’m good enough to share your wife, why can’t I share your pain? Why can’t I help you do whatever you need to be whole again?”

Though Nevin shouted the words, Ross gave no notice. He nudged his horse. After a moment, Nevin followed. They rode in silence until almost home. Finally, Ross sighed.

“I need to kill three men. One has the bottom of his nose slit from a knife. The other has old powder burns past his cheekbones.”

“What about the third?”

“My raven attacked him. He’s got deep cuts on his head, but thick hair and a hat would cover them.”

“What did they do?”

“They took what they wanted from a girl and rode away laughing.” Ross clenched his jaw, blinking rapidly. “She slit the first one’s nose with her knife, but he knocked her out. I was too late to

save her. I killed one when he came back for more. The other three escaped. For now.”

“Aw, shit.” Nevin closed his eyes, realizing what they’d done.

“She was our cousin, Nev.” His voice broke. “Nine years old.” He kicked his horse. The beast, startled at the unusual treatment, snorted and stormed away. The ravens, shrieking, chased after.

Nevin pulled on his reins, stopping his horse. After a minute, it leaned down to crop the grass.

“You’ve kept this inside for too long, brother Raven.” Nevin slid his feet out of the stirrups and dismounted. He stretched out his legs, cramped from being in the saddle so long. He kicked a mound of dirt. “Why?” He smashed the next mound with his other foot. “Why didn’t you trust me?”

An image of what must be burned into Ross’s brain hit Nevin. The little girl, covered by one man after the other while Ross raced down the mountain as fast as his legs could go. Too small and far away to stop it. Somehow, Ross had killed one of them, but the other three escaped.

Nevin groaned and fell to his knees. Jessamine Elliott was six months older than him and the toughest girl he’d ever met. What if he was Daniel’s age and was unable to stop four men from raping and murdering Jessie? How could he live, knowing what she’d gone through?

Revenge would be the only thing to keep him going.

So much made sense now. Why Ross wouldn’t pay for a woman, even one of Lily’s eager girls. Why he made regular sweeps into the nearby towns, hanging out in grungy bars pretending to drink bad whiskey while he listened to the talk.

Nevin staggered to his feet. He cursed, wiping away tears of rage with the back of his hand. The three men deserved to die as they had killed. Slowly, painfully, and in terror. The type of men who’d do that to a child wouldn’t stop with just one. How many other girls and women had they destroyed just because they could?

His right hand flexed, eager for his gun.

No. That was too easy for raping scum. He'd tie them up and gag them. Let them watch him put a branding iron into the fire. He'd tell them exactly what he planned to do with that iron. He'd start slow, burning right through the front of their pants.

As a finishing touch, perhaps he'd go medieval, like Vlad the Impaler. He'd roll them over a log, face down. He'd let the branding iron cool a bit so it wouldn't cauterize and kill the nerve endings. He wanted them to feel everything. He'd take that iron rod and shove it up their—

Nevin's smile came slowly, and it was not a pleasant one. Ross would appreciate his idea. Maybe he'd add a few extras with his knife. Just thinking about what would happen when they caught the men made him feel better.

First, they had to catch them. He looked forward to Virginia City even more now.

He whistled for his horse. The mare took her time, being an ornery female. He shook out his body and set his mind to war. He'd heard a few things about the man with the cut nose. He liked to attack Indians, preferably when alone and defenseless. Lately, there'd been rumors of him hanging around the area.

He mounted up and turned toward home. Ross wanted to go to Virginia City for more than Daniel's lip and Gillis's need for Amelia's comfort. There'd be two MacDougal devils on this manhunt. No, they weren't men. They were corpses burning in hell. They just didn't know it yet.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Not bad for an old man,” said Simon to Gillis after the axe slammed down on another piece of wood. The noise hadn’t stopped since he arrived with Beth for a short visit.

“Are ye here to flap yer jaws, or te work?”

“Seems you got the work covered.” Simon looked at the chunks of wood strewn around the chopping block. “Where’s your helper?”

“Ross is tellin’ the laddie aboot yer trip. Ye man enough te replace him?”

Accepting the challenge, Simon strolled over to the woodshed and looked in. Neat rows lined the back end from floor to ceiling. The last row was only waist high. He walked up the plank, grabbed the waiting wheelbarrow, and wheeled it out of the shed.

As usual, Simon whistled as he worked. Gillis muttered while Simon picked up the split logs and set them in the wooden barrow. He took his time in the woodshed, placing each log just so, knowing Gillis had to get up a head of steam before he’d blow.

“Fine! Ye came here for a reason. Tell it and go.” Gillis’s bare chest heaved as he hauled air into his lungs. He stood straight and brushed chips of wood off his chest hair.

“I have a message for you. From Prue.”

Gillis set his jaw and clenched his hand around the axe handle. His eyes narrowed.

“Dinna play with me, lad. I thrashed ye afore, and I’ll gladly do it again.”

Simon opened up his vest and pulled a small book out of an inner pocket. He held it in the air like a preacher would a Bible.

“Prue wrote something in this for you. She told Beth to show it to you when it was time.” He held it out. “Beth says it’s time.”

Gillis stood like an ancient Celtic statue, axe in hand. Simon knew Gil could easily kill him if he went berserk. With or without the weapon.

“Time for what?”

“Time to join the living again. This is Beth’s diary. She marked the pages for you. The first is from before Christmas and the second just before Hope was born.”

Gillis shook his head slowly. “I’ll nae read a woman’s private journal.”

“That’s what Beth said.” He opened the book and cleared his throat. “*Lovely visit with Prue today. She’s blossoming well. We pray every night for the babe’s safe arrival.*” Simon nodded. “We did. Got down on our knees, the four of us, and prayed that Hope would be born safe. We didn’t know it was going to be Hope, of course, but—”

“Say what ye must and leave.”

“*Once again, Prue spoke of her concern for Gillis once she’s gone. She wants him to be strong for her and to love Amelia. She wants me to tell them that she approves of Amelia sharing her bed as I do.*”

Simon licked his finger and flipped forward many pages before looking up. “There’s a blank page on one side before this, and someone else’s writing. Do you want me to read what your wife wrote to you?”

“Can I stop ye?”

“No.”

“Get it over with.” He clenched and unclenched his fists.

Simon turned to the previous page. “It’s personal, Gil. Are you sure?”

Gil cursed. He yanked the axe out of the block and almost fell on the seat. He held the axe in both hands like a warrior eager to attack. He glared at Simon then dropped his head.

"Prudence writes so tiny I canna read her letters. Read it to me, cousin. I'll try not to take your head off."

The last sentence was said with a touch of humor. Simon cleared his throat. Now that he felt his life wasn't in immediate danger, he walked closer so he could lower his voice.

"Dearest Honey-bunny. How I love you, you great big furry oaf."

"If any of this is repeated, that babe you want to plant in Beth's belly will nae have a fither," growled Gillis.

Simon rubbed his forehead. "I promised Beth I'd do this, and she promised Prue. You know I don't carry tales." When Gillis grunted, Simon took it as agreement. He pointed his finger to the spot where he left off.

"I'll love you forever and ever until the stars fall from the sky. As I know you will love me. But we both know I won't be here next winter." Simon choked. He coughed to clear his throat and continued, his voice raw. *"Hope is a beautiful baby, and her da will care for her well. Amelia and Nevin will love her, too. But who will love you, Honey-bunny? I know you love to snuggle up at night and tell me your plans for the future."*

Simon took a long-suffering breath before he continued. *"How you try so hard to be the best Chief for your Clan. We MacDougals need sons, and Amelia will bring them, God willing. But for those sons to be strong they need a strong Chief. So I ask you to do something that only a great Chief would do. Put aside your grief when it is time to love again. If Amelia wishes, please love her as best as you can. She won't be me, but she'll hold you and comfort you. Love you forever, Honey-bunny."*

Simon kept his face averted as he sniffed and wiped his eyes. He carefully pulled the page from Beth's diary. One side blank, the other filled with love for all time. He finally looked over at Gillis. He sat with his elbows on his thighs, holding his bent head.

"I'll give this to you if you promise to keep it. If you destroy it, you'll regret it later." Simon wiped his face. "I remember when Ma

and Pa died. It hurt like hell. Still does. But I'm alive. I have Beth and my brothers and baby James. Next year, God willing, I might have a blonde baby girl as beautiful as her mother. Like you have Hope." He released a shuddering breath. "Life goes on, Gil. It stabs like a knife at first, but the ache does fade to a dull throb."

Gillis didn't move. The only sound was their rasping breaths.

"She's right, Gil. The MacDougal Clan needs a strong Chief. Time to get off your sorry ass and be a man."

Gillis roared and leaped to his feet. Holding the axe handle in both hands, he swung it at Simon. Sy didn't move. At the last moment, Gil changed angle and let go. They heard a deep *thunk* as it embedded itself in a tree.

"Your temper tantrum over now, Chief MacDougal?" Simon's croaking voice proved he wasn't totally unaffected by Gillis's actions.

At six foot five plus hob-nailed boots, Gillis had at least three inches over Simon. He straightened up and used the bulk of his huge chest and massive shoulders. Though smaller in size, Simon had always had a big attitude. He was quiet, but when he spoke, they listened.

Gillis strode over to Simon until their chests almost touched. "Aye," he said quietly. He snatched the page out of Simon's fingers. "I'll thank ye to clear off my land for a wee while."

"As soon as I can get Beth back on Peaches, we'll be gone."

Gillis turned his back and walked toward the woodshed. "That's a daft name for a horse," he said, looking over his shoulder.

"What's a man to do? It makes her happy." Simon nodded his head enough to convey respect as well as friendship. He took a few steps before turning back. He gestured at the wood still littering the areas. "A smart man would have waited until I was finished picking up all the wood you split."

"Mayhaps," said Gillis with a sarcastic growl. "A smarter man would get his arse off MacDougal land afore he loses more than an afternoon stacking someone else's woodpile."

Simon laughed and sauntered back to the house, whistling as if he had no cares in the world. He didn't see Gillis kiss the paper and hold it to his heart or the tears that leaked into his red beard.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ross walked over to Daniel, stacking firewood in the shed. He hadn't told the boy about Amelia's plans with the surgeon in case it didn't work out. He'd learned not to have dreams or hopes. That way, you couldn't lose them.

"We've got some travelling coming up."

Daniel set the log in his hand on the pile. He didn't turn around. "Yer leavin'?"

Though Ross felt an urge to rest his hand on the boy's shoulder, he held back. Daniel had relaxed a lot since arriving, but touching from behind reminded him of previous blows.

"I said 'we.' That means you, me, and Nevin."

Daniel turned so fast he had to brace his hand against the stacked piles. "You're taking me back to my pa?" He stared, his face white and eyes wide.

"No! We'd never do that." Ross crouched down, leaning his elbow on one knee. "We're going to Virginia City. Each of us has some business there."

"I ain't got no business there." Daniel hunched over as if expecting a blow.

The boy's command of grammar had improved drastically as he tried to sound like the people around him. Fear took its toll on everything. Ross held out his hand and gestured him to come near. Daniel did, one slow step at a time.

"Remember when I asked you if Billy could keep an eye out in town?"

Daniel nodded.

"Well, I need to check things out a mite further."

"You after some bad men?"

Ross nodded solemnly. That was all the boy needed to know.

"And you want me to go with you, to help?"

He looked at Ross with bright eyes, eager rather than worried now. The boy was so desperate to prove his worth. All of them wanted Daniel to stay, but the law might force him back to his father. Ross wouldn't make a promise he couldn't keep, so he said nothing.

"That's one reason. The other's to do with your hare lip. Mrs. MacDougal found a surgeon who's worked with other boys like you. He knows how to fix it."

Daniel took a step back, fear replacing the joy. "I figured you liked me a bit."

"We do. That's why we're trying to help you." Ross kept his voice calm, as if he was talking to an injured horse ready to bolt.

"If it don't work, you won't want me no more. You'll leave me there."

Ross shook his head. The boy needed something to believe in, even a crumb. He'd have to word it carefully. Daniel watched, chin quivering.

"Mrs. MacDougal told me she promised you'll always have a home on the MD. Me, Nev, and Gil want Mrs. MacDougal to be happy. So we're doing everything we can to make this your home."

Daniel stood as if expecting a beating. Hunched, shivering, he looked at Ross. "Why?"

Ross dropped his head. He scratched his ear. Finally, he sighed and sat in the dirt cross-legged. He patted the ground beside him. He waited as Daniel approached with short, hesitant steps. When the boy stood beside him, he looked up.

"My ma and pa sent me away when I was five years old. I never had a real home until I moved here with Nevin and Gil."

"Yer ma didn't want ya?"

"I thought so." He picked up a twig and began shredding the bark

from it with his thumbnail, watching the process intently. “But now, I figure she did it to save me.”

“From yer pa?”

“My pa didn’t care if my big brothers killed me. The only thing Ma could do was send me to her family.”

“You lived with Indians?”

Ross smiled wryly at the awe in his voice. “My grandfather and uncles taught me how to be a warrior. Then something bad happened, and they sent me back.”

“Was you bad?”

Ross shook his head. He met Daniel’s eyes, only a few inches above his. “Those men I’m looking for? They did something bad, and I’m going to kill them for it.”

His eyes opened wide, this time in eagerness. But then he frowned.

“Does Mrs. MacDougal know? She said she don’t like killers. She might not like you doin’ that.”

“Women don’t know the way things are in a man’s world. I wasn’t planning on telling her about it. She thinks I’m going along to take care of you. I’d like her to keep thinking that for a bit.”

Daniel dropped down beside Ross. Their shoulders touched. “I won’t tell her.” He reached for a twig and started doing the same as Ross. “Is that why Mr. Nevin is coming along? To help you look?”

Ross grunted his agreement. It was partly how he explained to Gil why all of them had to go. “It’ll take a couple days each way on horseback. Don’t know how long it’ll take for the doc to fix you up.”

Daniel slumped at the reminder of the main purpose of the trip. “Kin I use your belt to bite on when the doc sews me up? I don’t got one.”

Ross let his arm naturally curve around the boy’s back. The boy didn’t ask if it would hurt. Pain was a part of his life. He respected Daniel for that. He’d rather have a bullet in the leg any day than someone taking a needle to his lips. He leaned into Ross, who held

him tight for a moment before releasing him.

"Guess we'll have to get you a belt as well as a pony in Bannack City."

"Pony?" Daniel's fear and worry almost disappeared in eagerness.

"I'm not having you grabbing my shirt all the way there and back! It's time you got your own ride. What color do you want—brown, white, or one of those splashy paints like Trace Elliott?"

"It don't matter, Mr. Ross. 'Long as it's got heart, the outside don't matter.'" Ross recognized the phrase as coming from one of the Elliott boys. Daniel stood up and brushed off the seat of his pants. "It's time for chores."

Ross watched him run toward the barn, leaping and punching his fist in the sky.

"You're right, son." He looked at his brown hands. "The outside don't matter one damn bit." Bleating told him Daniel was getting ready to milk the goats. "Too bad most people aren't as smart as a ten-year-old child." He rose easily to his feet and brushed his pants off the same way as Daniel.

Next on the list was telling Gillis he'd be alone with Amelia for a week or more. Whatever Simon had said to him during Beth's visit, it had put a bee up his butt. This might make him act like a whole swarm was up there.

Gillis was to the west searching for lost cattle. Horseback was the best way to deal with the man. If Gil came at him with fists flying, Ross could always ride away. Fast.

* * * *

"Two bluidy weeks?" Cattle scattered at Gillis's roar. He lowered his voice but not the intensity. "Can ye not wait for yer Auntie? She'll be back in a bit."

Ross tried to look contrite. "The camas digging takes at least a week once they get there. For all I know, Auntie will want to visit her

home and show off Hope for another couple of weeks. We can't wait. Amelia arranged a meeting with some fancy surgeon in Virginia City. For all I know, he's visiting there and will be gone in another few weeks."

Gillis narrowed his eyes. "The lad doesnae need twa men to watch him. Leave Nev here."

"You know I want to check out a few low places along the way. Someone has to stay with the boy, especially after the doc operates."

Gillis harrumphed. He snorted and spat downwind. "Does yer wife know how tae cook? Tillie and Auntie been doin' it all."

"She says yes, but she's afraid of the fire," said Ross quietly. "They use coal in the city, so she hasn't seen an open fire, or heard one crackling, since she got burned. She said this is her chance to prove to herself she can do it."

Gillis scratched his beard. Ross knew he was aware from Prue how badly Amelia had been burned though her scars healed well.

"And will my breakfast, dinner, and supper be either raw or burned?"

"She's made the biscuits the last few days. I didn't see you complaining when she added extra sugar and a handful of currants to try scones."

"Hah!" Gillis shook a finger at Ross. "I was right. I knew those other two wouldnae think of that." He sat up straighter in the saddle.

"There's a problem. Amelia gets nightmares of the fire. The only way to stop her screaming is to hold her."

Gillis muttered for a bit. He scratched his beard and kicked a rock. "I'll only do it if the lass screams." Ross gave a slight nod. "I'll bed down by the kitchen. Nae in that room." Another nod.

They rode on for a few minutes while Gillis grumbled again. He shot his finger at Ross. "I'll not bed the woman!" He kicked his heels, and the horse took off.

"That went well," Ross said to his horse. "I wonder how long he'll last, holding Amelia while she wriggles her ass against his belly."

He looked up at the sky. Though it was near supper, the sun was nowhere near setting. He settled in the saddle and adjusted his hat.

"I'll give you extra when we get home," he promised, patting the horse's neck. "It's best we stay away for a bit."

He nudged the animal west.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Amelia waved as Nevin and Ross, with Daniel hiding in front, trotted away. Gillis turned the wagon back toward town. She yawned and looked forward. Ross and Nevin had given her an exquisite goodbye celebration. A bit sore, she shifted on the hard seat. Since Gillis wouldn't come near her, it would be at least a week, perhaps two, before she'd have a man in her bed again.

She'd learned a lot since Auntie and Tillie joined the Tribe for their annual celebration, centered around the women digging the sweet underground bulbs which kept the Tribe alive during the cold winter.

Daniel taught her to milk the goats, and she'd proudly tended the stove by herself for two days. The house was quiet without the women and babies, but Daniel kept her company during the day while the men worked.

Gillis had been short with all of them since Hope left. Amelia dreaded the time alone with him. She knew still grieved for Prudence, but his gruffness was a trial. Beth told her that there was little time for grief in the West. Most widows remarried within a couple of months, unable to cope on their own in a harsh land.

She had her suspicions that Ross and Nevin had set up their trip so that Gil would be alone with her. Would Gillis use the opportunity to get closer with her? He could be frightening, but Prudence said he was like a big, friendly bear. He certainly acted that way with Hope.

"Do ye want some tea? It's Smithy I came to see, and that's no place for a woman."

"Tea would be lovely. Perhaps I could visit Miss Lily."

“Ye’ll not!”

Gillis glared down at her, all fierce with his bright blue eyes and red bristles. She held back a smile at his shock and horror. Perhaps Ross hadn’t mentioned their visit.

“You’re right. I expect the ladies are still sleeping. Were you thinking of leaving me in the hotel dining room while you chat?” She blinked her eyes at him. He narrowed his back as if seeing her for the first time and not being pleased at it.

“Nae,” he said slowly. “I shall leave you with Sophie McLeod. She’ll keep an eye on ye.” He bent his head toward her and held up a furry, red finger. “Whilst Ross is away, ye are under my care, and ye will do what I tell ye.”

“I’ll obey you as I obey my husband.”

He harrumphed and slapped the traces to make the horses turn back to town. They’d gone east as far as possible to hide Daniel, pretending she couldn’t bear to see Ross leave her. She held onto the seat with both hands as they rattled over the ruts. She settled her skirts around her when they faced town.

After weeks of going without, she wore a chemise, corset, white-on-white embroidered corset cover, drawers, three petticoats with wide lace frills, and a bustle. She would have gone without the last, but her sheer white dress with sprays of blue flowers would not fit without it. Even with the petticoats, she’d had to shorten the dress four inches so it wouldn’t drag in the dust. Of course, if it had been a damp day, she would not have worn such a thing.

Ross had refused to tie her corset tight, so she’d had to ask Nevin. He also made comments about the lack of practicality but had done as she asked. Both said they wanted to see her in the sheer dress, without undergarments, on their return. Their final kisses had left her in a near-faint as she couldn’t breathe deeply enough due to the corset.

All that mattered was that she looked beautiful as she said goodbye to her men, and that was worth all the trouble.

Gillis, of course, had never noticed her whatever she wore.

Perhaps he was so grouchy because he was forced to be near her today. Surely, she didn't remind him too much of Prudence. She favored her mother's side while Prue took after their father with his deep brown eyes.

"There's the smithy," said Gillis, pointing to the first building on his left. "Ye'll stay with Sophie until I come for ye. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she replied.

So far, she'd promised him nothing. For all she knew, he'd be hours before returning, and she had her own needs. She wanted a sheathed knife from Patsy Tanner without the men learning about it. When she lifted the lid on the trunk to get this dress, she got an idea how to pay for things herself. Unfortunately, the mercantile was across the street from the hotel, but she'd have to chance Gillis seeing her.

She had to talk to Patsy today. Alone. To spite the inheriting cousin, she brought all manner of fabric and dresses from the attics in her father's home. She'd never wear them, but Patsy would know if they had value here.

She braced herself to get down as Gillis pulled up in front of the hotel. He turned to her and placed his paw on her arm as she was about to stand.

"Nae so fast, lassie."

She felt the warmth of his hand through the sheer fabric. She looked down. He snatched his hand away.

"Look at me, Amelia MacDougal."

She'd not heard him speak in so determined a manner before. She saw no sign of the grieving widower or playful father. Shrewd, blue eyes speared her.

"Ye will promise to stay with Sophie until I come for ye, or I'll take this wagon straight home."

"But I want to talk with Patsy Tanner at the mercantile. Women's things."

His face reddened, but he looked even more determined.

"I was married long enough to learn a few things about wives. Prue didn't think she had to mind me. She learned to obey or not sit down for a few days. Ye'll get the same by my hand."

Amelia cursed the corset that made her pant. In anger, of course.

"I think not!"

He leaned closer until his forehead almost touched her bonnet. "Did Ross not tell ye I'm The MacDougal, yer Clan Chief? Ye will do what I say, or I'll put ye over me knee."

"You'll not raise a hand to me!"

Gillis sat up. A new light was in his eye, one she wasn't sure she liked.

"Are ye wearing drawers under that dress, Mrs. MacDougal?" He said it loud, as if he wanted the whole town to hear.

"Of course!"

"Guid. I willnae have to wait until home to spank ye. I'll lay ye acrost me lap right here, flip up that fancy dress, and show ye who's in charge."

"Do it, Gillis," shouted a male voice from the crowd.

"Show us her drawers!"

Amelia glared up at Gillis. "Ross has never, ever treated me this way."

"He's not spanked ye?" Gillis touched his chest and leaned back in mock surprise. "'Tis clear the man needs an education on bein' a husband."

Amelia burned from her toes to her bonnet. It wasn't just the public humiliation, it was the thought of spanking. The book showed a naked woman lying across a man's lap. His hand was raised above her bottom. The second picture had the same hand between her legs, pleasuring her.

Gillis looked thoughtful as he watched her hot face. His eyes traced to her throat. She swallowed. He stopped for a moment at her breasts before dropping to her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. When he looked up again, he nodded in satisfaction.

“Where will ye be, Amelia MacDougal, whilst I’m away from ye?”

“With Mrs. McLeod.” She ground out the reply through clenched jaw.

“Too bad, lads,” called Gillis while watching her. “The wee wife will be obeying me this morning.”

“We will discuss this later, Mr. MacDougal,” she said quietly.

“That we will,” he replied. Gillis held out his right palm and looked at it. He brushed it, as if to remove a bit of dust. He slapped his left hand against it lightly, twice. “That we will.”

* * * *

“I don’t know what my sister saw in the man!”

Sophie McLeod, teacup in hand, watched Amelia pace across her private parlor.

“This morning is the first time I’ve seen Gillis looking like himself since Hope was born,” said Sophie. “When he returned from his trip East with a laughing bride on his arm, we were so pleased.”

Amelia turned to Sophie.

“He was always so sober, worried that he had to do everything to keep the MD going strong. But Prudence made him laugh. He’d bluster and fuss, and she’d poke him in the belly and bat her eyes at him. Prue was good for him, but she wasn’t strong enough to survive out here.” Sophie smiled sadly. “You’re tougher, more resilient. You’d have to be, putting up with Ross as a husband.”

“He’s a good man, far better than anyone here thinks!”

“You don’t have to convince me. I came here a very young bride to an older man. After Amos died, I fought to keep this hotel. Many wanted to take me, and the business. I fought back, but I had help. The Elliots and MacDougals are good friends.” She smiled widely and motioned to the Queen Anne lady’s chair beside her. “Do have a seat. You make me tired with your pacing, and that chair is designed

for a bustle.”

Amelia nodded her thanks and sank down on the ruby brocade.

“I apologize for my outburst. We’ve barely met, and I rush in here complaining. It’s not that I don’t want to visit with you, it’s—”

“You don’t want to be ordered to do something by a man. Especially one who’s not your husband.” She poured tea into a delicate flowered cup. “Lemon and sugar?”

Amelia nodded and gracefully accepted the cup. She took a sip and smiled. Sophie watched her place the saucer on a side table.

“I do hope you’re sleeping with Nevin as well as Ross. No wonder you had a tiff at Gillis. Going without for a week or more will be difficult, won’t it?”

“Pardon me?”

“If you could see your expression!” Sophie laughed. Amelia’s lip twitched, then she laughed as well. After a moment, Sophie sighed. “You needed that poke, didn’t you?”

She motioned for Amelia to have more tea.

“I think Beth considers me a good friend. I hope one day you will as well. There are few intelligent women in these parts, so we have to stick together.” Sophie leaned back. She rested her heels on a hassock. “It feels wonderful to get off my feet during the day. My next husband will be wonderful at foot massage.” She gave Amelia a knowing wink. “As well as massaging other parts. How do you like married life so far?”

“I’m not sure if I have anything to compare it to. I lived alone with my father since Prue left and I was injured. I expected to care for Father until he died then live there until I did as well, doing good deeds.”

“You didn’t want to marry?”

“No man wanted a scarred woman. At least, no man who could enhance my father’s business,” she added.

“I heard you enjoying your first night with Ross.” A playful smile twitched her lips at Amelia’s wince. “The looks on their faces when

you and Ross finally came downstairs for dinner kept me laughing for a week!”

“I don’t remember seeing anything. I was so embarrassed.”

Sophie sipped her tea for a moment. She set down the cup and sat up.

“Gillis was right in telling you not to walk around town alone.” She held up a hand at Amelia’s immediate protest. “Yes, other women don’t have that rule. But you are a pretty white woman married to what many consider to be a worthless savage. I think of those boys as better than three-quarters of the men in this town, but I don’t walk around with a hard-on, a gun, and a grudge. You are in danger.”

Amelia set her saucer down, the empty cup rattling from her trembling fingers. She folded them together. All color had dropped from her face.

“Did something already happen?”

Amelia nodded. “A man caught me out by the privy in back. He said he and his partner would make me a widow, then I’d belong to him.”

“Did you see him?”

“No. He held my neck from behind. All I know is his voice and that he stank.”

“Did you tell Ross?”

She shook her head. Sophie exhaled hard through pursed lips. “Why not?”

“The man said he’d kill Hope if I told anyone.”

“Goodness, girl. You’ve got to tell your man so he can protect you and your niece.” Sophie tucked a few strands of hair back under her cap. “This is Montana Territory, not a big Eastern city. A man has to protect what’s his or lose it. Frank Chambers does a good job, but he’s only one man. And you’ll be all alone on the ranch.”

She abruptly stood up and began pacing as Amelia had earlier. “If Ross had known this, he wouldn’t have gone off with Nevin for a jaunt to Virginia City.”

"It's not a jaunt, and he would have gone anyway." Amelia set her jaw. "If you know so much, then where is the son of that vicious drunk, Ernest Thompson?"

"I've been trying to find that out. He's a good boy, a hard worker." She frowned. "His father wouldn't be cursing him for going missing if he killed him, but someone else might have."

"He's on his way to Virginia City with Ross and Nevin."

Sophie cocked her head and looked down at Amelia. "He's going where?"

"Ross brought him home weeks ago. He's very helpful with chores. I've arranged for a surgeon to fix his lip, or at least try to. That's the only reason they went."

Sophie settled herself again. She tapped the pads of her fingers together under her chin as if praying, but her eyes were open.

"Ross gets to search for whoever he's looking for, Nevin gets some fun, and Ernie gets a lip that closes," she murmured.

"As far as we're concerned, he's now Daniel MacDougal."

"The boy deserves a good home." Sophie nodded once, decisively. "Now, what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

Sophie's expression changed from worried to lurid. "About you being alone with Gillis, who hasn't bedded a woman since Prue started showing with Hope. Twelve long months."

"We are going to do nothing. This morning is the first time I've spoken more than a few words with the man. Ross insisted he sleep in the house while they're gone, so he'll have a pallet by the kitchen until they return."

Sophie raised an eyebrow.

"There's nothing between us. Nothing!"

"I certainly saw something between you out in the wagon." She spoke over Amelia's gasp. "A woman doesn't get that excited about a man she isn't interested in."

"He threatened to spank me! In the street!"

“And you loved the idea of it, didn’t you.”

“I beg your pardon!” Amelia struggled to her feet, hampered by the bustle.

“If you leave here, he will spank you.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“He did it to Prue the first time she tried having a hissy fit on him. Mind you, he kept her skirts down, but he told everyone, rather loudly, it was only because he doesn’t allow her to wear knickers.”

Amelia slumped onto the chair, face pale. “He actually did that?”

“Prue told me later that halfway home, he did it again, this time with her skirts up over her head. She struggled, kicking and screaming. She said it was the best fun. Mind you, she was much healthier when she first arrived. Every winter made her worse.”

“Oh, my.” Amelia fanned her face with her hand.

Sophie stood up. “I’ll give you a few minutes. When you’re calm, turn right at the hallway and join me in the kitchen. You’re not dressed for baking, but you could set some tables for me.”

“Of course,” replied Amelia primly. “I’ve taken you from your work. I do apologize.”

“Goodness, this was the most entertainment I’ve had since I planted my foot in Frederick Smythe’s bottom and shoved him out the front door.”

She paused with one hand on the crystal doorknob, her expression suddenly sober.

“Like others, Smythe thought he could take advantage of me. I don’t go far from the hotel without an escort, Amelia. Neither should you.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Job completed, Gillis almost whistled as, kilt swinging from side to side, he strolled down the middle of the street toward the McLeod Hotel. Ernest Thompson had crawled out of some hole and slouched on the front steps of Baldy's Saloon. With that ugly mug, Daniel was lucky not to favor his father.

"Why don'tcha wear pants like a man instead of a skirt?"

Gillis usually ignored that sort of comment, but he felt different today. He stopped and turned to the man. Daniel's pa. He'd love to kill him, but it wouldn't be fair to the boy. With that attitude, it wouldn't be much longer before someone else did him in. Gil set his fists on his hips, booted feet wide apart.

"You think wearing pants makes a man?" He tsked and shook his head. "The MacDougal motto is *Vincere vel mori*. Which do ye think I'll do today? Conquer, or die?" He spoke as if in conversation but clear enough for all to hear.

"You can't kill me in cold blood on the street."

"I didnae say kill, laddie. I said conquer. Do ye think ye can spare a few minutes to meet my fists on this bonnie day?"

The man looked around. He licked his lips when those around him looked back and sneered. Either he fought, or he'd lose what little respect he had. He sniffed deep and spat. It caused a tiny puff of dust near Gillis's boot.

Gillis watched the much smaller man approach. There was at least nine inches difference in height and almost as much in girth. The man put up his fists and swung. Gillis caught the fist in his hand. With the other, he grabbed the man by the shirt collar. No matter how hard he

swung his remaining hand, all he could connect with was Gillis's arm. Gillis lifted him off the ground so his feet dangled then dropped him. He sprawled in the dust.

When Thompson scuttled away on hands and knees, Gillis followed and gave him a boot in the rear. The man rolled away, howling.

"I dinna waste my time with the likes of you." He turned in a circle, looking each man in the eye. "Any more of ye think ye're man enough to insult The MacDougal?" Suddenly, not a man was looking at him. They'd either slunk back into the dark or found something far more interesting to look at, like their feet.

Gillis rolled his shoulders and continued down the middle of the street. When he passed the mercantile, the old dog struggled to his feet and paced with him.

"Damn dog's smarter than half the men in this town," he muttered as he turned toward the hotel. "I hope the lassie needs a lesson as well," he said to the dog. It sat, knowing the hotel was out of bounds, as Gillis climbed the stairs. He marched through the front doors and down the hallway to the kitchen. He looked at the bustling group. No flimsy white dress.

"No Mrs. MacDougal, then?" He smiled and rubbed his hands in eagerness. "Guid!"

"Sorry to disappoint, but I'm setting the tables in the dining room." Amelia strolled into the kitchen with a handful of spoons in one hand.

He slowly looked her up and down, admiring her as a woman for the first time. The fabric, see-through from right above the V of her chest to her neck, barely hid the flush that rose to her face. His cock rose as well. The heavy wool of the kilt pressed it down so no one else knew. He caught Sophie's wink and smile and returned it. That woman missed nothing.

"I've done my business. Are ye ready to go across the street?"

She set her jaw. Her color deepened. Prue thought she controlled

him, and he let her think that. He was discovering that Amelia was too honest to play those games. He hadn't sparred with a woman other than Sophie in years, and that was only in friendship.

He suddenly realized he was glad to be alive. At this very moment, he was happy. He bent slightly forward and extended his left elbow.

"Shall we?"

He could tell she knew it was a dare. He'd push her boundaries as he found out what type of woman he'd insisted Ross marry. With this amount of fight in her, she was better off with Ross. Luckily, she got Nevin, too. As to him, well, he'd see how the wind blew.

Amelia handed the spoons to Elsbeth Fetters. The serving girl took them and flounced into the dining room. She made sure she turned fast enough for her ankles to show. The effort was lost on him. He wanted a woman, not a flighty miss.

The thought startled him for a moment. He wanted to bed Amelia, to share her with Ross and Nevin. He'd never love her as he had Prudence, but he cared for her. A home revolved around a woman, and the Clan needed a good home to raise children in. Amelia would be that woman.

"Thank you for your kind consideration, Mr. MacDougal," said Amelia.

She moved toward him, her full skirts gliding across the floor as if they were at the finest ball in the East. He'd attended one or two when looking for a wife. Damn waste of time, material, and candles in his mind. The music was slow with too many violins screeching. Nothing like the pipes.

The pipes. He hadn't gotten them out since he brought Prue home. She didn't like the sound, she said. Too much like cats fighting. Well, Amelia was going to learn to like them whether she wanted to or not.

"What is that smug smile about, dear brother-in-law?"

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. Her words were like honey, but her look was pure poison. Ah, bettering this woman for the next few

weeks was going to make him a new man.

“You’ll discover soon enough, Amelia.”

* * * *

“I swear I’ll not wear a corset again on a hot day while riding in this wagon!”

Amelia tried to move into a more comfortable position. It was unseasonably hot for late June. The afternoon sun beat down on them. She held a parasol matching her dress. Without it, she would burn through the thin material barely covering her shoulders. She gasped in relief when they entered the woods and the temperature dropped drastically.

“Whoa.”

She held the side as Gillis stopped the wagon. She turned to him.

“Take it off if it’s bothering you so much.”

He didn’t look at her as he swung down the side. His kilt swung wide, showing his white buttocks and strong thighs. He kept his back to her as he walked toward the stream with a bucket.

If she tried to get down without him, she would surely tear her dress. She couldn’t take off her corset without removing her dress. That was something she was not going to do until in the privacy of her room. But she could take off a few other layers.

She reached under her skirt, the side farthest from Gillis, and tugged. Gillis knelt by the stream filling the bucket, his back to her. She stood up, reached underneath, and wiggled her drawers down.

They were soaked, both at her waist and between her legs.

A quick look showed he was paying her no attention. She flipped up the overskirt and untied her petticoats. The top two were the thickest, covered in carefully ironed ruffles. She struggled out of them, leaving the plain one on. She gathered them up and then turned around. She knelt on the seat and carefully placed her bundle on a clean section of the wagon floor. She overbalanced and found herself

caught, head and arms on one side and flailing legs on the other.

A warm hand on her bottom steadied her. Gillis reached around her middle with his other hand. He took his time lifting her top end up. In the process, his hand slipped over her corset to her breast. He held it there for a moment.

"Are ye sure ye dinna want me tae spank ye, lass?"

She heard the laugh in his voice.

"I'm very sure, thank you," she growled. "Please remove your hands from my person so I can sit down."

"If I thought ye did it a'purpose, ye'd not wish to be sitting for a wee while."

He placed her hands on the boards and helped her balance until she could get herself right. He leaped off the wagon again, chortling. She was mortified at the position he'd found her in as well as his implication that she'd done it on purpose. She panted, once again cursing the corset that held her so tight.

"As soon as I get home, I'm going to take this off." She suddenly gasped, her mouth dropping open. "Oh, no!"

Nevin had tied her corset and done up her buttons. On her back. She remembered him tucking the strings under her shoulder. The dress was so tight that she'd never reach to undo it herself.

She heard a deep snort of laughter. Gillis held up the bucket for the lead horse to drink. He had that cock-of-the-walk, know-it-all expression she'd seen on a few of the more insufferable boys who gathered around Prue.

"I wondered when ye'd figger that out." He snorted again. The animal did as well, only louder. Gillis moved the bucket to the other horse.

"It's not funny."

"Aye, it is." Though he spoke seriously, she saw the twinkle in his eye and lip twitch. "Ye've got twa choices. Ask me te help ye or wear what ye've got on until the others return."

"I could ride to Beth's and ask her to help."

“Do ye know how to saddle a horse, lassie? I thought not.”

“I’ll not go near the stove in this dress. You’ll have to feed yourself.”

The horse finished drinking. He rubbed it between the ears. “Ye’ll nae go near the privy in it, either.” He grinned openly at her. “I’ll gladly lend ye my hands, fumble-fingered though they be.”

She glowered at him for a moment.

“Fine. But you’ll wear a handkerchief around your eyes.”

“I told Ross ye were a bright one.” He attached the bucket back to the side of the wagon and climbed up. She held on as it rocked with his weight. “I’ll cover my eyes tae keep yer modesty, Mrs. MacDougal.”

She’d wear her ugliest wash dress with a chemise and petticoat every day while Ross was away. After all, she had more chores with Daniel gone. She’d also have more free time. She wanted to use her charcoals to make a sketch of James as a present for Beth. Surely, they’d visit at least once while she was alone. The Elliotts said they’d help fill in for the two missing men, and Beth could easily come along.

She was silent the rest of the way home, thinking of her plans. Gillis, however, would look at her and chuckle every now and then, as if he had a funny secret he’d not share.

After today’s fiasco, she was bound to prove to him that she could do very well without him, thank you very much. She also wanted to prove to herself that she could do all the chores of a ranch wife. She tried to ignore the twitch between her legs that demanded the rough touch of a man.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Stop laughing. I don’t find this at all amusing.”

Gillis knelt on the bedroom floor while Amelia tied the red handkerchief tight around his closed eyes. She was madder than he’d ever seen Prue. But then, he didn’t bedevil his wife since she took it so badly. He hadn’t realized how much he kept back from her so as not to cause an upset. Even when they met, he treated Prudence like a porcelain doll. Amelia, however, was able to take all sorts of pranks.

When he saw Amelia dang near buck-naked in the clearing, with Ross banging her from behind and Nevin kneeling before her, sucking her pussy, he’d damn near come on the spot. He quickly turned around, in such shock he didn’t know or care who she was. Just that he could never have that with his late wife. Prue was never so hot that she couldn’t wait until they went into their room at night.

He’d thought about what Prue would have done if she’d got herself in this predicament with only Ross or Nevin around. She would have cut the dress and corset off rather than be seen by the others. Her talk of sharing was just that. Talk.

Auntie told him what Amelia did with Nevin on the kitchen table before Ross hauled her outside for more. The old lady damn near giggled in pride. She said Amelia’s sass was good for her boys.

He didn’t mind a bit of sass in a woman, as long as she knew who was boss.

Amelia tied a third knot. “Can you see anything?”

“It’s all dark from this side.”

“Good. I’ll turn around so you can start on my buttons.”

Gillis opened his eyes. He wouldn’t touch the blindfold to make it

easier to see, but he wasn't about to let her know that enough light filtered through. He got to his feet, stumbling a bit. He held out his hands, feeling for her.

"Oh, no, you don't."

She grabbed his hand and placed it on her back before he could touch her elsewhere. Now that her back was turned, he let a smile slip out. He blew out his breath as he worked on her buttons. It made the tendrils of hair at her neck stir. She shivered, just like Prue used to do. He cursed as his thick fingers fought the tiny buttons.

"Who was the idjit who tied you into this fool dress?"

"Nevin was kind enough to do it for me." Her tone was snippy, implying that Ross had refused to do it.

"I'll have to thank the lad."

"Why?"

She turned toward him. He kept his eyes as slits and let his fingers trail over her bare neck as she turned. He wasn't going to say that it allowed him to touch her, reminding him what a woman's soft skin felt like.

"'Tis the first time I've been up here since Prue died. She's dead and buried," he croaked. "And I have to move on."

Careful of the blindfold, he pressed his knuckles against his forehead as sudden grief rolled over him. It faded quickly this time rather than taking hours. Amelia forced him to open up and see that life went on. She grieved for her sister but was able to move on.

He'd lost his wife, but he was the Chief. It was his job to be responsible for the Clan. He would not follow Prue into the grave the way that Trace's father had followed his mother. He was not that selfish.

When he saw Amelia that day in the clearing, taking his brothers with every bit of joy she could, something shattered inside him. It scared the hell out of him. Even this morning in town, he'd fought against letting her in. But his brothers were gone for some time, and he had to step forward. He never let Prue wander around town alone,

and he was not going to let Amelia.

He just hadn't realized how much he enjoyed proving to her who was boss. He'd laughed at her today...and lusted. It would have been even better if he'd been able to get into a knock-down fistfight.

"Ah, well," he murmured. "It is what it is."

She moved away with the last button undone. He heard the skiff of fabric as she slipped off her bodice. She wore a red corset underneath. With her back to him, she pulled off her fancy shift, skirt, petticoat, and bustle. She bent over to lay them on the bed and then turned to face him.

He had to bite his tongue.

He'd taken one look at her in the clearing and turned his back. Since then, he'd told himself the vision he held in his mind was false.

It was real.

Damn, she was lush! There were the wide hips that had Ross held with both hands. He remembered that curve of her ass as she bent forward, breasts jiggling as she gasped with each thrust. Her belly might even now hold his nephew.

She turned her back and stood in front of him.

"Nevin tucked the lacing under my right shoulder."

He reached out his hand and tentatively touched her hip, as if he wasn't sure where she was. She shivered and swallowed hard. He traced his fingers up the corset to her armpit. He circled around it so lightly that his calluses skimmed her downy hair. She shivered again.

As soon as the wagon reached the yard she'd run into the house. When he put everything away, he brought her drawers and petticoats to her. Her soaking drawers had the same scent he now inhaled. He would love Prue until the day he died. If she'd lived, he'd never have looked at another woman.

But Prue was dead. Amelia was alive...and married to his brother.

He wouldn't ask. But if she wanted him, he was too weak to turn her down.

He found the tie and pulled it free. A few minutes and he had her

unlaced. She held the corset to her breast like a shield and scuttled over to the corner screen.

“Thank you,” she said. “You can remove the blindfold.”

He pulled it off and blinked. She peeked around the far corner of the screen. Her face was almost as red as her corset.

“Good night, Amelia,” he said.

“Thank you again. Good night.”

His wool kilt rasped against his hard cock as he walked down the stairs. Ross said she might have a nightmare and need to be held. Holding her, just holding, would be torture. But some night, she might want him to do more than hold her. Maybe he’d get a chance to kiss her.

He undressed and lay on the pallet between the stairs and the kitchen. He listened to the house settle around him as it cooled. The comforting sounds reminded him of better times. He drifted off.

* * * *

“Fire! Please, someone, help!”

Gillis was halfway up the stairs before his eyes opened. He ran into the bedroom and stopped, chest heaving. Amelia rolled in the bed, trying to escape the sheets wrapped around her.

“Don’t let them die! Please, help me!”

He strode toward the bed and lifted her, sheets and all, into his arms. “I’ve got ye, lassie. Ye’re safe.”

“But the children!”

“The wee ones are safe. Shh, ye can relax now.”

She sighed and slumped against him. He stood for a moment trying to catch his breath, enjoying the feel of her against him. He gently laid her down and unwrapped her from the sheets. Her nightgown was soaked along with the sheets. Telling himself it was a job that needed doing, he eased her nightgown over her head. Her nipples crinkled as the cool air from the window hit them. He backed

off the bed and walked around to the other, undisturbed, side.

He pulled back the top sheet then gently rolled her over. She stretched out on her side, her back to him.

Her long, dark hair, so much like her sister's, flowed over her body. A body that was nothing like any he'd seen before. Perfect alabaster with light brown circles around large nipples. Dimples above her ass that he could put a thumb into. He sighed and covered her.

He kissed her forehead and walked toward the stairs.

She started moaning again. He looked over his shoulder. She whipped her head to the side and cried out.

He looked up at the ceiling. "Lord, why are ye putting me in temptation?"

Amelia choked, coughing as if she breathed smoke. She whimpered.

"All right, then. 'Tis in yer hands, nae mine."

As soon as she felt the mattress tip, she turned toward him. He lay on his back and let her climb onto his chest. Her left hip brushed against his cock. He gently rested his arm on her back.

"Sleep, lassie. Yer safe."

He lay there and looked at the ceiling, silently talking with God, until faint fingers of light broke through the night. Figuring she was safe now, he got up. He looked at the messy bed and the nightgown he'd hung on a peg to dry. He shook his head and padded downstairs, hard cock aching with every step.

Let her figure out how it got there.

* * * *

Amelia carefully sliced bread. She couldn't remember a thing happening between going to bed and waking up. Gillis had grabbed breakfast and was gone before she woke. All morning, she'd waited for him to say something about what they must have done, but he

hadn't come by.

"Dinner ready yet?"

She jumped. The knife clattered onto the floor. Gillis knelt and set it on the table.

"Better be careful with that. Ye could get hurt."

She gulped. Though he was dressed as usual, in shirt, kilt, and boots, he looked different. He looked *at* her differently. She turned her back and went to the stove. She'd cooked up extra bacon at breakfast. The onions and cold potatoes from yesterday were sliced and ready to heat. A pot of beans was bubbling in the heat at the back of the stove. She slid the heavy pot to the front, replacing it with the cast-iron frying pan.

"Somethin' itchin' ye, lass?"

"Pardon?"

She kept her back to him as she added a dollop of bacon fat to the pan and then the onions. Once they were mostly cooked, she'd brown the potatoes with them.

"I said, is somethin' itchin' ye?"

His deep voice came from right behind her. Onions. She had to stir the onions.

"Ye've been jumpy all day. Did somethin' happen last night?"

"What?" She squeaked and whirled around. He looked at her for a moment and then turned to wash up in the yard. She watched him pull his shirt off. He was fifteen inches taller and perhaps three times her weight. He moved like a giant, deliberate power visible in every action. Ross and Nevin were more like mountain lions, sleek and graceful but no less deadly.

He splashed water over his beard and furred chest. How did she know what his chest felt like on her face? Soft and warm and a bit prickly. She rubbed her nose. Ross and Nevin's skin was mostly smooth with only a few stray hairs around their nipples. She'd never thought of getting an itchy nose from a man's hairy chest.

She startled when a log crackled. She turned back to the stove,

catching the onions just in time. She added the chopped potatoes and stirred the pan, coating everything well in bacon fat so they'd brown. She reached for the pot of beans.

"I'll get that."

Gillis, still without his shirt, brushed past her. His chest hair tickled her cheek as he passed. She backed away as he picked up the heavy pot with one hand. His arm bulged as he carried it outside.

"Ye want the water in the cauldron?"

"Yes, please." When the boiling water from the beans cooled, she'd use it on the vegetables and herbs in the garden.

After depositing the pot on the stove, he went back out to put on his shirt. When he sat in the chair at the end of the table, she filled his plate with beans, bacon, onions, and potatoes and the sliced bread. She puttered, delaying the time she'd have to sit with him. At last, she had a smaller plate fixed for herself. She poured a mug of milk.

"I have milk. Did you want some?"

He looked up. She was sure he stared at her breasts before meeting her eyes.

"From the goat?" His lip twitched. He shook his head. "Nae."

She frowned. He looked as if he was holding back a laugh at her expense. He looked at his plate again. She sat at the long side of the table on the bench, her back to the room.

"Is yer nightie dry?"

She dropped her spoon, heart thudding wildly. He calmly continued eating. She picked it up again, fighting to gain her composure.

"Why," she choked. She sipped her milk. "Why do you ask?"

He licked off his spoon and set it down next to his tin plate. He leaned forward on his forearms. His big head looked like a lion, fierce and wild. His eyes bored into her.

"Because it was soaked when I took it off ye. Those are powerful nightmares ye get, lassie. Ye kept me awake all night keepin' ye safe from them."

“You—” She gripped her spoon. “You undressed me?”

“Aye.” He nodded calmly.

“When I was asleep?” Her voice rose on the second syllable.

Another nod. She pushed back from the table, forgetting she was on the bench. It didn’t move, but she did. She fell backward, windmilling her arms for balance. He caught her before she hit the floor. He smiled down at her. Bright blue eyes stood out from the bushy red hair covering most of his face.

“I didnae notice ye were so clumsy afore yer man left. Is there sommat yer missin’ from him I could help ye with?”

She closed her eyes, unwilling to see him laughing at her. He sighed deeply. She didn’t look as he maneuvered her to sit in his lap on the floor.

“I shouldnae make fun of ye.”

He kissed her forehead. His beard and moustache tickled her, but his lips were soft. He pressed her head against his chest. Worry about the fire, Daniel’s operation, missing Ross, and how she was going to cope alone as an untried ranch wife hit against his kindness and warmth. She tried to fight them, but tears leaked out. She snuffled.

“Let it out, lass. I’ve got ye.”

* * * *

Gillis held the small, trembling woman in his arms. He cursed himself for being so clumsy and making her cry.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice high from a tight throat. “I didn’t know I had them again. I thought it was over.”

“Ross told me to watch, said ye get them when ye’re alone in bed.” He rubbed his chin on her head as a cat would. “I liked holdin’ ye all night. Makin’ ye feel safe.”

He liked it too much. But he and God had come to an agreement during the long night. God had taken Prudence and left Amelia. She wasn’t his wife, but he was the Chief, so she was under his protection.

He'd do for her whatever she needed.

If that included helping her sleep by kissing her or letting her kiss him, then so be it. If she wanted more, he was ready to give that, too.

Things were different back East. Here, there was no time for a long mourning period. Life went on, and a man's needs must be met. Bedding a willing woman was one of the few pleasures available on a ranch. Prue wanted him to bed Amelia. And, by damn, so did he.

Before she left, Auntie informed him that Amelia was already carrying Ross's child. She wasn't very far along, but Auntie always knew these things long before others. That meant he could have her without guilt.

"I didn't mean to keep you awake."

"I've nae slept well in some time. 'Twas good to be needed as a man."

He remembered cupping her soft cheek where it flared out at her hip. His thick fingers pressed into her flesh, holding her in place as she sprawled across his chest. She was no bigger than a minute, but every part of her was womanly. She would make healthy babies for his Clan, starting with the one already in her belly.

"Lyn' there, just holding ye, that's what was hard."

He let some of what he felt show on his face. Prue knew what that look promised. He raised an eyebrow at Amelia. "Do ye know what I mean, lass?"

Her face turned red faster than a flannel-mouthed politician at full speed. She dropped her eyes.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm sorry you couldn't sleep." She struggled to get loose, but he held her snug. "I'd better clean up the kitchen."

"Will ye nae give me a reward?"

He whispered the words across her throat near her ear. When he lifted his head back, she looked up at him with those stormy gray eyes. His cock throbbed. With her bottom resting in his lap, she knew it was there. Her nostrils flared, and she licked her lips.

“A kiss?” she whispered back.

He nodded, waiting for her to act. She opened her mouth. He dropped his head, letting her kiss him. She tapped her tongue against his moustache before tasting him. He opened his lips and let her explore. She flicked that agile tongue between his teeth. He imagined it dancing over his cock. When she nipped his lip, he gave in and pulled her close. He took over, but gently.

Years of careful kisses with Prue had taught him to hold back no matter how much he wanted to take everything. When he felt her hesitation, he released her. He rested his forehead on hers as they both fought to breathe.

“You’d best get up now,” he said, his voice like a rasp.

She had a sparkle in her eyes that he hadn’t seen directed at him before. He helped her to climb out of his arms. Even sprawled on the floor as they were, she wasn’t ungainly. He, on the other hand, felt like an ox. An ox with a cock long enough to drag on the ground. He watched as she tucked her hair back into shape. She stood sideways to the door. It outlined her body, nipples hard and breasts swollen.

“Mayhaps I’ll sleep near so ye dinna have nightmares this night.”

It was a plea and a promise more than a question, and they both knew it.

“Mayhaps ye better,” she whispered with a shy smile.

Chapter Thirty

“Did ye boil the water as I told ye?”

Supper was over, cleaned up and they had nothing to do but spend time with each other. Gillis waited as Amelia fluttered around the kitchen like a moth seeking a lamp, unable to settle. Their dinnertime kiss had changed everything. Both admitted they wanted each other.

It was the ‘how’ that had her worried.

When he cleared his throat, she nodded a reply and pointed to the reservoir at the back of the stove.

“Guid. I’ll get the tub out.”

“Why? I had a wash this morning.” She fidgeted with her skirt.

He lifted an eyebrow and gave her the lordly stare that worked for shopkeepers but rarely his wife.

“Oh.” She swallowed hard, dropping her eyes to his chest, then lower. “I’ll just go, um...”

She turned and rushed up the stairs. His cock stood at attention under his kilt, eager for her touch. He’d likely spill himself when she touched him, but that would make it easier for him to touch her without needing to throw her down and fill her.

Though it was well past supper, the long June evenings ensured enough light to see by while hiding a few flaws. He set the copper tub in the yard and walked back and forth with buckets of hot water, filling it half way. He set a bucket of cold water from the creek beside the tub along with a three-legged stool. He placed soap and a brush on the stool and shucked off his boots.

When Amelia didn’t follow him into the yard, he stood at the foot of the stairs and called out to her.

“Amelia, ‘tis time for yer bath.”

She floated downstairs, having taken off only her boots. She stopped at the entrance to the kitchen and frowned.

“Where’s the tub?”

“In the yard. That’s where we’re bathing.”

“But why?”

He saw her taut nipples under the thin cotton when she turned to him. Prue refused to strip in the yard, even when she first arrived and was relatively healthy. This was a test, to make sure Amelia was the strong woman they needed for the Clan. Also, he was a big man, and the yard gave him more than enough space.

“Because, lass,” he said, stepping close and nipping the tip of her breast with his knuckles, “I want to. Take off yer clothes.”

She looked up, ignoring her fifteen inch disadvantage. She pressed her lips together like James Elliott before he worked himself up to a good cry. But after a moment, she pressed her shoulders back and turned away.

“I’m only doing this because I don’t want to get my dress wet. What you want is of no concern to me.”

He kept back the smile that would only egg her on. He’d let her have her moment of pride if it would make the evening go easier.

She knelt to take off her short boots. Keeping her flushed face down, she fumbled with the buttons running from her collarbone to her waist. She turned her back and unbuttoned her skirt. When it slid down she folded it and set it on the table. Her shirt followed.

He caught his breath.

Prue was sickly even before they met. Her heavy cough and wet lungs kept her from doing much, including eating. Amelia, however, was healthy and lush. Though tiny in height, her broad shoulders and hips curved into her waist. She would not break like a dry stick, but he would still be careful with her. After two years of loving Prue, it was the only way he knew to treat a woman.

She faced back, holding her shoulders so her breasts stood proud

and full. The dark thatch between her thighs called to him, but that was for later. First, she would care for him.

"Come find out how to undo a kilt," he said.

She came when he crooked his finger. A moment and he was naked. She averted her eyes, turning away to fold the garment and place it with her clothes.

She followed him to the tub. To give her credit, she did not hunch forward to hide herself. He set his feet shoulder length apart and held out his arms. Without the kilt to weigh it down, his cock stood proudly in the light breeze. Like him, it was long and thick, erupting from a nest of red curls that matched the ones on his head.

"I need a scrub afore I climb into that clean water with ye."

* * * *

In spite of herself, Amelia shivered at the naked man waiting for her touch. Though they shared a father, Gillis was so different from Ross and Nevin. While they were intense muscular men with smooth golden bodies and straight black hair, Gillis was broad, red and furry.

An overpowering man who, at least in his opinion, could order her to do anything as he was the head of the Clan.

Challenging that would wait for another time.

She shivered in the light breeze. It was one thing to play under the trees with Ross and Nevin. Could she stand naked in the open yard?

Whatever his reasons for doing this, she would not let him think he could cow her. He might be The MacDougal, but she was the only wife.

His long, thick cock bounced gently in time with the pulse at his neck. She picked up the brush, dunked it in cold water and rubbed soap on it.

"You'll have to sit so I can reach your back."

He nodded and dropped to the stool. It put her at an advantage as far as height. One look of those bright blue eyes, full of both warning

and promise, made her realize she'd better behave. Instead of scrubbing as hard as she could, she used the brush only as hard as was necessary.

Every time she came close enough to scrub, her breasts or belly brushed against him. He didn't sit still, but transferred soap from his body to hers. He made her stand still as he skimmed her soapy body with his callused hands. He growled deep in his throat each time she moved away. She quickly learned to stay near.

A glorious sunset kept them company, the rich colors fading to purple behind the mountains. When it was almost dark, he decided he was clean enough and stepped from the cold water bucket into the tub. He settled back, sighing. By then she was wet and slippery from the nose down.

He held his hand out and gestured for her to climb in.

"There isn't room," she said

"Dinna worry, I'll find enough."

She climbed in, her back to his front. The water came to her chin when she snuggled low in his lap, keeping the mosquitoes from everywhere but her face and neck. He briskly rubbed her arms and legs to get the soap off. He placed one arm around her chest under her breasts and stood, hauling her into the air as he rose. She squawked when he bent over to pick up the bucket.

"No use both of us getting our feet dirty. I'll set ye down in the house."

After once more dipping his feet into the bucket to clean them, he stepped onto the porch. He didn't release her, though. Instead, he carried her through the kitchen and set her feet on the stairs.

"Wait here," he said.

He lit a lantern, the warm glow immediately making the darkness outside the windows more complete. Because she stood on the second stair, she was almost eye to eye to him when he came close. He held the lamp high. The light reflected off the sparkle in his eyes.

"Walk upstairs. Slowly. I wish te see every part of ye."

He might be bigger and stronger, but she had a power over him. She did as he ordered, putting each foot slowly and deliberately on each step. Of course, her hips moved from side to side a bit more than normal, but that was to be expected at this speed.

His low chuckle suggested he wasn't fooled.

When they got upstairs he set the lantern on the table beside the ewer and basin. A golden glow filled the room.

She yawned and patted her mouth as if she was too fatigued to stay awake. Gillis set his fists on his hips and shook his head. A slight twist at one end of his mouth suggested his amusement. He took a step closer, then another.

When Ross made her his wife, not only was it dark, but she had no idea what to expect. During her first time with Nevin, Ross was there to provide support.

There was no one on the ranch but the two of them. Naked and aroused. When she walked upstairs her thighs slid against one another but the water from the tub had little to do with it. She was wet, her pussy and breasts swollen with wanting.

Drops glistened in his chest hair, the red nest of curls and the tip of his cock. As she watched, the drop swelled, lamplight highlighting it.

Would it fall to the floor?

Harsh breaths filled the room. She lifted her eyes. Gillis stared back at her. The need in them made her clench in response.

"Help yerself," he whispered hoarsely.

Her feet moved, her body knowing what she wanted without needing to think. When she knelt in front of him, he shuddered. He jerked when she captured his cock with her right hand. Her fingers barely closed around it.

She looked up. He stared at her with an intensity that was almost frightening.

"I dinna think I can stop meself if ye touch me, lass," he said, his voice both harsh and trembling. "It's been so long—"

She placed her left hand beside her right, rubbing his tip with her thumb. He groaned when she slid his fluid along his hot cock, stroking him. She did it again. His hips moved in counterpoint, pressing his cock through her hands.

She snuggled closer and leaned forward so her shoulders rested against his thighs. This time, when he pressed his hips forward through her hands she opened her mouth and let his bulbous head breach her lips.

The strangled gasp, perhaps in Gaelic, was quickly followed by him placing his hands on her head.

“If ye dinna want me te explode in yer mouth, ye’d better stop.”

At the same time, his hands held her head still as he pressed his cock into her mouth. His flavor was like his brothers, yet his own.

She shifted her left hand to cradle his balls, squeezing gently as the rhythm of his hips increased. She used her right hand to control how far he entered her mouth.

When his breath was little more than gasps she sucked him deep, pressing him against the roof of her mouth with her tongue. He was big enough that he scraped a bit against her teeth.

He shouted something, pressed her head against his groin and jetted into her mouth. She swallowed his seed as he thrust again and again, each time with less strength, until he shuddered to a stop. She released him and stood up, his hands still cradling her head. Tears glistened in his eyelashes.

“I never...” he gasped, huge chest heaving. He bent and kissed the top of her head. “Jaysus, I need to sit down.”

He stumbled the few steps to the bed and sat. After a moment he fell onto his back, eyes closed, still fighting for breath. He held up one hand and gestured for her to come near. When she approached he shoved himself fully onto the bed and patted the space beside him.

She climbed on, letting him pull her back to his chest. His heart thudded heavily behind her shoulder. He panted gasps over her head. She waited as he calmed, hoping he would do the same to her.

* * * *

Gillis fought to breathe and think. He had to bring his body back to as close to normal as possible after what Amelia had done to him. Who would have thought such a tiny woman could not only take him in her mouth, but keep him there during the biggest, longest orgasm he'd ever experienced?

After what he saw Ross and Gillis share with her in the clearing, this shouldn't have been such a shock. Prue was eager and adventurous, especially in the beginning, but he'd never expect his wife to let him put his cock in her mouth.

If she would do this, the thought of the three of them sharing her was not as impossible as he'd expected.

He moved his hand from her waist to cup her breast. It filled his palm, the nipple pressing between his fingers. She squirmed, arching her back to silently ask for more.

"Give me a minute, lassie. I'll take care of ye when I can catch me breath."

"Did you like that?"

"I thought me heart would jump out of me chest and me balls burst from the end of me cock!" He inhaled deeply and let it out, allowing his heart to slow a mite.

"Is that a good thing?"

He forced one eye open. She frowned up at him, biting her lip as if worried. "Considerin' I've nae felt so wondrous, yes, 'tis a good thing."

"Good." She snuggled her round bottom against his exhausted cock. "I expect the same from you."

He groaned. "'Twill take some time afore I can sit up, much less perform."

It took a few minutes for her to reply.

"You could sit on the floor while I lie on the edge of the bed. Or is

your tongue old and worn-out as well?”

Old? She thought he was old because it took him more than a few minutes to recover from damn near having his head explode as well as his cock?

He opened one eye. She grinned up at him like an eager strumpet wanting triple pay.

“It’s like that, is it? Ye think I’m nae monly?” He struggled to sit up. “Haul that ass to the end of the bed and spread yer legs. I’ll show ye what a *real* mon can do to please his woman.”

She moved on hands and knees to the end of the bed. The tilted back gave him a nice view of her glistening pussy. She smoothed the sheet then lay on her back, heels tucked up beside her hips.

He sighed and hauled himself up. She’d thrown down the challenge and he’d taken it up. After that insult about his age he would tease her for a long, long, time before giving her a release. By then he’d be recharged and ready to slide into her as she spasmed around him.

She’d better be very careful to obey him for the next few days. He couldn’t wait to spank her fleshy cheeks until she was so hot one finger would set her off. His cock twitched, eager to rise again after so many months of nothing.

* * * *

“Please,” she begged. “Let me come. I’ll do anything you want, just don’t stop until I—no!”

Amelia drummed her heels against Gillis’s back as he lifted his tongue from her clit. He snickered into her pussy, again.

He’d licked, and sucked, and fingered and tasted her for what seemed like hours. Every time she was almost there, he backed off and moved away. Worse, he laughed at her.

“Do you want me to burn everything you eat until Ross and Nevin come home? Because if I don’t come soon, I swear I’m going to—

yes, there!"

She lifted her hips, grasped his ears and pulled his face into her pussy. He beard scratched lightly between her cheeks as he flicked his long tongue over her clit. The tension built again, coiling higher than before.

"You want to come, Amelia?" His words rumbled from between her legs but she heard every precious one.

"Yes!"

He pulled his head back and stood. The lantern flickered over his wet, shiny face and beard. She scrambled back on the bed like a crab at his signal, eager to have his cock give her what she needed.

He took his time, staring at her eye to eye as he approached on hands and knees. She opened her legs wide, offering herself to him. She needed him to slam into her, deep and hard. Only then would she get her release. Nothing would stop her from this. Nothing!

But he lay down beside her and motioned her to climb on top. She scrambled onto his huge chest. If she was on top, she could take what she needed from him. His chest was so deep that the only reason her knees touched the mattress was due to the sag of his body.

He placed his palms under her back cheeks and lifted her into place. She grasped his hard cock and guided him into her. She closed her eyes and sighed when he finally lodged the first inch into her. He let her sink another inch onto him, then raised her up again.

"What are you doing?" She frowned at him.

"You ask that when me cock is in yer pussy?"

"Your cock is only in a few inches. I want all of you in me. Now!"

"I'll take that under consideration."

He raised her until only his tip was left, then slowly let her sink to halfway. She clenched her muscles and tried to grip him with her knees, but it did no good.

"I want it hard and fast," she growled. "*I need it hard and fast!*"

"Ye'll get what I think ye need, and nae more."

He continued his slow advance, then retreat, while she fought for

more. She groaned her agreement when he tilted her to move forward and back more than up and down. He let his cock reach deep, but he still had an inch or two left. She wanted it all. He shifted again so she sat vertically on his cock.

Amelia screwed up her eyes at his nonchalant smile. The quiver in his biceps and trickle of sweat down his temple disproved his air of ease. She returned his look of leisure and lifted her breasts. She squeezed one, then the other. He stared at them, licking his lips when she rubbed the nipples together.

His tempo sped up, as did his breathing.

She slid her right hand down her belly and between her legs. She closed her eyes, keeping just enough open to see his expression. One hand on her breast, the other on her pussy, she played with herself as his cock filled her, then released.

The tension was different now. More intense, as if his fingers and tongue were only an appetizer and she needed to be full to get dessert.

“Fuck me,” she whispered.

His eyes widened and he gasped. Finally, he sped up, Thrusting up from below as he let her slid down his cock all the way. Once, twice, then she pinched her clit and nipple, clenched her thighs.

She threw back her head as stars finally exploded behind her eyes. She leaned forward, bracing her palms on his chest as he pumped her up and down his cock.

He growled and slammed her down twice, his thick fingers curving into her ass. She heard his roar of triumph before she came again, clenching and shivering as the aftershocks hit.

When he gasped and released her she fell forward onto his chest, unable to hold herself up.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ten days later

Ross had Nevin ride through town while he brought Daniel home in a wide loop. The trail went to the south over a ridge behind the Double Diamond. The boy had amazed everyone, including the doctor, with his fast recovery. Because there was no cleft palate, the surgeon had repaired the break in his lip without too much problem. He'd always have a ridge and scar on his top lip, but he could grow a moustache to cover it. Someday, he'd kiss a pretty girl. For now, he was overjoyed to eat with his mouth closed.

"Do you think Mrs. MacDougal will like what we brought her?"

"Yep. That handkerchief is sure pretty."

It seemed Daniel could ride for only a few minutes before talking. He was so proud of losing his lisp and worked hard to speak well. Both he and Ross were ready for some alone time. Daniel had been with Ross or Nevin every minute of the day and night and was likely a bit sick of them.

Ross wanted alone-with-Amelia time.

Ross let Daniel forge ahead, training him to follow the faint trail. Now and then, he glanced behind him. Usually, he'd take more care of his back trail, but the boy needed his attention. A faint tingling between his shoulder blades bothered him. He shrugged it off as a side effect of Daniel's chatter.

He knew what was over the next ridge, but the boy didn't. He held back, letting him discover it himself.

"Look! We're almost home!"

Daniel turned in the saddle, grinning wildly. Under his new hat, he was tanned and fit, no longer the scrawny child they'd brought home. He still wasn't as tall as most his age, but his father was a short man. At least he no longer resembled an eight-year-old scarecrow.

"Lead the way, pardner!"

The boy gave a yell and encouraged his pony over the ridge. Ross was just as eager, but he knew what to expect. Daniel had never come home before. He let his tired horse pick its way down the slope until they entered the trees. He stopped for a moment in the cool and let the land settle around him like a cloak.

MacDougal land. He inhaled and forced out the old air. He sent out his senses and let the energy of the land, the trees, the water, and all life flow into him. After a moment that could have been forever, he continued home.

When he cleared the trees, he saw Amelia rush out of the house and hug Daniel as soon as he got down from his pony. She held him away from her for a moment before hugging him again. Ross could almost hear her say, "My, you've grown" and "Just look at you—aren't you the handsome boy?"

It's what he wished his mother could have said. Instead, she'd told him everything with her eyes and a gentle touch on the shoulder. If only he could write her a letter that no one else would read. He'd tell her how he understood what she had done and why.

As a child, he believed that Fin and Hugh beat him because his mother was disgusted with him. Looking to fatherhood, he realized she would never be ashamed that her eldest son was part herself and part his father. His father was not one to allow love to show. But his children would have love, from father, mother, cousins, and all.

He dismounted and walked his horse the rest of the way, both to let it cool off and to give Daniel time with Amelia. When he entered the barn, he rested his forehead against his horse's shoulder, thanking him for bringing him away and back home safely.

Daniel had already unsaddled his pony, brushed, fed, and watered

him, cleaned the tack, and put everything away. The pony contentedly crunched on sweet feed in his stall. Somehow, they had to find a way to keep the boy, to hide him from his father until he was old enough to make his own decisions. He'd set a fine example for all the children Ross wanted.

He removed the saddle bags carefully and set them aside. He hauled the saddle off, removed the tack, and picked up a brush. When he bent over to brush off the beast's front leg, a hand slid into his back pocket. He knew she was there, no matter how soft her steps.

"How's my favorite wife?"

She pulled her hand out of his pocket, grabbed his lapels, and hauled him down for a kiss. Her desperation soon matched his. Still kissing, he walked forward until her back rested against one of the wide timbers.

"I'd better be your *only* wife," she gasped when she came up for air. She scrabbled at his pants, fighting the undo the buttons. "Now! I want you in me now!"

He helped her to free his cock and hauled her skirts up to her waist. He cupped his hands under her cheeks and lifted her. She caught him around his waist with her legs and crossed her ankles. He leaned her back against the wall and slid home.

He exhaled and rested there, her soft, wet pussy enveloping him. She clenched her muscles and tilted her hips, sucking him deeper. He pressed all the way in and held her there. Pinned to the wall by his cock. She hadn't stopped with his pants buttons. Her breasts now spilled out of her dress, lush and full, begging for his lips. He suckled deep, his need for her immediate.

His balls tightened, ready to burst. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He stepped away from the wall and grabbed her ass in his hands, one for each cheek. She held on tight as he braced his legs and slammed her up and down. He lasted maybe four times before his white-hot balls exploded. He roared, filling her with weeks of his seed, weeks of need. She cried out, her legs almost cutting him in two

as she joined him, thrusting her own hips when he slowed.

He staggered forward and rested her against the wall again before his rubbery legs gave way. She groaned, smiling. His kissed her forehead tenderly. She looked up at him with eyes only half open.

“Welcome home, my favorite husband.”

She purred the words up at him like a cat full of cream. His cream.

“Damn, I missed you.” He panted as he reluctantly backed away so she could let her legs down. They sank to the floor. He hauled her into his lap and just held her for a while.

“Beth said she could borrow Daniel for a few days.” Amelia drew a finger down his chest in suggestion.

“I’m all for it.” He kissed her nose.

“More.”

“More? As in two, or three?”

A flush rose up Amelia’s face. After everything she’d done, he was amazed she still blushed like a virgin. Had Gil finally relaxed enough to join the living?

“Gillis said he had to sleep with me so I wouldn’t wake him with my nightmares.”

“He did? And how much sleep did you get, vixen?”

She pouted. “Lots. He only played with me a couple times.”

Ross laughed. “Was that a complaint?”

“Yes! He was too gentle with me. It’s nice now and then, but I’m not going to break. So I need lots and lots of you.”

She pushed out her lower lip. He nipped it as a warning.

“Ah, laddie. Wastin’ time while chores are needin’ to be done.”

“You’re the one who didn’t take care of my wife well enough. She jumped me before I could finish my horse.”

Gillis picked up the brush and took over from Ross. “Did she now? I treated her as the sweet woman she is. Mayhaps the lass needs a bit of spanking for all her complaints.”

“What?” Amelia fought her way out of Ross’s lap. She got to her feet and shook a finger at Gillis. “When you finally played with me,

you teased me for hours!”

Ross sent a silent prayer of thanks. Whatever the two of them had done, or not, it had brought his brother alive. No more moping around in silent grief, day and night.

* * * *

Gillis hid a smile at the way Amelia's lush breasts forced their way past her buttons. The two of them had wasted no time.

“‘Tis a bonnie pair ye have, but do ye not think it best to close up yer dress? Or are ye asking for more?”

Amelia looked down at the open buttons. She almost spat fire as she struggled to do them up. Ross stood and turned his back to quietly do the same with his pants.

“I put on weight while you were gone,” said Amelia. Her buttons strained in their holes. “I did a lot of baking for Gillis.” Gil rubbed his belly appreciatively. “Now you're back, I'll be so busy I'll soon be back to normal.” She pointed a finger at both men. “And that means no eating a whole berry pie after supper!”

She stomped out of the barn. When she reached the sun, she stopped and looked over her shoulder provocatively. Hips gently swaying, she strolled to the house, knowing Gillis and Ross watched every step.

“Aye, she needs to be put across yer lap, laddie. Both sitting on yer cock and face down with that saucy bottom under yer hand.”

Ross scratched his few days' growth and turned. Gillis raised an eyebrow and waited. Ross coughed and cleared his throat. “Is she sick in the morning yet?”

Gillis grinned in response. “Caught that, did ye?” Ross nodded, his body tense. “Nay, but I expect it any day. Prue was the same. Breasts swelled up before her belly was upset. Yer seed is strong. Auntie told me afore she left. ‘Tis the only reason I touched her.”

“You knew, and didn't tell me?”

“Would ye have left yer wife if ye’d known?”

“No.” Ross grasped the rough top of the stall with both hands. He leaned over and rested his forehead on them for a moment. “I don’t know how to be a good father.”

“Dinna fash, laddie. Ye had many years with the tribe and three with the Elliotts. All I had was Pa. Ye’ll do fine.” He slapped Ross on the back, harder than necessary. Ross raised his fists and glowered.

“That’s more like it,” said Gillis. His face felt like it would split from smiling so damn much. He nodded toward the house. “I’ve said naught to her. Best go say why she’ll have to make new dresses. Give her bit of happy afore she has to spend the mornin’ chucking into a chamberpot.”

Ross nodded. He squared his shoulders and walked out of the barn. His steps quickened. He yelled for Amelia. She ran into the yard shaking her finger at him. He caught her and swirled her around. He put her down and spoke to her. She cried out once and reached for him. Ross swept her into his arms and carried her into the house.

Gillis gave a wry smile and went back to brushing the horse.

“I prayed to the Lord that she’d catch,” he said. He bent to brush off the fetlocks. The horse nibbled his hair. “It’s up to Him whether the babe is a healthy lad or not.” He looked up, past the horse.

“Hear that, Lord? Ye have my wife now. I need a MacDougal lad in return.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Nevin trudged into the yard. The new moon barely lit the ground, but the horse beside him knew the way. It nickered and was answered from the barn. It quickened its steps, and he kept pace.

Ross and Gillis were there to greet him in the barn. Ross handed him a cup of lukewarm coffee. He nodded his thanks and drank.

"Thought you'd be home for dinner," said Ross. He took the reins and led the eager horse inside. "Gil said one of the cousins stopped by. Tillie and Auntie decided to go back with the Tribe for a couple more weeks. Amelia made a good dinner, but we ate it all when you didn't show up. Her pastry's improving."

"Horse threw a shoe the other side of town," said Nevin. "Smitty took longer than I expected, so I had an excuse to hang around, get a bath and all." He leaned against the wall and let his brothers take care of the horse. "Did you tell Gil the men we want are nearby?"

Gillis unhooked the belly band and turned to Nevin. "He's been a mite too busy to talk to the likes of me."

"Celebrating coming home to Amelia?" Nevin's cock stirred to life. He grinned in anticipation of her soft mouth going down on him.

"Tell him, laddie."

"Tell me what?" When Ross didn't answer, Nev stepped forward. "Is she sick?"

Ross quivered with a strange energy, one Nev hadn't seen around his brother before.

"Gil thinks she might be in a day or so. But only in the morning."

Nevin looked from Ross to Gillis and back. "Dammit, is she sick or not?"

“She’s with child, Nev. My child.”

Nevin tossed the tin cup aside. He grabbed his brother’s arms and looked at him. “You’re happy. That’s the energy I feel.” Grinning, he shook Ross and released him. “Damn, man. That’s wonderful!”

“Ross?” A sleepy, feminine voice drifted from the upstairs window. “Is Nevin home?”

Ross slapped Nev on the shoulder. “She missed you. And since she’s carrying my child now...”

Nevin’s mind went blank for a moment before his brain engaged. Blood surged into his cock. He swallowed, mouth dry.

“You’re sure?”

“We’ll finish up here.”

“Thank God I had a bath.”

Nevin ripped his shirt off and tossed it aside. He strode across the yard toward the house. He bent to undo his boots, kicking them to the side as he entered the kitchen. He unhooked his belt and unbuttoned his pants as he climbed the stairs. He shoved his pants past his knees and stepped out of them, kicking them aside.

Amelia stood by the bed. Naked. He groaned. She opened her arms. He walked toward her, taking in the sight of her body. Of her wanting him. She suddenly dropped her head when he stepped near.

He lifted her chin. “I missed you,” he whispered.

She bit her lip and nodded. She took his hand and placed it on her belly. A smile, brighter than any he’d seen on her, lit up her face.

“Congratulations. You’ll be a wonderful mother.”

He brushed her lips with his. Gently, reverently. He gasped when she grabbed his cock in her hand. She towed him backward, toward the bed. When the backs of her knees touched the mattress, she released him.

“Show me how much you missed me,” she said.

He lifted her and tossed her gently on her back. She lay as she fell, arms and legs spread, knees bent.

“I missed your feet,” he said. He lifted her ankle and nibbled her

toes. "Your legs." He walked on his knees up the bed between her legs. He bent over to kiss the tops of her thighs. "Your belly." She squirmed when he nibbled around her belly button. "And these," he said, covering her breasts. "These I missed a lot."

"Show me," she said huskily.

He concentrated on her right breast first. Perhaps his memory was wrong, but it already felt fuller. Her nipple was just as tasty as he remembered. He drew it through his teeth, making her arch her back and gasp. He switched to the left, sucking as much of her inside his mouth as he could. He pressed this nipple against the roof of his mouth, holding it there with his tongue until he had to stop to breathe. He gave her a quick kiss on the mouth before backing up.

"And I want this." He lay on the bed between her legs.

He pressed her pussy lips open with his thumbs. Her sweet perfume hit his gut like a sledgehammer. He licked her, from as far down as he could reach to her clit. She shivered and pressed up, demanding more.

He took his time, sliding his tongue between her folds. He pressed his fingers into her wet heat, drawing it out and down. He scratched at her asshole with his knuckle, just enough to make her squirm.

He sat up on his knees and looked down. Her eyes were glazed, her chest heaving as she gasped. Her thighs glistened with her juices. He idly rubbed her clit with his thumb.

"You want me in you now?"

"Yes!"

He wanted to slam into her pussy, deep and hard. Tonight, he'd take his time. His first time. Another night, he'd show her a different side of him.

"Bend your legs."

She not only bent them, she curled until her knees were by her ears. Everything was available to him. Her clit, her pussy, her asshole, and her cheeks.

He held his cock in his hand and rubbed it over her clit. Back and

forth, until she reached for him. Before she touched him, he inserted the throbbing head between her lips for the first time.

She caught him immediately, holding him with her inner muscles. He held his cock, his fist stopping him from plunging into her. She wanted him, but he was the one in charge.

“Hold onto the headboard,” he ordered.

“Why?”

“Because I told you to.”

When she hesitated, he smacked her ass, just hard enough to sting. She jerked.

“Ow!”

“Are you going to do what I said?”

“But—Ow!” She grabbed onto the thick metal bars with both hands.

If it was light out, he’d be able to see the faint imprints of his fingers on her ass. That was one advantage of white skin—his love taps would show for a bit before fading. One of these days, he’d bend her over his knee and show her how a good, loving spanking would make her so wet she’d almost come without him in her.

He released his fist and, ever so slowly, slid his cock all the way in.

Her ass was tight and hot, but her pussy was wet and welcoming. He pulled back all the way and then in again, so slowly he felt her muscles give way for him.

“God, you feel good,” he gasped.

She clenched him in silent reply. He shuddered, fighting the need for his balls to explode. Giving up, he braced his arms and gave into it, slamming forward again and again. He stared at her open mouth, her breasts jiggling every time he hit bottom. She arched her back and opened her mouth. Her orgasm rippled along his cock.

He roared and let go, instinct taking over as he filled her with his seed, again and again until he had nothing left.

He slumped onto her, his weight on his elbows.

"Mmm," she sighed. Her arms and legs wrapped around him.
"Welcome home."

* * * *

"Your pa thinks you're hiding from him in town, being fed by some goody-goody who's against his drinking," said Nevin to Daniel the next day. "He figures you'll turn up someday when you want something from him."

Rain, the all-day kind, dripped outside the windows. It was warm, so more of a nuisance than anything. They'd been lucky on the trail. The only rain they had during their trip was in Virginia City while Daniel was recovering from his stitches. He didn't mind the rain now that they were home.

Daniel finished eating his porridge. He followed it with milk and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I don't want nothing from him." He frowned for a second. "*Anything* from him. Not even his name."

"I wouldn't go that far," said Ross. "Sometime's all a man's got is his name and his pride. You wouldn't want to lose that name, but there's nothing stopping you from adding another."

"I liked it when you said I was Daniel MacDougal." Daniel looked from Nevin to Ross to Gillis. He gulped and then dropped his head. His shoulders slumped as well. "But it's your Clan name. I suppose ya gotta be born with it."

Gillis set his coffee down deliberately. "Nae, lad. There's many a MacDougal who weren't born that way. Were ye nae listenin' to what we told ye?"

"I thought them were just made-up stories, like Mrs. MacDougal reads."

Ross shook his head and leaned forward. "Remember about the landless men who helped Somerled build and defend the keep when they were attacked?"

Daniel nodded. "Somerled said they could stay 'cause they were brave."

"Right," said Nevin. "They knelt to the Chief and pledged their lives and those of their children's children. When he touched his great sword to their shoulders, they became part of the Clan."

Daniel looked at the three big men sitting around the table. "If I do something real brave, could I get touched with a sword like that and have a family?"

Nevin and Ross looked to Gillis. He stood up, revealing the intricate pattern of his kilt, green, white, blue, and red.

"Someday, lad, ye may kneel to me, and I'll proudly make ye a MacDougal with my grandsire's *claidheamh mór*."

He pointed above the fireplace. All eyes turned to the MacDougal claymore, thirty-six inches of double-bladed iron plus another thirteen of the hilt. Gillis walked over and lifted it down with both hands. He held it for a moment before sliding it from its wooden scabbard. He held the silver hilt point down and inhaled, his eyes alight. He placed the scabbard on the table as he walked past, oblivious to all but the sword.

Daniel got a quick nod of dismissal from Amelia and dashed to follow. Gillis stopped in the yard. He looked around, nodded, then paced off an area. After checking for obstacles, he stopped and held the claymore point up. He closed his eyes for a moment as Daniel held his breath. Then he started moving.

Slowly at first, then gathering speed, Gillis swung the two-handed sword in an intricate series of movements. The kitchen emptied as the others stood behind the boy, watching. Kilt swinging wildly, he attacked invisible foes, sending them to a Gaelic hell.

"*Buaidh no bas!*"

The yell echoed off the rocks as Gillis stood straight, sword high in one mighty fist. Rain and sweat dripped off his beard, and his chest heaved, but he looked alive.

"The MacDougal's back," laughed Nevin. He clapped Ross on the

shoulder. Gillis turned his head toward them.

“What are ye doin’ standin’ there, gawkin’? Do ye nae have work to do?”

Ross twisted his lips in a wry parody of a smile. “Yep. He’s back.” He kissed Amelia on the cheek and strode to the barn. Nevin did the same to her other cheek.

“Come on, Daniel, dinner’s over.”

* * * *

Amelia returned to the kitchen to tidy up. Every now and then, she glanced out the window at Gillis, not sure about his sudden change in behavior. When she arrived, he was a shell of a man, drowning in grief. After he’d vowed to spank her in town, which still made her blush, he developed a spark. That night, when he held her, had changed him into a thoughtful, loving partner. He treated her as if she wasn’t strong enough physically to stand hard thrusts. She loved it when Ross or Nevin pounded deep.

Gillis was a gentle lover, but she’d not want to cross the wild man who’d wielded a sword longer than Daniel was tall. She dipped hot water from the reservoir on the stove to wash up. A glance outside showed Gillis moving with the sword again, this time slowly and deliberately. It was as if he followed a pattern, like a slow, deadly dance.

If someone were to come after her, like that ghastly man who’d held her by the throat, Gillis could slice him in half with one stroke.

“That’s the stuff of old stories and legends, suitable for boys,” she told herself.

She didn’t need a man to protect her. Patsy had come through with the knife and scabbard Amelia wanted. Two, in fact. One to strap on her leg and one to keep in a special pocket. Since she had to make new dresses anyway, she’d add that pocket to each.

She rested her hand on her belly. The few minutes of absolute

misery each morning were minor compared to having a baby of her own to love. Nothing would harm this child. She would protect it with her life, no matter what.

Not that she'd have to, of course. Considering the strong, tough men she lived with, who would ever go against them?

Chapter Thirty-Three

Friday mid-morning, Ross and his brothers met up with Trace at the Big Hole River trail. A pair of ravens soared overhead in the sun, chuckling as they chased each other. They seemed at ease, but the four men glanced around, their senses alert.

Daniel had his instructions to take care of Amelia. No one could approach the ranch from the road without being seen. There was no reason to think anyone had followed Ross and Daniel over the higher trail, known to few. If someone came near, the dogs would howl a warning.

"Smythe says he's interested in buying up railroad land," said Ross. "He wants our opinion of the best land. I expect he also wants us to contribute to the pot along with Jennett."

"Why are we going to him if he's the one that wants something?"

Nevin snorted a laugh at Trace's question. "He's afraid of horses. He either has wheels under him, or he walks. He's such a big bug no one calls him a coward to his face."

They rode for a while in comfortable silence.

"You saw him lose the Double Diamond." Trace's voice resembled that of the ravens above.

"Yep," said Jack. "Damn fool thought he could bulldoze Ace and his partners, but he's just a chiseler."

"He'll nae bulldoze a MacDougal!"

"Contacts in Virginia City say the man wields power from back East," said Ross after Gillis settled. "We'll listen to what he says, but commit to nothing. Keep your eye on Jennet. I think Smythe's serious about wanting advice, but I don't trust his lapdog."

“There’s four of us and two of them. Every one of us could take both with an arm behind our back. We’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Trace’s words faded as they travelled east toward town. Ross looked back once more, fighting against the tingle in his back. Amelia had been alone with Gillis coming and going for two weeks. Why would she be in danger just because he knew she was with child and was nearby to worry?

“The babe’s not showing, and you’re already fretting?” Trace laughed. The harsh sound caught the attention of the ravens, who swooped low to comment.

“You were the same?” Ross glanced sideways at the man he thought of as another older brother.

“Worse. I would barely let Beth out of my sight for weeks. Finally, she got Doc out for a visit. He told me there was nothing I could do that would hurt either of them.”

Ross and Nevin perked up. “Nothing?”

Trace nodded. “Doc said all three of us could enjoy her every which way to Sunday, as long as she’s happy.”

“And did you?” Ever the pestering younger brother, Nevin had to ask. Trace gave a quelling look, which rarely worked on Jack, either.

“She’ll be more tired the first three months, so treat her well. Enjoy the middle three when she’s eager. At the end, she’ll be so big you have to take her from behind, gently.”

Trace croaked a laugh when all three men adjusted their pants. Gillis grimaced the worst, being used to the freedom of a kilt. He wasn’t stupid enough to wear the rough wool garment on a long ride, however.

“Don’t laugh too soon, my friend,” said Ross. “I saw a certain glow on Beth’s face the last time she visited.”

Trace smiled wide. “I know, but don’t tell Simon. Once he finds out he put a baby in her, he’ll be insufferable.”

* * * *

As soon as the men disappeared from view, Amelia took her new knives from their hiding place. She put one in her skirt pocket. She strapped the other one on her thigh then realized it had to go on the outside of her leg. It felt awkward, but she had all day to get used to it.

Daniel worked on Auntie's home, wanting to get it finished before she returned. Before they left for Tanner's Ford and the meeting with Frederick Smythe, Gillis had filled the big pot and started a fire for the wash. She'd already rinsed the worst of the dirt out of the clothes in the creek. She dumped the damp clothes in the pot and added soap. Humming to herself, she took up her stick and poked them to get the soap all the way through.

The smell, rather than improving, got worse. She wrinkled her nose, realizing she needed more soap. She was about to turn around when she heard the click of a gun being cocked behind her. The wind blew against her back. The pot was in front of her.

The smell had nothing to do with the clothes and everything to do with the man carrying the gun.

"If'n I'd known you was gonna warsh today, I'da brought my old pants."

She shuddered. The voice belonged to the man at the hotel privy.

"Turn around nice and easy, Miz MacDougal. And no screamin' or I'll have to shut yer mouth."

She did as he asked though every part of her screamed, "'Run!'" If she made a noise, it would alert Daniel. He'd try to save her and get killed in the process. Her men would not be back until late, and she had a boy and a baby to protect.

But she had two knives they knew nothing about. Now was not the time to attack as he was expecting it. Later, she would kill him.

His scraggly, blond moustache couldn't hide the fact his nose had been almost sliced off from underneath. The gap between his upper

lip and nostrils made him look even more menacing than she'd imagined, if that was possible. He held the huge pistol steady with an ease that showed years of familiarity. Once he saw she wasn't going to fight, he twirled his pistol and set it into his holster. She noted the mother-of-pearl in the handle and scrolled engraving on a silver plate. Likely stolen.

"I hear yer taking two Injuns in yer bed." He wiped spittle from his lower lip. "You'll take my pardner and me jist the same. Only we'll show ya somethin' more."

"Don't hurt me," she said. She let him see her fear without letting it conquer her.

"Do what we say, and we won't hurt ya," he said with a leer. "For now."

Another man, just as filthy but with the lower part of his face dark with powder burns, came around the corner of her home.

"Thweet, ain't ya," he lisped in a voice so high it was almost girlish.

He cupped his crotch and thrust it toward her. She gagged and turned away. The man with the cut nose grabbed her arm and hauled her toward the house. His fingers bit deep into her flesh. Was he going to rape her here, where Daniel might see?

"Please, no!"

"I don't trust the bitch. Gag her and tie her hands."

He pushed her toward Powderface. He laughed and caught her. He tied her hands in front of her with a strip of hide before she could go for her knife. He pawed her breasts. She gagged at his stench and intentions.

"Use this." Cutnose pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket. He held it up, pointing to a rusty spot. "Lucky I cut my cheek shavin' this mornin'." He tossed it to Powderface, who stuffed it in her mouth. At least it was relatively clean.

They hauled her behind the house, where two wretched horses waited. Cutnose mounted and held out his arms, leering. She fought

automatically until a hard slap on the face stunned her. She gagged at the stench when he hauled her back against his chest. He grabbed her breast and cruelly squeezed.

"Jist relax, missy. We'll git ye to a safe place where ya kin rest a bit." He kicked the horse, which reluctantly moved forward.

The other man passed them, leading toward a faint trail. She realized it was the one Daniel and Ross had followed home, a path she hadn't known existed. She had to hold on to the pommel so it wouldn't jam into her belly. She'd never been up here and couldn't find a way to see a trail back. The land all looked the same—sage, sand, rock, and scrub. She concentrated on holding on, protecting her baby.

After what seemed like hours, they came upon a low, sod-roofed hovel tucked into the slope. She fell to her knees when they hauled her off the horse. She bent over, praying the jolting hadn't hurt her baby.

A cruel hand hauled her to her feet by the same arm as before.

"See. I came for ya, jist like I said. Ya didn't listen, and now, ya'll pay."

He pushed her forward. She stumbled but caught herself before falling. Powderface pulled open a cage-type door. Two small windows framed it, each covered with bars. The gaps were so small she'd never fit through.

They pushed her inside. In the far corner to her right was a box bed. The lumpy mattress was covered in stains. She hoped they were black and not a rusty red. Whatever the case, she didn't want to think about it. A rusty stove with a pot on it squatted in the middle of the dirt floor. An iron bar with a thick chain attached protruded from the floor by the stove. At the end of the chain was a shackle.

She backed toward the table. As she passed the stove, she noticed the smell of burned coffee. The stove was still warm. Cutnose picked up the pot with both hands. He lifted it to his lips and gulped. After wiping his mouth, he strutted around the bare room. A rickety table

and benches sat in the corner opposite the bed. He kicked a pile of rags. Satisfied that nothing of value was in them, he turned back to her.

“Home, sweet home,” he said. He stared at her chest. She backed away as he stalked forward.

“We gotta be in town by noon.” Powderface shuffled his feet and glanced out the door. “Thath’s what he thaid.”

“I wanna see her tits.”

Cutnose grabbed both sides of her dress and yanked. Buttons flew, and fabric ripped.

“Dayam,” he breathed.

She tried to squirm away, but he grabbed her by the hair and pulled. With his arm behind her back, it pulled her into an arch. He licked her breast. She shuddered. He bit her nipple, and she screamed behind the gag. He shoved her away, and she fell to the floor.

“We’ll be back by supper,” he said to her. “Spit out that gag and scream all ya like. Nobody’s gonna hear ya.” He reached down and caressed the lump swelling in his pants. “See that bed?” She didn’t dare look away from him. “Lots a wimmen done what we wanted there. If ye’re nice, maybe we’ll let ya live.”

He laughed and followed his partner outside. He slammed the door shut, the ungreased metal shrieking. If he wasn’t worried about someone hearing that, no one would hear her scream. He held up a chain and lock. Grinning, knowing that she had no chance of escape, he wrapped it around the door and through bolts on either side. He snapped the lock shut.

Before he left, he held up the key. He licked it, as he had her skin, and slid it in his front pants pocket. He rubbed himself through his pants. She spit out the handkerchief, gagging at the stench and memory of his touch.

His laughter echoed through her mind long after it faded from the air.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Daniel waited until the men left the hut before he snuck away from his pony and approached the place they'd put Mrs. MacDougal. He'd never have found the side trail if he hadn't followed the bad men. The ravens had helped him, flying ahead and calling. They acted as usual, swooping up and around. But Daniel knew they were friends.

"Mrs. MacDougal? It's Daniel."

"Daniel?"

He ran to the doorway. The woman he thought of as Ma sat with her back against the wall, her knees up and hands around her legs. The tears he'd kept back since he heard the men steal her burst out. He knew to keep quiet and watch, but it was hard. When the men were gone, he grabbed his pony and followed the ravens.

"I'll get you out!" He pulled on the heavy chain keeping the door shut. It was too heavy for him to lift. A big raven landed on the roof. He dropped down to peck at the chain but also gave up.

"Daniel, go get help."

"I can't leave you here. They're gonna come back and hurt ya real bad."

"I'm going to escape, but I need you to get help. Get Simon and Jack if you can. Tell them one man has powder burns on his face and the other has a deep cut under his nose."

"But I don't want to leave you. They'll hurt you again."

"You are very brave, Daniel. Do you trust me to be just as brave?"

Though the room was dim, he could see her trying to smile at him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I need your help to get my hands free. Turn your back."

He did as she told him. He heard rustling sounds come closer.

"You can look now. Reach into my side pocket and get my knife out of my skirt."

She'd flipped her apron up to cover her front. She held it there with her chin. He quickly dropped his eyes and reached into her pocket. He pulled out a folding knife and opened it. She held her hands out. He sawed through the rawhide carefully, not wanting to cut her.

"Thank you. Keep the knife in case you need it. And take this."

She held out a fancy ladies' handkerchief.

"My sister made this lace, but it's not her initials. It has an R and a B. It might tell us who those men are. Give it to Mr. Simon. Ride fast, Daniel."

"Where will you be?"

"After I escape, I'll start for home."

He looked at the barred windows, the heavily barred door.

"How you gonna get out?"

She crossed her arms, her hands holding her apron up. Though she stood straight, he saw her shake. "I'm going to burn this place down. They're not ever going to put another woman in here."

"But you could get hurt—"

"Daniel, if I'm here when those men come back, they *will* hurt me. I'd rather die escaping than by their dirty hands. Now, ride!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

He ran to his pony, his heart pounding harder than it had when he snuck after the men.

"I'll save you, Ma!"

* * * *

Rusty flakes scraped Amelia's face as she leaned against the bars. She craned her neck to watch Daniel race away on his pony. The big

raven landed on the ground in front of the door. He stalked forward and poked his head between the bars. He looked up at her and crooned.

"I don't know what you can do, Master Raven, but I'll take whatever I can get."

He blinked a few times at her. Dust swirled when he flapped into flight. He soared down the hill, away from Daniel and home. Following her captors.

Amelia looked at the stove for a moment. She squared her shoulders and stalked toward it. She could cry in the corner until the men returned to rape and murder her, or she could face her fears and escape. She could also die in the fire she created, but at least it would be by her own hand, unsullied.

She rested her hand on her belly. The choice wasn't hard at all. She did not prefer death to rape, but those men would never let her live to identify them. She survived one fire that burned and scarred and would do the same this time.

She might finally prove to Ross that she was not a useless city woman. She wasn't yet a good Montana Territory wife. She couldn't do most of the things Auntie and Tillie did so easily. Escaping without help would prove to Ross that she belonged here. Perhaps he would then let go of whatever made him lash out at the world before it attacked him.

Trace was proud of Beth fighting off three men, even killing a couple of them. Beth said that was when Trace realized how much he loved her. Sometimes, she thought Ross might love her, but then he'd remember he was mad at the world. He'd frown and stomp away.

Even if Ross didn't love her, after this she could hold her head high as a proud MacDougal, able to take care of herself.

She took her big knife from her thigh and cut a strip off the bottom of her skirt. She wrapped that around her chest to hold the apron in place. Right away, she felt more in control.

She wrapped her hand in her skirts and opened the stove. She

blew lightly, discovering a red glow. She placed a few dried leaves that had blown into the corner on the spot and blew once more. As the fire grew, she added twigs, chips of wood, and anything else that would burn.

She used her knife to slice open the mattress at the cleanest spot she could find. She sneezed as the dry, dusty straw fell out. She took a corner and dragged the mattress over to the stove. She carefully placed a couple of handfuls of the stuffing so it would catch and burn without snuffing out the fire.

She climbed on the box bed and looked up. Animals had dug into the far corner where the roof leaned into the hill. Cracks of light filtered between the sod pieces placed on top of the sapling poles running along the roof. She stabbed the ceiling with her knife between the poles. It sunk in fairly easily. She reached high on her toes, grabbed a pole, and shook. Dust, bugs, and things she did not want to think about fell over her head and shoulders. She shuddered and shook off as much as possible.

When the dust cleared, there was more light shining through. The poles were laid in a crosshatch pattern. The squares were too small for her to force her way through. She would have to burn some of the poles enough to break them. Only then could she escape.

She had to get the lower corner burning well. As the fire burned toward the highest part, it would burn a hole big enough for her to climb through. She had to make sure the fire didn't grow so big that the flames and smoke stopped her from escaping.

Amelia closed her mind to everything but her task. She didn't know how much time passed, only that her muscles ached. She ignored the things that fell on her, shaking off the biggest chunks as best as possible. Though her apron protected her somewhat, her urgent attacks with the knife rubbed her skin against the old log wall. Splinters, sticks and straw poked her tender flesh.

How long would it take for Daniel to ride that pony home then all the way down the valley and up the other side to the Elliott

homestead? What if Simon or Jack were so far away that Daniel couldn't find them?

No! Those were the worries of a coward. Gasping and choking, she worked on. In her mind, she spoke with her baby, telling him how much she loved him.

Finally, there was a hole big enough that she could set the roof on fire. She cut a slice of mattress cover and laid it on the floor. She placed a stout stick in the middle. She sifted dry straw thickly over the stick and rolled the fabric up. She tied her torch closed with strips of mattress cotton. She opened the stove and stuck one end in. The straw and cotton quickly caught fire, but she held it there for a moment longer to make sure.

She carried it carefully so it didn't hit the ceiling until she climbed on the bed. When the flames touched the dry roof, the fire immediately caught. Terrible crackling noises and heat brought her nightmares to life. She pushed them back, desperate to live.

White smoke billowed through the hold, a signal to both her captors and rescuers. If, that was, they saw it. Though bits of burning straw and twigs fell on her, she held the stick aloft until she knew the roof would keep burning. She coughed as the smoke swirled into her face.

When it got too hot, she jumped down and backed into the far corner to watch. She removed her petticoat and folded it. She'd use it as a barrier for her hands. She startled when a corner of the roof collapsed into the room. Part of it fell on the bed. If it burned the bed, she could never reach the roof.

She had to get out, now!

She gathered the back of her skirt, pulled it through her legs, and tucked it into her waist. With one hand on the hillside wall, she hurried to the bed. She climbed up, the fire dancing at her feet. If she hadn't tucked up her cotton skirts, they would have caught as quickly as the mattress cover.

Using her petticoat as a thin shield for her hands, she grabbed a

thick pole above her head. It still smoldered, too thick to burn as quickly as the grass. The pole had held thinner ones, now burned away to make space for her body.

Her eyes stung from the smoke. Her muscles screamed as she pulled her weight up. She scrabbled with her feet against the log wall. The curved logs provided a tiny ledge for her boot toes to catch. Heat from the pole burned through her petticoat as she hauled herself up and over. She landed on the rocky hill and rolled away from the crackling fire.

She lay there, gasping and choking, until her eyes and lungs cleared enough to keep moving. She wrapped her hands in her petticoat and staggered after Daniel.

She could barely see through tears from smoke and relief. Branches slashed her face. She stumbled over rocks, not caring where she went as long as it was away. She stepped in a hole and cried out as she fell, her ankle twisting under her.

“Amelia!”

“My God, look at the flames! She can’t be alive in that!”

Horses rushed past, not twenty feet away

“Help!” She tried to scream but only croaked a gasp. A dark shape flew close. It squawked and raced after the men.

“What the hell? Stop it!”

“Follow the bird, Jack.”

She called out again but only coughed. The bird swooped down and landed in front of her. It cawed loudly, shaking its huge wings. Hooves followed.

“Christ! It’s her!”

She couldn’t see who leaped off the horse and ran toward her. Tears erupted, and she started shaking.

“It’s Simon, Amelia. You’re safe now.” He knelt close to her, speaking softly. He pulled his shirt over his head and held it out.

“Simon?” She croaked the word then coughed again.

“She okay?” Another man ran over.

"No, shithead, she's not all right! She's cut and burned, and I don't know what else, but she's alive. I'm taking her home, so shut your face and follow that bird!"

Amelia wiped the tears out of her eyes. "I'm okay," she whispered.

She tried to imitate Simon's smile. Jack stood still, mouth open, staring at Simon.

"Well, hallelujah. The man *does* have a temper. Is that because Beth's making you a daddy?"

"Beth's going to have another baby?" More tears flowed at the good news. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

"Shut up, Jackass."

"Yes, *sir*, Mr. Elliott. Of *course*, Mr. Elliott." Jack gave an irreverent salute and took a step. He turned around and winked at Amelia. "Nice outfit, ma'am."

Simon sighed. He shook out his shirt. "Let me get this on you. Don't want to add a sunburn to all those scrapes and bruises. Close your eyes."

He spoke soothingly as he unwrapped her hands. He slipped his large shirt over her head. He carefully guided her sore hands through the sleeves and lifted her hair over the collar. He wrapped up her hands again. He went behind her and placed his hands around her waist. He lifted her to her feet. She cried out as her ankle gave way. He swept her into his arms.

"We'll get you home as fast as we safely can, but it might hurt a bit."

"I know," she said. She gritted her teeth and smiled up at him. "But I escaped. And I'm alive."

"That you are. And I'm damn proud of you. Ross will be, too."

"Jack, hold her until I mount up."

"Hunh. Now that she's all covered up, you let me help play rescuer."

His words didn't match his actions as he gently took her from

Simon. She'd never been this close to Jack. To keep away the pain, she concentrated on his smiling brown eyes.

"How ya doin' in there, Mort? You've got a ma who'll kill to protect you, just like James."

"Hand her up, Jack."

Simon gestured with his hand. Jack shook his head though he walked toward the horse.

"You think the Raven will ever let me get this close to his pretty wife again? I want as much of her as I can get."

Simon leaned over as Jack lifted her up. Simon settled her across his lap. He leaned close and whispered in her ear.

"Don't mind him. He acts like a jackass, but I thought he'd kill himself on the way here, pushing that horse to damn near fly."

"I'm watching you, Sy," called Jack over his shoulder. He caught his horse and mounted up. "You kiss that pretty lady, and I'm telling Raven."

Amelia had to smile at the way the two Elliotts treated each other. Though they poked, they cared about each other, just like Gillis, Ross, and Nevin. Her baby would have lots of brothers and sisters and cousins across the valley. He wouldn't be left alone in the world.

"We can ride slowly, so you don't get jarred, but it will take longer. Or we can go quicker, but the pain will be over sooner. Your choice," said Simon.

"I want to go home," she said, her voice quavering.

Simon pressed her head against his chest. He wrapped his reins loosely around the saddle horn and held onto her with both arms.

"Home, it is," he murmured.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ross erupted at the scream of a raven. His chair crashed to the floor when he jumped to his feet. The scream came closer. Nevin and Gillis rose as well, followed by Trace.

"What the devil's going on?" groused Smythe. He scrambled backward when the huge, black bird landed on the windowsill. It stuck its head inside and screeched the alarm once more.

Hugh Jennett pulled his gun. Ross had a knife at his neck before he could cock the pistol.

"Shoot that bird and you die."

The banker let Ross take the pistol from his hand though his eyes promised revenge. The raven gave the same look back. "I hate those damn creatures from hell."

"I say, what's all this about?" Smythe had his back pressed firm against the far wall.

"That savage always has those damn birds around him," complained the banker. "They should all be shot!"

"I'd be careful about who ye call a savage, Jennet." Gillis spoke quietly, but the man paled and snapped his mouth shut.

"Someone's attacked my family," said Ross. He made the knife disappear again. "We're leaving."

"But what about the cattle I need?"

Gillis raised an eyebrow at Smythe. "Ye should hae thought a' that afore ye put them on the table with yer ranch."

Smythe followed them outside, still stuttering protests. He backpedaled quickly when the four of them mounted their large horses. The raven flew behind the mercantile and circled, waiting.

“We have to split up.”

“I’ll go with the bird. You go home to Amelia,” said Trace to Ross. “If she’s missing, your birds will tell you where to go. This one knows me. He’ll guide me.”

“I’m with Trace,” growled Gillis. “Yer wee wife needs ye. I feel a need to kill someone.” His hand clenched as if clutching a sword.

“Done.”

Ross and Nevin trotted past the hotel. By the time they reached the jail, they were galloping. Trace and Gillis followed the silent raven beside Emslow’s boardinghouse. They discovered a well-worn path up the south side of the town and followed it. After an hour, they smelled smoke and sped up, still moving quietly.

The raven suddenly screamed and dove toward a plume of smoke. Wings back, it fell like a rapier. Trace and Gillis raced their horses toward screams and gunshots. They pulled their pistols, ready for anything.

They rounded a hill and found the remains of a burning sod-roofed cabin. Two men waved their arms to keep the raven away. It hovered between them and the smoking ruins. Trace pulled up and put a bullet an inch from the bigger man’s foot. He screamed and danced sideways. Gillis rode up behind the remains of the smoking building, checking it out. He circled and came back down.

“Move and you’re dead,” said Trace.

The men lifted their shaking hands.

“Turn around. Give me a reason to kill you.”

Trace fought to keep from pulling the trigger when he saw them. Their eyes opened wide. They looked at each other. A silent signal passed between them. They turned to him and sneered.

“Yer too late. The bitch is dead. Burnt herself up.”

The raven rose into the air. He flew in front of the men, tilted his body feet first, and dropped toward the one with black powder scars. He screamed and covered his head, dropping to the ground.

“My black friend says you lie. That’s a good thing,” said Trace.

"We left her here, nice and safe," said the standing man.

Something about the man's face was familiar to Trace. He had no time to think of it now.

"Yeah, we wath gonna athk fer gold and give her back."

The whining lisp of the man on the ground grated on Trace's nerves like a bad memory. He recognized the powder burns on the man's face. It was long, long ago, and he couldn't remember why it was important. He gave a mental shrug and set it on the back burner to bubble up later. He pulled a length of rawhide loose from his saddle and tossed it to Gillis.

"Tie 'em up."

Gillis stared at one then the other. His eyes narrowed, and his red face darkened.

"Mayhaps we could torture 'em for a bit?"

"Why?" Trace played along with Gillis's game. The men licked dry lips as they looked from one captor to the other.

"Mayhaps they'll tell us sommat else. Amelia's not the first woman they caught."

Trace hadn't seen Gillis so eager to attack before. With his wild, red hair all over the place and the evil way he grinned at the men, he could be one of the highland berserkers of old.

"I know thom things—"

"Shut the hell up!" The blond punched the other. "You wanna get us kilt?"

They both jammed their teeth shut. A pair of smaller ravens arrived from the direction of the ranch. One landed on Trace's outstretched wrist, a muddy, blue ribbon in its beak.

"That's Amelia's favorite ribband," said Gil.

Trace looked the bird in the eye. "How's Amelia?"

The bird made a rattling sound, nodding its head before crooning. It took off and landed in a nearby tree.

"Thank God, she's going to be all right."

"Damn. Are ye sure we cannae burn 'em, just a wee bit?"

“Nope. They’re going to the sheriff.”

Though the men complained, Gil insisted on tying them up and laying them across their horses. Trace didn’t object since he was a mite angry himself. There was something on Gillis’s mind, but the man was as stubborn as a tree. Trace would have to wait to find out what.

The larger raven flew toward home while the other pair followed them toward town. Now and then, they’d land on the men’s backs and peck at their pants. None of their injuries were much, but they sounded painful from the men’s screams. And humiliating. He chuckled to himself.

* * * *

Ross raced his horse along the valley. The trip home had never seemed so long. He knew Nevin followed at a slower pace, watching his back. He finally raced into the yard and leaped off his horse.

Jack ran out of the house.

“She’s going to be fine.”

Ross tossed his reins to him and ran into the kitchen. Simon stood at the stove, sipping coffee.

“Where is she?” demanded Ross, his chest heaving.

“Upstairs with Beth. But don’t—”

Ross pounded up the stairs, his lungs tight from holding his breath for so long. When his head cleared the floor and he saw Amelia sitting up in bed, his steps slowed. She looked at him and shuddered. Did she hate him that much for not protecting her?

Her hands were thick with bandages. Strands of her long hair twisted out at the ends, singed. Red spots dotted her face. Blisters. He snarled when he recognized the outline of a hand where someone had slapped her face.

“What happened?”

“It’s best if she speaks as little as possible,” said Beth. Calm and

cool, she stood beside the bed. "Shall I tell you?" He turned to her, unable to look at the disappointment on Amelia's face. He nodded.

"Two men came. They took Amelia. Daniel held back and followed them. They went to a small cabin, locked her inside, and said they'd be back. Amelia sent Daniel for help. The ravens alerted us, so Simon and Jack were at the house when Daniel arrived. Amelia escaped by setting fire to a corner of the sod roof and climbing out. Simon carried her back. She's got some burns, and her throat is raw from the smoke, but she will be fine."

He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

"Did they touch you?" He finally looked back at Amelia.

She nodded, her chin trembling. She dropped her eyes, not wanting to see him. "But—"

He staggered and turned away. Again, he was too late. She didn't want him, had turned away in disgust.

Memories hit. Little girl cries of fear. His throat burning as he screamed as well, running as fast as he could to her. The tears that he had to blink back so he could see and not trip.

The blond man's scream when she sliced his face with her knife. Her sudden quiet when the brute punched her. Then his grunts. And those of the next. And the next. And the last.

His heart almost bursting in fear, panic, and rage as they rode away. Fear that he would not have the chance to kill them. One turned back, laughing that he wanted another taste before she died.

His quiet moccasins made no sound as he ran up behind the man lying on his cousin. He slid his knife between ribs and into a black heart. The man screamed as he hauled him off her body.

Too late. Her eyes stared up at the sky.

He remembered nothing until someone took her out of his arms. They told him he cut the man so he would never be whole again. That he carried her back, staggering under her weight. The weight of his shame was far heavier. They sent him back to his father. His father's blow knocked him sideways. He lay as his father roared that he was

banished from the tribe, sent back to them in disgrace as a coward.

He knew then that he was damned. Only if he killed all the men would he be accepted. He took on the blood debt and spent every minute working toward erasing it.

For a while, he thought Amelia, who knew nothing of his failure, might want him.

But he'd failed again. Failed his wife. She'd lived but must hate him for it.

He turned away, unwilling to look at her and see his shame reflected on her face. He walked down the stairs in a daze. Someone pulled on his arm. He shook it off. Halfway to the barn, he heard feet running toward his back.

"Mr. Ross? Is Mrs. MacDougal going to get better? They won't let me see her."

He couldn't face his wife. He had no choice with the boy. He turned. Daniel trembled in front of him. Wet lines tracked over his dusty cheeks. Ross nodded. Young shoulders slumped in relief.

"You did a good job today, Daniel. She's hurt, but she'll heal."

Ross managed to choke out the words the child needed to hear. He couldn't deny Daniel what he so craved at the same age.

"Can I help you catch them?"

"Gillis and Trace Elliott went after them. I'm going to make sure they're caught."

"Can I go with you? I can hide from Pa."

He would not let the pain in his heart hurt the boy. Not like he'd been hurt. He knelt so his face was at the same level as Daniel's.

"I need you to stay here. With the three of us away, you're the only MacDougal man. Can you help Mrs. Elliott take care of my...Mrs. MacDougal?"

Daniel nodded. "You gonna shoot 'em?"

Ross shook his head. He slowly reached behind his back and pulled his biggest knife from the downward-facing scabbard under his shirt. He held it up so the light caught the wide blade.

“Shooting’s too easy for scum like that.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. He gulped in awe. “I’ll keep her safe until you come back, Mr. Ross.”

Ross nodded though he wouldn’t be back. Amelia would have Nevin, just as she wanted from the beginning. Gillis would roar and bellow, but he’d eventually settle when the boy was born. Maybe when the last man was dead, Ross could return and face his failure.

Maybe.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A raven rode triumphantly on each captured man when Gillis and Trace entered town. The men's pants had a few holes. Blood trickled where beaks had punctured deep. A crowd had already gathered in front of the jail, waiting for them.

Frank Chambers scratched his cheek as the four horses approached. A few guffaws erupted when the ravens flew away and the men began screaming of how they were attacked. Ropes tied wrist to ankle under the horse's bellies kept them from moving anything but their heads and mouths.

"They attacked Amelia," said Trace. "Hauled her from her home and locked her up. We caught them coming back to get her."

The crowd got louder. A couple of men ordered their women to go home.

"Did you find her?"

"No, she'd already escaped. But the ravens say she'll be fine. One brought this." He held up the tattered ribbon. "It's Amelia's favorite, one she wears every day."

Gillis dismounted, vibrating with rage. He slashed the rope on the nearest man then the other. They slid headfirst to the ground under their gaunt horses. He looked around, spotting Daniel's friend. The boy stared, eyes goggling.

"Billy, take these horses to Stumpy's and fix 'em up," he growled. "Tell 'em I'll pay."

When an eager Billy led the horses down the street, Gillis grabbed the men by the backs of their shirts, one in each paw. He half carried, half dragged them into the jail. He strode across the room and threw

them into the cell, slamming the door shut behind them with a crash.

Dizzy from their heads being down for so long, they fell to the floor. One landed on his ass and yelped, quickly rolling onto his stomach. They groaned for a moment before hauling themselves to their feet. They yelled that they were innocent until a glare from Trace shut them up.

The room filled, everyone talking. Frank put his finger and thumb together and let out a shrill whistle. Silence descended.

"Anyone seen these two before?"

They glowered from behind the bars. Both medium height, one with shaggy, blond hair and bushy moustache, the other brown with a beard that didn't cover the powder burns creeping up to his cheekbones.

"I seen 'em around fer a bit now," said Old Walt. "They slunk around like they had no business bein' here. I figger they knows someone in town."

"State your names," said Frank.

The blond glared at the other, who dropped his head.

"Tav and Zeb," said the blond. "And we ain't sayin' nothin' more."

Frank looked up when Nevin pushed through the crowd, panting. He stopped beside the sheriff. "I know who they are," he said. "And as soon as Ross gets here, there'll be hell to pay."

"How's Mrs. MacDougal?"

"She'll be fine. But that's not what Ross is after them for."

The men backed up as Nevin moved forward. He pointed to the blond.

"You grabbed her first, didn't you? Threw her to the ground as if her life didn't matter."

Tav shook his head. "We jist tied her hands and put her on the horse. She come quiet."

Nevin slid a knife out of his sleeve, hidden from the others in the room. He waved it back and forth before Tav's face. The man put his

hand over his nose and lips.

“Remember who cut your nose? It wasn’t from shaving, was it?”

Nevin spoke quietly but with deadly intent. Tav gulped. He shot his eyes to his companion and back again.

“Don’t know what you talkin’ about,” he blustered. “Some Injuns jumped us once.”

Nevin shook his head. “One little girl did it. Isn’t that right?”

“How’d he know that?” said Zeb, almost squeaking.

Tav slapped Zeb’s head. “I said, shut up!”

“What’s this all about, son?”

Nevin slid the knife away and turned. Without him noticing, the room had been cleared. Gillis, Trace, and the sheriff looked at him.

“Unless we hold him back, Ross will hit them like a porcupine as soon as he sees them.”

Gillis scratched his beard with both sets of fingers, like a dog would attack an itch with his hind leg. He growled almost the same as well.

“These the men he’s be wantin’ to kill?”

Nevin nodded. “He’ll turn Warrior on us. I was in the barn when he headed back out. He said he’ll kill these two for touching his wife then go after the others and never come back. Having two of the ones he’s looking for right here and not being able to skin them alive will make him crazy.”

“What about Amelia?”

Nevin cursed. He winced and rubbed his forehead as if he had the mother of all headaches. “Ross thinks she doesn’t want him because he didn’t protect her. Just like last time these two attacked someone he cared about.”

“What’d they do before?” asked Trace.

“That’s for Ross to say.”

“He’s not here, and I’m the one asking. Now,” said the sheriff. He motioned them to the far side of the room.

Nevin leaned a shoulder against the wall. Trace and Frank faced

him.

"Years ago, these men and two others raped and murdered our cousin," said Nevin. He spoke so quietly the sound didn't reach far. "She was nine. Ross saw everything. He was too far away to stop it. When one of them came back, Ross killed him. He's been searching for the other three since. These are two of them."

"Shee-it."

The prisoners backed away from the intense glare from three furious pairs of eyes.

"That's is too long to prove anything, especially on the word of someone who was a boy at the time," said Frank. "If Ross kills them for that, he'll hang. Taking his woman and threatening her is bad, but it might not be enough to hang them." He turned to Nevin. "Where is he?"

"He followed the trail back to where they held her."

"You should have a look at the place," said Trace. "Bars on the windows and door. She wasn't the first woman held there."

"How'd she get out?"

"Set fire to it and escaped through the roof as it burned," said Nevin.

Trace nodded, a smile cracking his stern face. "Ross needs a strong woman like that."

They turned as the crowd outside erupted.

"Here he comes!"

Trace peered out the window. "I'll take his right arm. Nev, you take the left. He might listen to Gillis if that's all he can see. Stay out of the way, Frank. I don't want him to kill you as well."

* * * *

Ross recognized the horses tied to the hitching post outside the jail. Trace, Gillis, and Nevin. The whole fam-damilly, here to see his shame. Nothing new.

He pushed everything deep inside and ignored the jabbering crowd. He dismounted and looped his reins over the post. He opened the jail door and walked in, slamming it shut behind him.

He faced forward and took a step. Trace grabbed his bicep and forearm.

“What the hell—?”

Nevin grabbed the other arm. Gillis stood to one side. Ahead, two men held onto the bars of the cell and stared at him defiantly.

“You got nothing on us,” said the blond one.

His moustache didn’t hide the ugly flap of loose skin above his lip. Someone spoke, but the thunder in his head blocked everything out. His entire being centered on two faces. The second man’s brown beard covered as much of his face as possible, but even after all those years, he recognized the powder burns.

Suddenly, he was a child again, hearing the men laugh in the distance as they threw her to the ground. Back then, he had only a vague idea of what they were doing. Now, he knew.

Had they done that to Amelia as well?

He screamed a war cry and surged forward. He managed to push a few feet before the men holding his arms stopped him. The evil ones backed away. He saw their terror. Exulted in it. But he wanted pain. Screaming pain as he sliced the skin from their flesh. Inch by slow inch.

Something blocked his path. He kicked out, using the leverage of the men holding him. Someone grabbed his knees, holding him still. He raged, fighting to be free. To kill.

He couldn’t move. A red haze blurred his eyes, and a thousand bees filled his ears. He tried to shake the hands off, to see his victims scream in terror.

The red haze in front of him came into focus.

Red hair. Red face. Red beard. Bright blue eyes, staring him down. Searing into his soul.

He knew those eyes. The buzzing in his ears faded.

"I am The MacDougal!"

"No!" He shook his head as violently as he fought to escape the hands holding him.

"I am The MacDougal!"

The voice roared past his ears. The boy in him heard his father's roar, knew it meant pain. But there'd be even more if he fought. He could stand pain, but the beast had learned to beat his little brother if Ross disobeyed.

"Ross! Do ye hear me!"

He fought the need to kill, to rend. His birds would peck their eyeballs out. Brother Bear would slash their bellies open with his claws. Later. He would be still, for now. In time, he would rejoice in their slow, agonizing deaths.

He trembled, still fighting his body's need to explode. He refused to bow down, no matter what the man did to him. He met the bright blue eyes head on. He blinked. Why didn't he see his father's big chest in front of him?

"Ross? It's Gillis."

He blinked again. He met the blue eyes with his own. A grin split the face. His father never smiled. He swallowed, realizing his throat hurt.

"Gil?"

"Thank God!" Gillis heaved a sigh. "Dinna let him loose, boys. He's got knives everywhere."

Ross tried to see around his brother's wide head.

"I'm too old for this, dammit!"

Ross looked down. The sheriff lay on the floor. Trace held out his free arm. Frank Chambers hauled on it to get to his feet.

"I swear, boy, whatever's been riding you had better be gone, or I'll lock you up as well." Frank brushed his pants off, glaring.

Ross finally managed to look past Gillis. Four hands gripped his arms as he flexed his fists. He looked at his enemies with the eyes of a six-foot-two warrior. They cowered against the back wall, eyeing him

in fear.

Cowards. Attacking a small child didn't make them men. Taking his wife, touching her, would make them dead.

"Hand over yer knives, and I'll tell the lads to let you go."

"They need to die."

"Not by your hand," said Frank. "They're not worth dying for. If you kill them, you'll hang."

"After what they did to my wife?" He roared at the sheriff, but the sound came out hoarse.

"You're a good man, but you're not white." Frank stepped until they were eye to eye. "The scum in that cell are white, and so's your wife. You know they'll shoot an Indian for just looking at a white woman. You married one. Worse, she looks at you like you make her very happy."

Ross swallowed bile. Frank stared him down.

"I don't like it, either. But there's enough men around who'd find you guilty of any damn thing they wanted. Don't do it, son."

Ross relaxed his muscles. Nevin the peacemaker quickly let go, but Trace held on a moment longer as a warning. Ross met his eyes and nodded his thanks. Trace snorted and flexed his fingers.

"Cramp, old man?" said Ross.

"Nothing I can't handle, sonny," replied Trace. "Hand them over."

Trace held out his palm. When Ross didn't immediately move, he lifted an eyebrow. Shortly after he was returned to his father, he was sent to live with the Elliots. Three years older, Trace took Ross under his wing. Without the Elliots, Ross would never have changed from the ball of bitter fury and rage his father dumped on them.

Ross nodded. He reached behind his back and pulled out the knife he'd shown Daniel. He stared at his foes as he turned the blade. They tensed when he hefted it, but he placed it in Trace's hand. It wasn't his best throwing knife anyway.

He stretched his arm up and moved as if to scratch his neck. He slowly pulled a long, slender blade from the scabbard between his

shoulder blades. He tossed it idly in the air, easily catching the hilt on each revolution. It felt good in his hand. If he threw it, the blade would easily slide through a neck. Place it right and he'd bleed himself out within minutes.

Much too fast. Not nearly painful enough.

Ross handed it, hilt first, to Nevin.

He watched the men's faces the entire time he retrieved his knives from the places he stashed them on his body. With his eyes, he promised them what would happen if there were no bars between them, no brothers to hold him back. After he handed over seven knives, Frank, Trace and Nevin relaxed. They moved away, leaving him staring at the two glaring at him from the cage. The blond laughed as if he'd gotten away with something. Ross stood still, hands resting quietly at his thighs.

Trace and Nevin lined up his knives on Frank's desk.

"Don't try it," said Frank quietly behind him.

"I won't kill them," he replied as if talking about the weather. "I was thinking more of a quick gelding." He swiveled his right hand in a smooth figure eight. "A few slices and we'd have a couple pair of mountain oysters. John Tanner's old dog could use a treat."

"I'd do the same if I was you. But I'm the sheriff, and I'll not have you injure my prisoners."

"What if I don't injure them? Not touch their skin at all?"

"Gil took seven knives off you."

"I can count."

Frank gave a quiet chuckle. "I'm going to turn my back and check on what's going on outside the door. I'd better not see anything."

Ross inhaled, holding his breath a moment before a quiet exhale. The men, knowing something was up, gulped.

"Don't. Move."

His hands flew. So did the blades. When Trace and Nevin grabbed his arms again, he laughed. "Damn, that felt good."

Gillis growled and gave him a shake before releasing him. Gil

stomped over to the cell. He took the key off the nail on the wall and hauled the door open. The whole time, the men didn't move. He stood in front of them and looked down. He spoke over his shoulder. "Not bad, laddie." He looked from one set of wide eyes to the other. "I suggest ye not move afore I pull these out, or ye might geld yerselves."

He reached both hands forward, bending down to their hip level. He grasped the long handles. They were stuck so deep into the log walls that he had to crank them up and down to pull them loose. He made sure he wasn't too careful. The brown-haired one squeaked when the blade grazed him.

Gil sauntered from the cell with two long knives in his hand. He slammed the door shut behind him. Only then did the men move, collapsing onto knees pressed tightly together. They curled forward, too late to have saved their family jewels had Ross decided to take them.

"You carry nine knives?" Trace shook his head and snorted.

"We went to a meeting with Smythe and Jenet," replied Ross calmly.

Trace's raw, croaking laugh followed Ross over to Frank's desk. He lifted his foot and added the knife from his other boot and the short spike from behind his belt.

"This is what ye learned from Sunbird's people?" Gillis shook his head mournfully as he carefully packed them in a wooden box.

"Some of it."

"Let's hope the lot of 'em like Amelia's cooking, then. They won't hurt her, but I dinna want my hide full o' holes." Gillis picked up the full box of knives. He walked toward the door, stopping to poke Ross in the chest with a blunt finger. "Word is they want to visit yer lovely wife. I think she'd be a mite happier if ye are there with her. Yer aunties can do a pile of pestering."

"My wife doesn't want or need me."

Gil watched Ross for a moment. "Dinna believe it, my Raven

brother. She loves ye.” Ross shook the words away. “Ye can deny it all ye like, but I see how she looks at ye. If ye were half the man ye wish to be, you’d choose her over this garbage. Go back home to her.”

Ross hardened his face. “She’ll be happier with Nevin.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Amelia stared at the ceiling, even though it was dark. Before the light failed, she'd counted the boards ten times and come up with six different numbers. It didn't make sense. Nor did Ross walking out on her.

Would he have been happier if she'd sat in the corner of the cabin and wrung her hands, weeping until they came back?

Her husband didn't want her because she was strong enough to escape without him. Worse, he thought they'd touched her body. Made her unclean.

She'd never forget the way Ross stared at her in revulsion. Or the sound of his feet, walking away.

At least he'd been kind to Daniel. The boy had insisted on sleeping beside her in case she needed him. Nevin slept on a pallet in the parlor. The men of the Double Diamond camped in the bunkhouse. At least she'd cleaned it while she was alone with Gillis.

She missed Ross with an ache deep in her heart. One she thought he shared.

She thought wrong. Once more she'd been burned. Once more, rejected.

She heard Nevin tell Simon that Ross didn't want her, that he was ashamed. He would kill the men who hurt her then leave forever.

Because of her, Ross would lose his home, and her baby would lose its father.

Daniel whimpered in his sleep like a dog too often kicked. She reached out a hand to gently sooth him. She whispered his name before she touched, knowing the fear of a rough hand waking a child

in the night.

“Ma?”

“I’m here. Go back to sleep.”

Quiet footsteps on the stair made her heart beat. A candle flickered, rising with the person, throwing dark shadows on the wall above the stairs.

Fire. She gulped, her hands suddenly stinging in memory. A dark head appeared. A dark forehead. She sat up. Was it—?

“Just me, Nevin,” said the man now approaching the bed.

She turned her face away, ashamed at the tears. He blew out the candle and placed it by the wash bowl. She heard the sounds of a man undressing. He padded over to her side of the bed.

“Move over. I’m not sleeping on the floor just because some short-ass is in my bed.”

“Shh, you’ll wake Daniel.”

“After the day he’s had, nothing will wake him but nightmares.” Nevin eased into the bed beside her. “Roll over.”

She grumped but, careful of her sore ankle, gave him her back. She faced Daniel’s in return. A long arm slid under her breasts and hauled her against his back.

“Mmm, that’s better,” he sighed. “Ross is an idiot for sleeping in town when he could be curled up with you.”

“At the hotel?”

“Nope. He’s staying with Lily. Whoa!” Nevin held her tight. “Not that. Never that.” He smoothed her hair back from her forehead and kissed her shoulder. “Ross might have a few drinks in Rosa’s kitchen. Since he doesn’t drink much, he’ll soon be snoring on the floor. He doesn’t touch those girls. Ever.”

“Maybe he will now that he doesn’t want me.”

“He’ll soon smarten up.”

“But—”

“My butt is sore from riding all over hell’s half acre. Tomorrow’s going to be another tough day. I need a quiet snuggle and sleep.”

She pressed her lips together. She would not say a word. Not one.

A tear leaked out. The pillowcase absorbed it and the next. She thought he was asleep and, just in case, tried to breathe evenly so he wouldn't know. She finally had to snuffle.

"Don't cry, sweets."

Nevin kissed her shoulder again. She shook her head.

"He doesn't want to see me again. He's never going to come back."

"I suppose you love the idiot."

The pillow rustled when she nodded. Nevin lifted himself up on his elbow to look down on her.

"Ross loves you, but he's not ready to admit it yet, especially to himself."

"Why?" She hated that she sounded like a child crying over a broken toy.

"It's hard to love someone when you don't like yourself. He thinks he's failed you."

"He can't protect me every moment. Trace tried, but Beth took care of it. So did I. Why can't Ross understand?"

"He's got a few demons chasing him." Nevin lay down again and pulled her snug, shushing her. "If he can get over this, he might finally become fully human."

"If he doesn't, I'll track him down and kick his sorry ass!"

Nevin laughed quietly into her ear. "You've been listening to us too much. Now, go to sleep."

* * * *

Rosa heard the distinct knock at the kitchen door. She smiled to herself. Ross MacDougal. As usual, she ignored him. He couldn't get through. The thick door was always bolted closed unless she chose to open it.

"Rosa, I know you're in there. I saw you through a crack in the

window curtains.”

The windows were too small for anyone bigger than a child to crawl through. She dusted off her hands and walked over to the window. Sure enough, there was a slight gap between the curtains. She closed it and walked back to the table.

“Rosa, let me in!” He banged on the door.

She picked up her cleaver and stepped near. “Who’s banging on my door at this hour of the night?”

“Dammit, Rosa, you know me. Now, let me in, you old fishwife!”

“Fishwife is it? Now, why would I let you in?”

She frowned when he didn’t come back with an immediate insult.

“Rosa, will you please let me in?” He spoke quietly for once.

She hauled back the bolt and opened the door. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“If you put that blade down and let me in, I might tell you.” He looked at the cleaver. “The edge needs touching up a bit.”

She stepped back and handed it to him. “You know where the whetstone is. While you’re at it, do the rest.” She bolted the door again and watched him settle in the corner with her knife collection. That was one thing they had in common.

“Might as well. Got nothing else to do until morning.”

“What happens in the morning?”

She knew what had happened. Someone in her position had to know pretty near everything that went on in town. She didn’t repeat any of it except to Miss Lily and those she trusted. Ross and Trace were on the list, as were the sheriff, Sophie, and the Tanners. She’d put Doc Henley there, too, if she could. But he was an important man, educated and respected. Not someone she could speak to openly.

“If all goes well, there’ll be a trial and two hangings.”

She sprinkled more flour on the dough she’d rolled. “If not?”

“If those two don’t hang, I’ll track them down and finish the job myself. Only it’ll take much, much longer for them to die.”

After eight years in Tanner’s Ford, the last four of them with the

MacDougals dropping by to say howdy, she knew Ross well. Like Lily, she felt almost motherly to the Elliott and MacDougal boys. At thirty-two, there was no way she'd be having children of her own. If, that was, she would ever allow another man to put a hand on her. Sometimes, when the nightmares hit worse than usual, she wondered what it would be like to be normal. To let a strong man hold her close and comfort her. There was only one man she could tolerate even thinking of touching her. But he'd never look at her as anything other than a big, ugly whorehouse cook.

She watched Ross work. He caressed her knives like a man in love or lust. She didn't think there was much difference. Each careful stroke along the blade made it all the keener. Usually, he'd place his own knives beside hers and touch them up at the same time.

"Where's yours?"

"Gillis put them in a box. By now, I expect they're locked in Lily's safe."

"I wondered what was in that box. How long has it been since you were so naked in town?"

At the look he shot her, she put back her head and laughed. She finally got herself under control, still snickering now and then.

"That was the best laugh I've had in years. Does Gil really think that would stop you?"

"Sheriff's idea." Ross screwed up his face at her and kept working, which only made her laugh again.

"You're wearing a pistol tied down like a gunslinger but no knives?"

"Gil knows a bullet's too fast a death for what they deserve."

Rosa thought of how she planned to kill the ones who hurt her, if she ever saw them. She was no longer a terrified twelve-year-old. Over the six years they'd held her captive, she'd memorized their faces. Hard not to when they leered down at her night after night as they—

"Dammit all to hell, Rosa, breathe!"

She backed away, still gasping. Though she knew Ross would never hurt her, she couldn't stand to have him near, especially after one of her episodes. She swallowed bile and calmed herself.

"That was a bad one," he said quietly.

She met his eyes and nodded, still unable to talk.

"Is it anyone I could kill?" He let his smile reach his eyes for once. "Now that I've found those two, there's room on my list for more."

She shuddered out a breath, trying to smile at his attempt at humor. "It's been over twenty years. They must be dead by now."

"The ones in jail aren't. I expect they did the same to other women." He gave her a rare smile. "We could bust into Lily's safe and get my filleting knives. You do one, and I'll do the other."

"We'd hang for it."

"Maybe, but we'd go happy, remembering their screams and blood for a change."

An image came into her mind of the leader, bound and tied. In her best dream, he was naked, all four limbs staked wide. First, she sliced out his tongue. He screamed, but no one saved him. She smiled and picked up a long, thin, very sharp knife. She began at his middle with tiny cuts, so small they barely bled. Thinking it about it always made her feel better.

"Ross MacDougal. You say the sweetest things to a gal," she said, the nightmare temporarily banished.

"Tell my wife that," he growled.

He went back to her knives, she to her baking. They worked quietly for some time. Whoops and hollers interrupted them now and again from down the street. Ghouls in town for the hanging. It didn't matter who, any display of violence would do. A volley of gunshots erupted, then another. As the kitchen was at the back of the building, it was hard to tell from where the noise came.

"Sounds like Baldy's Saloon is having a good night." Ross put her cleaver back in its slot. "Done. What's next? I can't sleep, so I might

as well do something useful.”

Rosa looked around the tidy kitchen. All her work was done, but she couldn’t sleep for hours after the memories hit.

“I know, you can show me how to make bear sign,” said Ross with a boyish grin.

“I’m not making you donuts when I’ve already got cinnamon buns rising.”

“Come on,” he wheedled. “Not for customers, for me. Where’s your recipe box?” He strolled around the room, looking for the type of box that every woman used to store her favorite recipes.

Rosa watched him look. She stuck her big hands in her apron pockets. Finally, he turned to her and shrugged.

“Where’d you hide it?”

“I don’t have one.”

He winked. “I know you good cooks like to keep your secrets, but I really don’t want to sleep. If I leave here, I’m going to end up at the jail doing something that might get me hanged.”

She twisted her apron. “I said, I don’t have one.”

“You know I can keep a secret. I promise I won’t tell. We’ll make some, and then I’ll put them on each finger.” He held out his hands, fingers spread. “You can go to sleep, and I’ll sit by the fire and eat.”

His smile faded as she didn’t move. He changed from eager child to responsible adult.

“Why don’t you have one, Rosa?” He almost whispered the words.

“I can’t read very good,” she whispered.

She dropped her head and wrapped her arms around herself. It was the only type of hug she’d ever known until Lily bought her. When Lily told her that no man would ever touch her without permission again, she’d thought she’d never feel shame again. She was wrong.

“Do you want to read better?”

She nodded, her face hotter than if she looked into a roasting

oven. "I know my letters and some words, but after that, it doesn't make sense."

Ross walked over to her flour bin. He reached inside and picked up her scoop. He carried it over to her clean table and dumped the flour in the middle.

"What are you doing? I just cleaned that."

"This is a pencil." He held up his first finger. "That is our slate." He pointed to the table.

She watched him spread the flour evenly over the surface. His dark hands moved smoothly, carefully making a thin layer. Lily said men who care for women touched them like that.

He pulled up a stool and sat. After cracking his hands and settling himself, he began writing the alphabet. He got to capital D before she moved.

"I said I know them. It's all those dots and squiggles that don't make sense."

"Then we'll stick to printed capital letters. The dots go at the end of the sentence." He looked up. "When we talk, we stop to take a breath, right?" She nodded. "That's where the dot goes. Don't worry about the rest."

He stood and, like a fancy gent trying to impress a lady, bent over and offered her his stool.

"Shall we begin?"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“We know he’s in there. Open the door!”

Ross groaned. After Rosa went to bed happier than he’d ever seen her, he’d found a bottle of whiskey and settled down for some serious drinking.

His mouth tasted like an old pair of boots belonging to a man who mucked out pig pens for a living. He couldn’t tell if the pounding was in his head or at the door. Too bad his head hadn’t fallen off during the night. He rolled to his side, muscles complaining.

“Get away from my kitchen, or I’ll take my cleaver to you!”

“Aw, Rosa,” he groaned. “Don’t yell back at them.”

“Coffee’s on the stove, Ross MacDougal. Better get some before they haul you away. My cleaver won’t scare off the sheriff.”

Ross hauled himself to his knees then to his feet with help from the table. His foot kicked something. An empty bottle spun across the floor to crash into the stove. He winced. Luckily, it didn’t break. The smell of coffee nauseated him, but he had to get something in his stomach. He grabbed a couple of biscuits from a basket on the way to the stove. They melted in his mouth.

“I’ll marry you just for your biscuits,” he muttered.

Rosa passed him on the way to the window. She drew back the curtains an inch and looked out.

“You’re already married. I’ll show Amelia how to make my biscuits instead.”

“Nev and Gil will like that.”

He stared at the stove. There was the coffee pot but damned if he could get his hands to stop shaking long enough to pour a cup. Rosa

took pity and held it out.

“You won’t tell anyone?”

“Tell anyone?” He took a careful sip. Since it wasn’t too hot, he gulped the rest.

“About last night. The reading and all.”

He shook himself out. The pounding on the door was now louder than his head. Rosa held out the basket of biscuits to him. He nodded his thanks and filled his pockets.

“Your secret’s safe with me. I sharpened your knives then found a bottle, and you went to sleep. That’s it.”

“This is Sheriff Frank Chambers. Open this door, or I’ll close your business!”

Ross winked and walked to the door. He shot the bolt and opened it. The sheriff stood in front of the usual mob of ne’er-do-wells. Frank held out his hand.

“Give me your gunbelt, Mr. MacDougal.”

Ross fumbled with the strap for a second but handed it over. Frank sniffed the end of it.

“When was the last time you fired it?”

“Think I got a rattler by the trail on the way back from Bannack the other week. Why?”

Frank opened the gun and looked down the empty chamber.

“Barrel’s got dust in it.” He showed Jenet and John Tanner before putting it back in the holster. “There’s two men in jail. You said you wanted them dead. We took your knives but left your gun. Someone shot them last night.”

“You did it, MacDougal,” yelled Jenet. “You killed both of them.”

“Where were you last night, Ross?” Frank nodded politely to Rosa, standing behind Ross with her cleaver in her hand.

“Here, in Rosa’s kitchen.”

“All night?” continued Frank.

Ross nodded. “I took a leak about midnight. That count?”

“Sure you didn’t slip upstairs for a bit of fancy?” jeered Jennet.

“Yes, I’m sure.” He kept his attention on Frank. “I sharpened Rosa’s knives like usual. She went to sleep, and I made friends with a bottle. Next thing I know, you’re pounding hard enough to wake the dead.”

“Nothing’s gonna wake those boys no more,” called out one of the yahoos in the crowd.

“Frank Chambers, Hugh Jennet, and John Tanner,” said a soft voice at Ross’s elbow. He moved aside to let Miss Lily through. “Two gentlemen visiting my parlor at just after sunup. Rosa’s baking isn’t cool enough yet.”

“There’s four of us,” said Hugh.

Lily batted her long eyelashes at him. He flushed. “I can count, thank you.”

“Sorry to wake you so early,” said Frank, “but I’ve got to take Ross over to the jail. I don’t suppose you saw him last night?”

“No, I was in my parlor playing canasta. And no, I will not give the names of the men who lost so badly to me.”

Ross kissed her soft cheek. “Sorry for the kerfuffle, Lily. I’ll get out of your way and let the girls sleep.”

“Aren’t you going to search the man?”

Frank snorted. “If I know Ross, all he’s carrying in his pockets are Rosa’s biscuits. Let’s leave the ladies to their day.”

Frank tipped his hat to Rosa and to Lily, as did John Tanner and a few others.

Ross finished the biscuits as he walked across the street to the jail. He didn’t know what the hell happened, but he didn’t have any part of it.

Whether he could prove it before they hanged him was another story.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Frank doesn’t believe Ross shot those two, does he?”

Nevin looked from Trace to Gillis. He’d helped Daniel milk the goats soon after sunup. Hope wasn’t impressed with bottled goat milk but she soon caught on. Auntie was pleased to see how much Daniel had grown. They were all amazed at the difference a few weeks made to a tiny baby. Hope had lots of smiles for him and Daniel.

He left Amelia still sleeping and rode into town. He got there in time to see Ross, trailed by a crowd of hecklers, walk into the jail. Trace had stayed in town, sharing Gil’s room. The three of them now shared breakfast.

“The sheriff could add me to the list,” said Trace. “I brought Miss Lily by the jail last night. The prisoners turned white when they saw her but clammed up. She agrees they were the ones who attacked her and damned near killed me.”

“They didn’t recognize you before?” asked Nevin.

“I’ve grown a bit, but Lily’s stayed much the same. It was dark that night, but we both recognized Zeb’s lisping whine and high voice.”

“Any witnesses to say ye dinnae kill ’em? Ye might be joinin’ Ross behind those bars.”

Trace ignored Gil’s effort to get him riled. Since Beth came into his life, he’d calmed down some. “Frank said he’d send their pictures around. He figured there’d be lots of people wanting them to hang. That would spread out the possibilities some.”

“Deputy Newton saw a man crossing the street as he rode down the street to help out at Baldy’s,” said Nevin. “He said the man had

long, dark hair.”

“Charlie’s a coward. He’ll say whatever the mayor tells him to,” growled Trace.

“Why would the mayor want Ross locked up for murder?” Gillis’s chair creaked ominously as he leaned it back on two legs.

“Other than he wants power, and we hold the valley?” Nevin sucked his teeth. “Why would he want the MD when he has one halfway to Bannack? They’re too far apart to be any use.”

The three men thought as they finished their breakfast.

“Why wasnae the man at our meeting?” They looked at Gillis. “You’d think the mayor, being such a big bug, would want tae be at the table.”

“Haven’t heard about him cosyng up to Smythe,” said Nevin. “But then, where would they meet? Smythe’s not allowed in Sophie’s hotel.”

“Emslow’s boardinghouse,” said Trace. “Both Smythe and Rivers stay there. No one would think anything wrong of them talking.” He looked at Nevin. “That handkerchief Amelia gave you proved it. Lily recognized Prue’s lace and that she and Rubina Emslow made two sets of handkerchiefs. Prue did the lace and Rubina the embroidery.”

“Why would she have anything to do with them?”

“Tav, the one with the cut nose, is her brother. From what I gather, the one Ross killed was the oldest.”

“Lumley, the clerk at the hotel, would know everything that goes on there, as well as any gossip he heard.” Trace counted off his fingers. “Orville Rivers stays there when he’s in town. Jennet’s wife is thick with Mrs. Emslow. And Smythe is staying there because Sophia gave him the bum’s rush.”

Nevin stretched out his neck and shoulders. “John Tanner’s next door. He keeps his eyes open.” He rubbed his chin. “I don’t need a shave for another month or so, and there’s no way Gil will face the blade.” They all looked at Trace. “Looks like you’ll be visiting George Byers for a shave. He’s right across the street.”

"I'll be payin' my respects to the Widow Emslow," said Gillis. "Me losin' me wife and all, I can offer guidance on her loss. She's a link to all this, for sure."

"Don't eat or drink anything," said Trace. "She's the type to use poison."

* * * *

"I wouldn't have shot them. I'd have skinned—"

"I heard you the first time!"

Frank growled back at Ross. He had his feet up on his desk, sipping bad coffee. Really, really bad coffee. He should know since he made it himself. The worst thing about having a wife was that you got used to all the things she did. When she went off and visited the grandchildren, you were stuck with your own cooking.

He watched Ross prowl from one end of the cell to the other like a coyote, never settling. Not that he had anything to sit on. When they hauled the two corpses out, they carried them on the wood bed frame. After all, it was covered with their brains. They'd fallen onto the mattress, which had luckily soaked up most of the blood. Paddy O'Keefe was making a new bed as well as two coffins. The bed came first.

So much about Ross made sense now. Frank knew the boy was haunted by demons, but he hadn't known if it was from what he did or had done to him. Three of the four demons were dead, but that didn't stop the problem. Ross privately admitted knifing one at the time but denied shooting the other two. Frank believed him, even without the evidence of an unfired gun.

Gillis said the dark-haired one, Zeb, wanted to talk, but Tav would stop him. So, who wanted Zeb kept quiet and why? Could the fourth man be in the area as well? He'd be the ringleader. Considering the miners, road agents, vigilantes, and usual cutthroats, there was no end of possibilities.

Frank brought the cup to his lips, lifted it, and then shuddered. He slammed his feet down and stood up.

“This coffee is God awful. I hate it when Mary’s away.”

“Rosa’s coffee is even better than your wife’s. You could ask her to send you a pot instead of drinking the slop you make.”

“I asked.” Frank grumped into his cup. “She’s mad at me for locking you up.”

Ross chuckled. “She had cinnamon buns rising last night. Didn’t need water for the whetstone, I was drooling so hard at the smell. They should be done by now.”

Frank’s belly growled. “You, Ross MacDougal, are an evil, evil man.” He scrunched up his face and downed the last of the black sludge. “But you didn’t shoot anyone last night.”

“Then you’ll let me go?”

“Nope.”

“Why the hell not?”

Frank carefully set the cup on his desk. He aligned it with the edge. He looked up at Ross.

“Because, my young friend, I want to keep you alive.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Frank laughed. “I hear you’re angry with your wife for saying the same thing.” He laughed harder at Ross’s stubborn expression. “The Vigilantes hanged a couple men for little more than looking sideways at them, and they were all white. If I let you out the way you are now, you’ll go looking for whoever killed those two. You’ll step on some toes, and next thing I know, I’ll have all the MacDougals and Elliotts on my ass for letting you out.”

“Gil told you to lock me up?” He grabbed the bars, his fingers wrapped tight.

“Didn’t say that.”

“You’re not denying it, either.”

“Nothing to deny.”

Ross stilled, as he had just before he went berserk on them. Frank

automatically rested his hand on his holster.

"You planning to put me on trial, Sheriff? Have a jury of single white men say I need to hang for marrying one of their women?"

"Nope. I'll conduct an investigation. I'll question the whole town, sum everything up, and tell it like it is."

Ross leaned a shoulder against a somewhat cleaner section of the wall.

"You won't find the killer."

"Don't need to, if I can make enough doubt and give enough evidence to prove you didn't shoot anyone that night." Frank nodded. "The man behind this hired someone. Someone Tav and Zeb knew and trusted. That fight at Baldy's was a setup to get Charlie away so the shooter could walk in. I figure he let them think he was going to bust them out. He shot Zeb to stop him talking. He shot Tav for being such a damn fool, kidnapping your wife, and drawing attention."

"They knew I saw them kill my cousin."

Frank nodded. "If you're lucky, Tav and Zeb didn't say boo about that little girl's death. You're going to have to watch your back even harder in case they did. Whoever's behind this has power and wants all the ends cleaned up. He wants you dead, any way he can. If he can get others to kill you for him, without his name coming into it, so much the better. A roping party with you as the main guest would work just fine."

"Trace survived a roping." Ross winced and rubbed his neck.

"You won't. And that's why I can't let you out."

Chapter Forty

Ross lay on the new box bed in the corner of the jail. As Paddy was Billy's father and known to them, he'd made it six-foot-six by thirty inches, almost wide enough for his shoulders. There was no padding, but Ross hadn't had any on Rosa's kitchen floor, either. It didn't matter much when he was stone drunk, though. Hungover was another story.

Frank, feet up on his desk and head back, snored. Ross winced. The man was too old for this crap. He should be off with his wife, visiting his grandkids, not keeping an innocent man in jail. For his own good—ha!

The door to the street opened an inch. Ross lay still, feigning sleep. He heard Frank's snore catch for a moment before beginning again. A silver blade slid through the crack. A long, wide blade. It disappeared again. The crack opened to a few inches.

"Did you have to bring that pig-sticker with you?" Ross feigned disgust.

"I'm here to protect ye, lad."

The door swung wide open. The jail faced north, but the sun was bright enough that light streamed in. Gillis, dressed in full Highland splendor, swept in.

"Christ, did you have to wear the bonnet as well?"

Gil, grinning like a cat in an ocean of cream, held up one arm, fingers pinched as if to do a sword dance, and made a slow circle. Ross groaned again. MacDougal tartan from bonnet to socks. There was no bell heather anywhere near, but he'd found a small, red flower to tuck in his clan badge instead.

"They willnae kill ye with me here." Gillis lifted the sword like an avenging angel.

Ross held back a laugh. "They were shot, Gil. Bullets reach father than the end of your blade."

"That's what this is for." He turned his right hip toward Ross and pointed to his holster. It didn't match the outfit, but Gil was the practical sort.

"About time you got here. I'm hungry," growled Frank. It took him a minute to shake out his bones and stand.

"I don't need someone to protect me," said Ross.

Gillis gave an exaggerated look of surprise. "I'm not here for you, lad. I'm escapin' all those aunties and uncles of yours. While my lovely wee lass is growin' well, and I'm glad to have her back, I dinna want to put up with the whole Tribe."

Gil nodded at Frank as he hobbled by. He left the door open behind him.

Ross sat on the bed. The edge poked into his thighs, so he pushed back and sat cross-legged inside the box. Once, he'd silently begged for them to come and take him home. He'd seen one or two relatives over the years and Auntie for the last while, but not the lot of them. They didn't want to be reminded of how he'd gotten their child killed.

"They fair love yer wife," continued Gillis. "Auntie took over the kitchen again since Amelia cannot stand."

"Why not?"

"She twisted her wee ankle when she ran from the fire. Didn't the lass tell ye?"

Ross didn't want to admit he'd not only missed on protecting her, he'd run in shame from her explanation. He couldn't take her look of condemnation. He'd seen enough of them as a child.

"Ah, that's right," continued Gillis in an ominously quiet voice. "Ye scurried away like a wee mousie from the cat."

Gil slammed the door to the street and turned to face Ross. His kilt swung as he strode forward, face red and beard bristling. Ross

didn't bother to stand or protest. When Gil got his back up, he'd spew out what he wanted before he ran out of words.

Gil ranted for some time about what a great job Amelia had done. How Daniel was a "wee warrior" who deserved to become a MacDougal. How Ross's ravens had done marvelous things. And how Ross had failed them all by running away from his wife when she needed him most.

Finally, he could take it no longer. He stood up, grabbed the bars, and told his Chief to shut the hell up.

Gil narrowed his eyes and glared back. Gil was dressed as a Highland warrior. Ross wore dirty, wrinkled clothes that smelled from the last few days. He was tired, hungry, and thirsty but would never admit it.

"She doesn't want me, Gil. She said when we first met that she didn't want a man who would kill just because someone looked at her. Well, I wanted to rip them apart with my bare hands for daring to touch her. I saw the bruise on her face where one slapped her." He swallowed.

"Did they do to her what they did to—" He shook his head, unable to mention his cousin's name. "I was too late again. She doesn't want me. I saw her turn away in disgust. She needs someone who can protect her. Who—"

"Are ye finished yer sob story now?"

"What?"

Gil sneered down at him.

"I said, are ye finished cryin' into yer beer? Oh, me puir wife," Gillis placed his hand over his heart and turned his head away. He cried out. "The wee lass burned herself escaping from a prison. Alas, she should have waited for her mon to rescue her."

He put the back of his hand to his forehead and near-swooned. "'Tis so sad, she lives with nae but a few burns. A mon touched her skin but once. Ah, ye puir mon. Ye hae the shame of yer wee wife survivin' without rescue by her mon!"

He dropped the act.

“Ye make me want to puke, feelin’ sorry for yerself and runnin’ away. Ye should hae taken her in yer arms and thanked the Gods she was safe! But nae! Ye ran away like a wee boy, pissin’ his pants in fear.”

White heat shot through Ross at the insult. “I didn’t run away. I went after her attackers!”

“Did ye now. And when ye found them in the jail, did ye then go back to yer wife?” Gil sucked his teeth. He shook his angry, red mane. “Nae. Ye went to a whorehouse for the night.”

“I spent the night in Rosa’s kitchen!”

“That’s yer story, is it?” Gil examined his fingernails. “I believe ye. Nev and Trace believes ye. Amelia and Beth, now? That’s sommat different.”

He used a nail on his left hand to clean under his right. He stabbed Ross with a glare.

“Them that want te hang ye will think what they will. They’re already wild te hang ye for marryin’ the woman. That ye tossed her aside so quick?” He tsked and shook his head. “That doesnae make friends, laddie.”

After a long look, he brightened and slapped his hands as if to free them of dirt.

“But ye’ll soon be hangin’ high, and she’ll be free to marry. Big Joe says he wants her since Trace took the last Bride. He’ll give us the baby after it’s weaned, ye ken. But he wants Amelia all to hisself.”

Ross forced a hollow laugh. “Don’t try to threaten me with that. If I die, Amelia will stay on the MD Connected and marry Nevin. She’ll keep both of you happy.”

Gillis placed his fists on his hips. He shook his head, slow and easy.

“The lady says she cannae stay after the way ye treated her. She says ye dinna love her or ye’d have listened without judging. She’ll live with Beth until the baby’s weaned. She agrees to let us raise the

child since no man here would want your brown babe. She'll marry a man who doesnae look on her in disgust because another touched her. Joe says he'll nae beat her. Much."

Ross gripped the bars so hard he could almost feel them bend.

"Think on that a wee while, laddie." Gil sniffed. "I dinnae like the stench of yer foul thoughts."

Gil turned so fast his kilt rose up and almost showed his red, furry ass. He stomped to the door.

"Gillis! Damn you, you're wrong! That's not what I think!"

Gil slammed the door shut behind him. The log walls absorbed the noise. Because there was only one house past the jail, and that belonged to Doc, this end of the town was quiet. Though Miss Lily's Parlor was across the street, she had a very discreet business. Most clients entered through the back lane. Mrs. Dawes had her dress shop next to Lily's. That business was even quieter.

The silence rang so loud it hurt his ears.

Damn Gillis! He twisted everything to suit himself. It was laughable to think that an intelligent, sensual woman like Amelia would have anything to do with a brute like Big Joe Sheldrake. Gil was pulling straws with that one.

Would she want someone like Smythe, though? The man was rich, though arrogant and likely demanding. Damn Gil for getting his brain all steamed up!

Frank would find out the truth and tell them all. Ross MacDougal had spent the night sleeping on Rosa's floor. The light was on late as he didn't want to drink in the dark.

His gun hadn't been fired in a week and had flour dust in the barrel. That would be interesting to explain. He'd helped Rosa make cinnamon buns? He snorted at the idea. Everyone knew Rosa didn't allow anyone near her baking.

He paced back and forth. Six steps one way. Turn. Six steps back. He stopped.

Gil said Amelia's skin had been touched once by a man. That

meant she hadn't been raped. He slumped on the bed then lay back, his muscles unable to hold him up.

She wasn't dead.

She wasn't raped.

She was burned but not as badly as the previous time.

What else had Gil said during his rant? Ross sat up. Gil knew how to say things that made him crazy. He seemed to enjoy pushing him.

When he was small, he'd attack Gil, going at him with every trick his Indian cousins had taught him. A few years younger and scrawny in comparison, he always lost. By the time their fight was over, his anger was gone. If they were near the water, Gil would throw him in then jump in as well. They'd have a big water fight. When they came out, Gil would act as if nothing had happened. In the winter, he tossed Ross into a pile of snow with the same result. Ross would feel calm for weeks until the anger built inside him once more.

He was in his late teens when they went to Texas, all but Trace, Simon and Jack Elliott and the oldest three MacDougals. He missed Gil, but without Fin and Hugh to hate him, it wasn't so bad. Because he was now the oldest MacDougal son in Texas, his father finally treated him with some respect.

Jessamine Elliott was only a year younger than he, closer to a brother than a sister. Benjamin and Ranger Elliott and Nevin were a trio. Patrick Elliott tagged along with them. Malcolm, his youngest brother, was their father's favorite and didn't get along with anyone.

As soon as he heard Fin and Hugh were moving down, he and Nev knew they had to leave. The Elliotts wanted to come north as well, but Father wanted the rest working for him. Ben escaped to law school, but Ranger had to stay. He finally got his inheritance and put it into the RB ranch next door. He and Patrick were already bringing their cattle north to Montana Territory.

Since he was moping already, he might as well admit he missed them. It would be good to have Ranger, Patrick, and Ben here.

Most of all, he missed Amelia.

He'd missed her every moment while they were away. Did she know how much he cared? She should have realized by the way he held her. The flowers he brought her each morning. He'd see them on the table at dinner and supper. Surely, she knew what that meant.

What if Gil was right?

What if she didn't know how he felt?

Did she really look away in disgust at him, or had she seen something on his face that made her turn away?

And how the hell could he find out from a jail cell?

The more he thought of it, the more he realized she might have mistaken what he was thinking. He couldn't really remember what happened. Amelia lying in bed, burned and scratched. Beth talking. Then he was halfway across the yard, telling Daniel to take care of her.

Damn, his head hurt!

When Gil came back, he'd ask him to bring Amelia. They could talk.

Chapter Forty-One

Ross contemplated his next move. Should he take Trace's man or move the other checker forward to get kinged? He looked up when the door opened. An old man walked, tall and proud, across the room. Four eagle feathers rose from his hair. No haltering step suggested his age.

"Grandfather!"

The three-legged stool scraped against the floor when Ross stood. Trace moved aside the table containing the hard-fought checkers game. He nodded in respect and left the jail, pulling the door shut behind him.

Ross watched his grandfather look around the jail. His eyes skipped past the few posters decorating the walls. He frowned at the battered desk where a large metal ring with one key had been tossed. Finally, he looked at the metal bars in the corner and the man who watched him.

"Why are you in a cage, Raven?"

"They say I shot two of the men who killed Antelope Girl."

"Someone took those deaths from you, bringing anger."

Ross didn't move his eyes or his body.

"And you have anger with me."

"No, Grandfather. You were right to send me away."

The old man didn't seem to move, but Ross picked up his surprise.

"Send you away?"

Sunbird's father looked at Ross for many minutes. He walked forward and took Trace's place on the stool, gesturing for Ross to sit

as well.

“We asked your mother to send you to us when you were five summers old. You were a warrior living with jackals. You needed training so you would not become one as well.” He gave a regal nod. “You learned well.”

Ross felt as if he was a boy again, facing the wrath of the tribe. Only he’d not had a chance to speak back then. They sent him away without a word. He kept still, his face blank, his body unmoving.

“She died because of me.”

“Do not take that from her,” scolded the Bannock Chief. “She died a warrior. You were a boy, yet you avenged her that day.”

“Three escaped.” He choked out his shame. “Two are now dead, but not by my hand. I will not go home until I kill the last.”

The old man sighed. “I hoped you would be free of this demon who rides you.”

“I won’t be free until I kill the last demon.”

“The demon is not a man. It is the need for revenge that harms you.”

“I don’t understand. You sent me away because I failed—”

“You were sent home to grieve, to honor her death and look once more to life. We did not know your father’s jackal sons would attack you. Sunbird knew one of you would kill the other. She gave you to the Elliotts to protect you from killing your half-brothers.”

Ross could barely breathe, much less swallow the bile that crept up his throat. Yes, his father was a jackal, and so were Fin and Hugh. They’d rip apart a carcass for the joy of destroying, not because of hunger. His mother hadn’t sent him away. She’d sent him to safety. The tight band across his heart eased.

“Until you let Antelope Girl go, you will not be whole. She is gone, her bones dust. A woman carrying your son needs you now. Take care of the living and let the other be at peace.”

“You would have me forget her?”

“I would have you act as a warrior. Not an angry child crying for

what is forever lost!"

Ross's heart pounded at the insult. Heat rushed up his face. He kept his mouth shut by force of will.

"You act like an injured bear," scoffed his grandfather. "In pain and anger, lashing out at everyone." He pointed a finger. "You want to be feared. It keeps others away and your heart cold. You have no fire in your heart, only the ashes of death."

Ross dropped his eyes rather than reply. The man made to stand. Ross reached his strong arm through the bars so his grandfather wouldn't have to touch the iron. Though the man was much shorter, bent in old age, he looked down on Ross.

"Will you send Daniel away because he did not stop two men from taking your wife?"

"No! He did everything he could."

"Then why do you hate the boy who could not stop four men?"

Ross gulped. It wasn't the same. Daniel was only a child, but he'd had years of warrior training by the time he was Daniel's age.

"You have a good woman and children on the way. Will you cower in the dark like a frightened child clinging to the past? Or will you face the future like a warrior?"

Neither spoke for a few minutes. The old man finally nodded. "If you choose the future over the past, I will be at your son's naming ceremony."

Ross gulped. "And if I go after the last man?"

The Chief's nostrils flared. His eyes became hooded. Ross watched his grandfather turn and shuffle from the room. He'd walked in tall and strong, but now, he moved as if their talk had added a dozen years.

He stopped just in front of the door. Without turning, he spoke.

"If you choose death over life, you are a jackal like your father and no grandson of mine."

The door shut behind him, leaving Ross alone. He stood at the bars for a long time.

Could he get his life back? Would Amelia even want him now?

He would see her tomorrow. From what he heard, everyone from miles around was coming to see the spectacle. Auntie would never bring Hope to town, but the rest of his family would be there.

The only one he cared about was Amelia.

Chapter Forty-Two

“We want a trial!”

Frank Chambers looked over the crowd from his vantage point. The porch of the Tanner's Ford Hotel was six steps above the street. The heckler standing near the back of the crowd ducked and shuffled behind a taller man. Frank stuck his thumb under his leather vest and flashed the sheriff's badge.

“Anytime you want to strap on this star and a gun and take my place, sonny, you let me know. Otherwise, keep your yap shut.”

“He's got a point,” said John Tanner, off to one side. “There's two men dead. Don't we need a trial?”

“I won't hold a trial without good reason. Charlie Newton said he saw someone tall and dark across the street.” Frank shook his head at the group of men in dark hats. “At least half of you've got dark, scruffy beards. Maybe the murderer is right here.”

Many looked at each other sideways and shuffled their feet.

“If you think that, why's my brother in jail?” asked Nevin.

He stood in the street, thick arms crossed and an unusually belligerent look on his dark face. Considering all the riding the young man had done since yesterday morning, no wonder he scowled like he had a boil on his butt.

“You want this lot to get all fired up with drink and hang him?”

Nevin shrugged and looked away. Frank had other reasons for keeping Ross locked up. Most of them had to do with the people wanting to talk some sense into him.

“Some say you're a mite friendly with the MacDougals, Sheriff.” Mayor Rivers smiled at the crowd. “Why don't I go with you to make

sure the truth gets out.”

“Only the truth about this crime needs to get out. People are allowed their secrets in my town.”

“Only trying to help, Sheriff.”

Frank thought the man as smooth as a church pew after six generations of fidgeting bottoms. His natty plaid suits were always pressed, his shirt ironed and boots polished. Even if he had witnesses to say he didn’t pull the trigger, it didn’t mean Rivers didn’t pay for it happening.

“A second set of ears can’t hurt,” suggested John Tanner. “Doc Henley’s known for keeping his mouth shut.”

“Doc?” Frank looked at the middle-aged man in the rumpled suit. “Would this take too much of your time?”

“Not too many babies, due and there’s no summer fever, so I’ve got time. Fact is, it’d be pleasant to see people when they don’t need me.”

“Then head back to work. Doc and I will stop by and talk to every one of you. Since I haven’t had breakfast, I’ll start with Mrs. McLeod. That all right with you, Doc?”

“When’s Mary back, Sheriff?” asked Doc as they walked into the hotel entry room.

“Not soon enough,” replied Frank.

* * * *

Doc and Frank, finished questioning those in town, rested over a cup of coffee in a corner of the hotel dining room. Frank counted off points on his fingers.

“Mrs. Dawes saw someone coming from the east end of town after Charlie rode past. No one saw Ross leave Rosa’s kitchen though the light was left on far into the night. Rosa and Ross heard gunshots but figured they were part of the fuss.”

“I saw you talking to Professor Thaddeus,” said Doc. “He see

what happened?"

Frank nodded. "Annie and Mollie May started a cat fight at Baldy's. They both wanted a kid with a poke of gold dust to spend on their favors. A couple of miners wanted to share Molly and hauled the women apart. They knocked over the faro table, and all hell broke loose. Baldy threw everyone outside. They pulled lead and woke up the town."

"Can the professor identify the miners? They might have been paid to cause the ruckus."

"I expect so. Thaddeus said they took off when Charlie waded in with his fists."

They finished their coffee. Doc placed a nickel by his mug and stood up.

"Mind if I head out to the MD? If she's up to it, I'll bring Mrs. MacDougal back in the buggy. She must want to be near her husband. We can talk with her at the hotel. Nevin and Gillis are there already."

Frank looked up at Doc. "Got something on your brain? You look a mite antsy."

"You'll know soon enough, Frank."

He watched out the window as Doc Henley walked over to Miss Lily's. The man went to the kitchen door, adjusted his hat, brushed the dust off his rumpled pants, and knocked. Frank added another nickel, pushed back his chair, and stood. "Go get her, Doc," he said quietly to himself. "It's about damn well time."

* * * *

Knowing it was a ridiculous gesture, Doc brushed off his wrinkled pants. He'd been alone since his wife died twenty years earlier, giving birth to their dying son. He'd sold the farm, gone to medical school, and headed West. That was where people needed him. He hadn't lost a mother or baby in all the years since. He hadn't found a woman he wanted to marry, either. Until now.

When he knocked on the door, he felt as if he was eighteen again, asking to take Martha for a walk.

“Nobody’s sick here, Doc.”

Rosa’s dark eyes looked into his. He suddenly remembered and pulled off his hat.

“May I come in, Miss Rosa?”

She frowned at him. “Where’d that ‘Miss’ come from, Doc?”

He looked at her expectantly. Still frowning, she backed away and let him enter her kitchen. As always, it smelled heavenly. Cinnamon buns, stew, and excellent coffee. His stomach rumbled.

“You here to question me about last night?” She crossed her thick arms across her ample chest. “I told the sheriff that Ross was here the whole time. We heard gunshots while we were—” She looked down and dusted off her apron. Flour motes drifted in the sunshine beaming through the open curtains. “We were talking.”

“No, I’m not here about last night, though I do have a question.”

His stomach rumbled again, louder. He pressed his hand on his belly sheepishly. She rolled her eyes.

“Have a seat, and I’ll dish something up for you,” she said. “What’s your question?” She turned her back to him and walked to the stove.

“Are you free for a few hours?”

She stopped. The muscles in her back, neck, and arms tensed.

“Free?”

He cursed his choice of words. After all, this was a house of prostitution. Nothing was free.

“Do you have time to accompany me to the MD ranch? I need to examine Amelia MacDougal. If she’s up to it, I’ll bring her to the hotel so she can visit Ross.”

Rosa filled a tin plate with stew. She added a handful of biscuits and a spoon before turning around. Her color was high, and she didn’t meet his eyes when she placed it on the far end of her work table.

“You need a chaperone, Doc?”

Though it was not mannerly, he sat down, feeling as nervous as she looked. The more he could make her relax, the easier this would be.

He couldn't help moaning at the first spoonful of stew. "I could marry you just for your cooking, Rosa."

"Don't talk foolishness," she snapped. "Nobody wants to marry me."

She bustled around the room slamming lids onto pots, rattling wooden spoons, and generally acting flustered. He smiled as he watched her. She kept her back to him, but he saw the pink tinge on her neck. Since she rarely went outside, her light brown skin still showed a flush. Was it embarrassment or something more?

He waited until she didn't have anything sharp, heavy, or breakable in her hand. "I don't want a chaperone. I want a lady to accompany me on a buggy ride." She whipped around.

"I don't know where you think you are, but there ain't no ladies in this here establishment. You want to hire a whore, talk to Miss Lily. Now, get out of my kitchen!"

He broke a biscuit in half and wiped up some of the gravy on his plate. He spoke into the plate, for both of their sakes. He couldn't watch if she showed disgust at him.

"I want to invite a certain Miss Rosa, who I consider a lady, to accompany me on a buggy ride. If she chooses to go, it will be her choice. All I offer is a few hours riding on a sunny summer day and my company. If you don't want my company, I will leave."

He put the biscuit on his plate, unable to choke it down through his suddenly dry throat. The minutes of silence scared him almost as much as when Marsha died.

"You don't know me. I ain't never been a lady. I've worked for Miss Lily since I was eighteen. In a whorehouse. I don't know what game you're playing—"

"Rosa, please look at me."

It took a while, but she managed to meet his eyes. She looked like

a frightened faun facing a mountain lion. He spoke soothingly, as he would to a terrified child with a broken arm or a woman delirious with fever.

“Remember when you had that fever the other winter? You were right out of your head.”

“Lily said you stayed with me until the fever broke.” She bit her lip and looked down. “I guess I never thanked you.”

“I don’t want your thanks. I want your company.”

“I’m no good, Doc. You don’t know—”

“Yes, I do. You had nightmares. Terrible ones. You said things.”

Her face paled. She slammed a hand on the table to stay upright.

“What did I say?” She croaked the words out. “Did anyone else hear?”

“I didn’t let anyone else except Lily near you. Only when I told her what you said did she explain. I know she bought you from those men when you were eighteen.”

Rosa stared at him with wide eyes and open mouth, her skin a dusty tan. She covered her face with both hands and sank to the bench, choking and gasping.

“I know you were with them for six years. Not by choice.”

She shot to her feet. She glared at him with her jaw clenched. Head high, she ignored the tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked magnificent.

“I don’t need your pity!”

“Good, because you won’t get it from me. I want something else.”

“What?”

“I want to take you on a buggy ride with me.” He forced the last biscuit down.

She shook her head quickly side to side in disbelief. “I can’t give you what you want.”

“Rosa, you don’t know what I want.”

“What they did—I can’t be a wife.”

He picked up the plate and licked it clean. Not a good habit, but

he didn't want to miss a drop, and all his biscuits were gone.

"When you had those nightmares, you know how I calmed you?"

She frowned down at him as if looking for a trap.

"You cried out and then screamed without making a sound. I sang a lullaby and held you in my arms for a long, long time until you settled. Finally, you curled up and went to sleep like a child. I held you in my arms until you woke."

"No," she whispered. "I can't abide the touch of a man."

"Could you share a breakfast table with me? Sit by the fire on a cold night?"

"Perhaps. But," she gulped, "not a bed."

"I'm lonely, Rosa. I'm forty-five years old. If I can have your company everywhere but the bedroom, then I'll be a happy man. It's far more than I have now. Given time, you might become more comfortable with me. But I will never, ever even think of hurting you."

She lifted her apron and wiped off her wet face. It left streaks of flour. She was so damn beautiful, and nobody else could see it but him. But that was a good thing because if others saw the light that lit her face now and then, they would want her, too. She would be his woman, as much as she would allow it. He heard approaching footsteps, the light tapping suggesting Lily.

He stood up and held out the plate. "Do you have a couple of hours to have a buggy ride with an old man?" He said it loudly so Lily would hear.

The door to the hall opened. As expected, Lily emerged. She looked immaculate as ever. Her petite perfection contrasted with Rosa's large-boned strength. Each was lovely in her own way.

"Of course Rosa has time, Doctor Henley. The question is, does she wish to spend it with you?"

"I have to change my dress."

"You do that while I get a buggy. Don't forget a bonnet. The sun is bright."

Doc let himself out the kitchen door. He felt like a rooster, ready to crow that he had a lady friend. It took seeing how much Frank Chambers missed his wife to force him to act.

He'd never told anyone, even Lily, that he cared for Rosa. He'd hoped she'd notice when he stopped by the kitchen every week when he checked Lily's girls. Rosa had gotten more comfortable with him over time though she hid it in argumentative banter.

He damn near strutted all the way to Stumpy's livery stable.

* * * *

"Will you look at that!"

A blond boy Rosa didn't recognize raced toward the buggy, two dogs yipping at his heels. His clothes were clean but too large for his small frame. He waited until the buggy stopped before he exploded with words.

"Doc! Did ya come to see Mrs. MacDougal? She's gonna be fine, ain't she?"

"Daniel, I'd like you to meet my lady friend, Miss Rosa. In his previous life, Daniel was known as Ernie Thompson."

Rosa looked at the smiling child. Little trace remained of the gaping hole in his mouth or his usual frightened expression. Could she blossom as this child had, given affection and caring? She laughed at herself. She was thirty-two, not ten. Too late, by far, even for dreams.

"Good morning, Daniel."

She let George help her down. She was getting used to calling him that, though it felt strange. He stood near her as a tall, well-built man strode toward them. He had the bearing of a military man, though he smiled kindly.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Rosa." His bow, along with his accent, suggested who he was.

"You must be Mr. Langford of the Double Diamond."

"Guilty as charged, but please call me Ace. May I escort you inside? Mrs. MacDougal is resting in the parlor. She would appreciate some feminine company."

The gals at Lily's would swoon to have such a handsome young man visit them. She mentally took notes, knowing they would want all the details she could provide. They were not wanted on the streets of the town.

"Daniel, I heard a buggy, so I know someone's there. If you don't bring them in here, I'm coming out!"

"Ah, that would be Mrs. MacDougal," said Ace. "She's become a mite petulant. Daniel, would you please escort Miss Rosa inside? You can put on a pot of tea for the ladies. I don't think there's any pie or cake left, however." He rubbed his belly. "We bachelors devoured all the baking during the first day."

Rosa, for the first time in her life, let herself be escorted as if she was, indeed, a lady. It felt strange to wait to have a door opened. She walked into the MacDougal kitchen and looked around. It was neat and clean, dishes put away and floor swept. Surely the men hadn't been doing the cooking and cleaning?

She followed Daniel into an open hall. He dashed across and into the front room. She didn't follow, not being sure she would be welcomed, no matter what the men said. She looked around, eyes wide. When was the last time she was in someone's home?

"Mrs. MacDougal, Doc brought Miss Rosa to visit," said Daniel. "Do you want me to make tea?"

"Oh, my goodness, someone other than a big, loud man. Yes, Daniel, tea would be lovely, but don't leave our guest standing in the hall."

Daniel peeked his head around the corner and gestured at her. She walked over, her boots heavy on the polished wood floor. Sometimes she let herself dream of having a home, though never children. This was too grand a place for her, but a small log home would be lovely. Maybe even a garden and flowers by the door. Just for today, she'd let

herself pretend it was possible.

Amelia lay on the sofa with her foot raised on pillows. She smiled and waved Rosa to sit. Pink burn marks from her escape still dotted her face. "Thank you so much for visiting!"

Amelia didn't ask what Rosa was doing there. She seemed delighted to have company no matter who it was, or why. Not knowing what else to say, Rosa asked Amelia to tell her about her excitement. They had just finished their tea when Doc came in.

"Good to see you've got that foot up. How are the blisters on your hands?"

Amelia lifted her hands up as if someone had pulled a gun on her. Doc looked at each palm and nodded. With one finger he tilted her chin to and fro, grunting with satisfaction. He seemed so in charge compared to when he arrived in her kitchen earlier. Was the man really nervous to be with her? Could she believe he cared about her?

"If you're up to it, I want to bring you to town. Sheriff Chambers needs to talk with you about what happened. I expect you also want to speak with your husband."

"I have absolutely nothing to say to that man! He made it clear he does not wish to be married to me. You can hang him for all I care!"

She suddenly burst into tears. Doc knelt beside her and held out his arms. She wrapped them around his neck and sobbed.

Rosa watched him gently rub her back in circles, murmuring quietly. Is that what he did with her when she was sick? Was this part of being a doctor, to care for the upset as well as the sick? Amelia was in her early twenties, she was thirty-two, and George was forty-five. He likely thought of Amelia as a daughter.

Daughter or not, she realized she wanted his arms around her, instead. She sat back in the chair, her face heating. She actually wanted a man to touch her? Perhaps it was because he had cared for her when she was so sick. She didn't remember it, but some part of her must think he was safe enough to trust.

Amelia sniffed and pulled back. George handed her his

handkerchief. She shook her head and pulled her own out of her sleeve. She wiped her eyes with it, still sniffing.

"I do beg your pardon. I don't know where that came from. I am so angry at the man, and I can't even tell him myself."

"Women in a certain condition often have such outbreaks. Being captured and escaping, then abandoned by your family, didn't help." He stood up. "We're going to solve that problem. You're coming back to town with us, as is young Daniel."

"But his father might see him and—"

"Sheriff Chambers has a plan for that. He can stay with Mrs. Dawes. If he has any problems, he can go next door to Rosa or run across the street to the jail. The boy knows all the hiding spots in town." He smiled kindly at her. "I doubt his father would recognize him now. You've done a marvelous job with him."

"He's a very good boy. I don't know that I would be alive now if it wasn't for Daniel."

"I expect you want to pack a few things. Shall I carry you up those stairs to your room? That is, if my lady friend doesn't object."

Rosa realized he meant her. She flushed, not knowing what to say. Amelia solved the problem by pushing herself to stand.

"Thank you, Doctor Henley, but I prefer to do it myself. Perhaps Rosa will assist me upstairs?"

Doc fussed but allowed the two women to go up by themselves. Rosa held out her arm for Amelia to lean on. The young woman was not as strong as she'd let on. She helped her up the stairs to the largest bed Rosa had ever seen.

"I didn't want Doc to come up here," said Amelia, her face red. "I know he knows I share the bed, but it's another thing for him to actually see it."

"Because of where I work, you think I won't be upset?" Rosa couldn't stop the comment from erupting.

Amelia shook her head. "You're a level-headed woman. You work for a woman I admire. From what I've seen since arriving here,

women have to be too strong to fuss over such things. I have to ask you to pack my unmentionables since I can't walk around that much, so I'm already embarrassed."

"I apologize." Rosa clenched her hands, huge compared to delicate Amelia. "I haven't been in someone's home for so long."

"And I apologize for weeping in the arms of your man. He held me like I wish my father would have."

"He's not my man!"

Amelia smiled and winked. "He seems to think so." "The way he looks at you..."

Rosa turned away, sudden tears threatening. She never cried. Ever. Tears only made them want to take more from you, laughing at your pain.

"I'm sorry," said Amelia quietly. "It's just that he always seems sad. Today he looks like he could almost fly with joy. Whatever happens, you've brought that to him." She cleared her throat. "Now. My carpetbag is in the trunk in the corner. My unmentionables are in there as well. I had to hide them under the quilts so my husband wouldn't take them."

Rosa followed directions for the next few minutes. She quickly realized that Amelia wore no corset, though she had a few layers under her dress. She herself wore undergarments that disguised her shape, making her more straight and bulky than she really was. It was a habit from so long ago, she wasn't sure she could ever be comfortable without the layers.

The trip back to Tanner's Ford was quite different than the drive up. Rather than two shy people testing the waters of friendship, there was a lot of laughter. George Henley teased her with a life that could never be hers.

She insisted George drop her off at Lily's on the way past. She had supper to get ready, after all. She saw Amelia look wistfully across the street to the jail, then harden her face and turn away.

Rosa worked long into the night, both to catch up on her work and

because she couldn't settle. She couldn't get the thought of a different life out of her mind. Was such a life possible for her?

Chapter Forty-Three

“Therefore, Ross MacDougal will not be charged with any offence regarding the man known as Zeb and”—Sheriff Chambers looked at the paper in his hand—“Octavius Browne.” He folded the sheaf of papers listing the evidence he’d read out and stuck them back in his pocket.

“I come here for a hangin’, dang it, and I want one!” The yell came out of the crowd. Others shuffled their feet and nodded in agreement.

Ross, standing beside the sheriff, caught the eye of the complainant. He quickly looked away, but other complaints were shouted. He glared back at them, confident now that his knives were back in their places. A bath and his most comfortable vest, hat, pants, chaps, and boots also helped.

The townsfolk on the boardwalk were outnumbered by visitors. From the jail to the mercantile, the street looked to be filled with scum eager for a rumble. Luckily, the wind was at his back, blowing their stench toward the jail. Miss Lily and a few of her modestly dressed painted ladies fluttered fans on the west fringes of the crowd. Some of Baldy’s prettiest gals did the same on the eastern end of the crowd. They fluttered eyelashes and swished their skirts, cut well above their ankles.

Everyone was here. Everyone but Amelia.

“We come here for fun,” yelled a gap-toothed yahoo. He lifted his pistol in the air. “If ya cain’t give it, we’ll make our own!”

“You shoot that and you’ll be looking at life from the wrong side of the bars, buster,” called out Frank. “Mrs. McLeod has a special

dinner prepared at the hotel for anyone who's clean, decent, and has four bits to spend on good food."

Ross noticed Baldy hurrying his girls down the street and into the saloon. Gillis and Nevin were setting some boards over upturned barrels in front of the saloon. He turned back to the crowd's rumble when he heard Charlie Newton swearing as he cleared the way for Orville Rivers. The mayor walked up the steps and held up his arms.

"Welcome to Tanner's Ford, gentlemen. Since the sheriff says there won't be a hanging,"—he waited for the boos and complaints to settle down—"we put a little something together for you."

Cheers for the mayor broke out. He nodded regally as if it was all his idea. Far down the street, men rolled barrels into place behind what Ross realized was a temporary saloon.

"First, all gunbelts must be left at the jail." They grumbled, but it wasn't unusual. "Baldy's got extra barrels and bottles, the ladies are ready to provide entertainment and—" whistles and catcalls covered up the rest of his words. Others hushed up the noisemakers. "Thanks to generous donations, beer is free from four to six o'clock. After that, dances are half price for an hour." He lifted his pocket watch from his vest and flipped open the lid. "It's quarter of the hour now, so you might want to stop by the jail and—"

As one, the crowd turned and fought their way to the jail. Trace and his brothers, along with the men of the Double Diamond and Circle C, waited to take the guns. Once unloaded, the men ran down the street to be first in line. The mayor watched them with a look of distaste. Never one to miss a good meal, he turned into the hotel. Ross and Frank moved to the far end of the verandah as others followed.

"Damn good idea that Trace came up with," said Frank quietly to Ross. "His idea, but the MacDougals are providing the gold to pay for it." He tilted his head and looked up at Ross. "Might be cheaper than holding a funeral and wake for your sorry hide."

"Where's Amelia?"

"Upstairs. You think she wants to see you?"

“Nope, but I have some groveling to do. Maybe after that, she’ll look at me.”

“You got a hankering for humble pie, son?”

Ross shook his head. “I want my wife in my bed again. If I have to chew iron and spit nails, I will.”

“Been there myself now and then. Hurts like hell at the time, but a happy woman makes up for it pretty darn quick.”

Ross grunted. He didn’t know if Amelia would let him in the room, much less listen to his apology. He had no idea what he would say, just that he had to try.

“She’s in the honeymoon suite, as Sophia calls it,” said Frank. “You got a key?”

“Nope.”

“What if she won’t open the door?”

“Sheriff, there ain’t a door or window within a hundred miles that can keep me out of somewhere I want to be.”

“How’ll you climb the brick to get to the second floor?”

“Rope the chimney and haul myself up. Might have to break a window.”

“You remind me of myself, going after Mary. Her papa thought I was lower than a skunk. I’ve still got buckshot in my ass from that man. But I married her. Thirty years, five children living, and eight grandkids so far. Damn, I miss that woman.” He settled his hat and cut across the street to the jail.

“Mr. Ross, have you seen my pa?” The voice came from the shrubs beside the hotel porch. Ross peered down to find Daniel, crouching with his arms wrapped around his knees. Ross shook his head.

“I want to see Billy! I know he’s here somewheres.”

Ross looked around. He saw Paddy O’Keefe helping with the gunbelts at the jail.

“Billy’s father is helping at the jail. He might be there, too.”

Daniel gave him a wide smile. He crept out of the bushes and

peered across the road. He stepped out just as a trio of whooping riders raced into town.

"Ernie Thompson!"

Daniel stopped and turned to the voice. His father raced down the street toward him, facing the horses. Daniel shivered with eyes wide, unable to move. Ross, standing on the porch, saw everything. He leaped over the railing and ran toward the street, knowing he was too late.

Daniel's father reached the boy first. He grabbed him up and threw him toward Ross on the boardwalk. Ross caught Daniel and turned his back as the horses raced past. He heard the high-pitched screams. Daniel struggled to get away, to see. Ross pressed the boy's face into his chest.

"Don't look, Daniel." He held him tight until the only sound was the gasps of the crowd.

"Is my pa dead?" Ross turned his head to check.

"Yes."

Daniel burst into tears. Ross carried him into the hotel and up the stairs to Gillis's room. He glanced at the bridal suite, where Amelia waited, as he passed. Gillis was next door. Daniel cried from the bottom of his ten-year-old heart.

He couldn't pick the lock while carrying the boy, so he sat cross-legged on the floor. He held his new son and waited for the storm to pass. Some storms were bigger than others, but they all eventually passed.

With all the excitement outside, the wide hall was deserted. As Daniel's cries slowed, Ross listened for a sound from Amelia's room. He heard nothing. Perhaps she was asleep or staring out the window at the excitement below.

Finally, Daniel snuffled in his arms. Ross rocked back and forth, just enough to be a comfort without it being too much like what a mother would do.

"I'm sorry your pa's dead, Daniel."

“He were good when he don’t drink,” hiccupped the boy.

“He loved you very much.”

“He hated me.”

“If he hated you, why did he save your life with his own? He saw what was happening and raced to save you. He was there for you when you needed him most.”

“I gots nobody now.”

The small heart beat frantically against Ross’s chest like a bird caught behind a closed window.

“Your pa gave you to me. He saw me catch you and knew you were now my son.”

Daniel pushed back to look up at Ross. He rubbed away the leftover tears. “My pa did that?”

Ross nodded. “He knew I couldn’t save you in time. He grabbed you and looked at me. He threw you to me on purpose. If you couldn’t have him for a pa anymore, he wanted you to have a mother and father who’ll love you forever.”

Daniel leaned his head against Ross’s chest again. He pulled the boy close. His heart slammed hard in his ribs. He would do the same for his child, yet unborn. Would know he was to die but accept it as long as his child lived.

“You’ve lost one set of parents, but you’ve got us now. Uncles and aunts and cousins as well as a new mother and father.”

He kissed his new son’s head.

“Do you want to be my son, Daniel? If not, Gil or Nevin or any of the Elliotts would be proud to have such a brave, helpful boy.”

His hair rubbed on Ross’s bare chest as he shook his head. “I want you.”

“Good. I want you, too.”

“Will I be Daniel Ernest Thompson MacDougal?”

“That’s a pretty big name, but I think you can live up to it, son.”

“Kin I call you Da, like Billy does his pa?”

“I’d be honored. What will you call my wife?”

"I already call her Ma in my head."

"Then Ma it is."

Daniel stretched. Ross took the hint and let him go. "If you want in the room, I can pick the lock."

"You kin do that?" Delight lit up his face.

"Yes, but only when necessary."

Daniel shrugged one shoulder. "Naw, I'm gonna go find Billy and tell him I'm a MacDougal now."

Ross raised a finger.

"I'll look afore crossing the street."

"You might want to wash your face first. Real men cry, but they don't let the women know."

"Cause it makes them sad?"

Ross nodded. Daniel dashed down the hall and out the back door. After the emotional storm and whirlwind of activity, Ross rested his head against the wall and just sat.

He had claimed a son. The boy was now a part of him.

Nevin would accept it immediately. A statement of claiming was worth more than a piece of signed paper. Gil already wanted to have the boy give fealty to Clan MacDougal. No one would mess with the ten-year-old son of Ross MacDougal.

Daniel had done everything right to help save Amelia. He knew he couldn't stop two grown men from kidnapping her. He'd followed, discovering where she was, then gone for help. What else could a young boy do?

Fly down a mountain and kill four men?

He failed to stop them when he was a child, but he was not a failure. He was no jackal like his father. He was a warrior.

Grandfather was right. He must let the dead go and take care of the living. He had one son and a baby on the way. If, that was, he could convince Amelia to be his wife. Again.

He looked to his right. His future lay just behind that door. Facing a dozen men was nothing compared to an angry, hurting wife.

Chapter Forty-Four

Amelia rested her foot on a stool as she watched the crowd of men whooping it up in front of Baldy's Saloon. None of them sent a tingle through her the way that stranger had the first night. Right here, at this window.

Thinking about Ross sent trepidation as well as a tingle. Was her husband out there celebrating his release from jail? Or had he already left on his quest for vengeance? She rested her hand on her flat belly.

"Your papa is too stubborn to see that I love him or admit he loves me. He's a fool," she told the speck of life growing in her. "But if he doesn't want us, then good riddance. Nevin is a fine man, as is Gillis. They'll raise you just as well as your papa would. You'll have brothers and sisters to play with, two uncles, aunts, and cousins."

She rubbed her fingers over the itchy remnants of a blister. She wanted to scratch it but knew it would be worse if she did. Sitting here alone made it hard to keep her mind off the irritation.

"If Gillis forged Ross's name to the contract, our marriage is invalid. Any decent judge would rip up the contract. Nevin wants to marry me. He's a very nice man and says he loves me."

She groaned. She loved Nevin, but she loved Ross more. She wanted him more. He didn't want her.

"Damn the man!"

Her swearing echoed off the high walls. It felt so good to say something rather than keep it inside as she was taught. "Double-damn and blast him!"

She laughed, feeling free for the first time since the attack. No, not "the attack." Since she escaped from a prison where two men were

going to torture, rape, and murder her. "Triple-damn them both to hell!"

She was free of those men and her husband. Lots and lots of men would want to marry her, just because she was female, fertile, and free.

But none of them made her feel the way Ross did. Hot, wicked, wanting, and wet. Nevin came close, and Gillis was beginning to accept the idea of doing more than kissing her crazy. Only Ross made her so hot she couldn't stand to go a day without his hot cock pounding somewhere in her.

She drew her palm over her breast, already firm from the thought of what she wanted to do with him. Beth told her she was insatiable for the first three or four months she was breeding then needy the rest of the time. Beth and her three men even had a long loving session the day before James was born.

A spark twitched in her clit. It demanded attention after days of being ignored. She thought back to the meadow, when both men did what she needed while Gillis watched. She wanted to be filled, now! Nevin and Gillis helped Frank Chambers keep order, and Ross was likely on the fastest horse going somewhere else.

If she was going to be hot and wanting with no man around to solve the problem, then she'd solve it herself. She yanked on the curtains, closing herself off from the street. She undid the top three buttons of her dress, caressing the skin underneath. She leaned back her head and captured her breasts, pretending it was Ross's hands that kneaded them. But his hands were so much larger. So much more adept.

The curtains ruffled as the hot breeze blew in. For decency's sake, she wore her dress, camisole, corset, bloomers, and three petticoats. Far more than she was used to. Far too much when she was all alone and likely to be so until morning.

She quickly undid all the dress buttons above her waist. She pulled her arms out and let the cotton drop off her shoulders. Her

corset followed. She groaned and inhaled deep into her lungs. She flapped her wrinkled shift, damp from perspiration.

“That feels much better.”

She undid her skirt buttons and all the camisoles. She stood up, balancing on her good foot. She pushed off her skirt and all but one camisole. She picked them up, draping them over the back of the chair. Putting as little weight on her foot as possible, she hopped toward the room with the bed.

She’d only taken two steps when someone banged on the door. She turned toward the door and set her foot down. Pain erupted. She cried out and lifted it, arms flailing. She grabbed the back of the padded chair she’d just left and fell into it.

“Amelia? Are you all right in there?”

Ross!

“What the hell do you want?” she yelled. Tears prickled her eyes as she rubbed her ankle, throbbing once more. Dead silence from the other side of the door.

“Are you hurt?”

“None of your damned business!”

Another long silence. The doorknob rattled. She stared at it. She heard scratching sounds. After a moment, the doorknob turned, and he stepped in. His eyes flashed around the room. They lingered on her bandaged foot for a moment. When he was satisfied she was alone, he relaxed enough to close and lock the door.

She gulped. He wore the same outfit as when she’d seen him on the street. His smooth leather vest curved over his shoulders. The edges parted, revealing his wide, muscular chest. His chaps framed the cock straining at his buttons. She stared at it, remembering how good he tasted. She licked her lips.

“Look me in the eyes, wife.”

His face was like stone except for the eyes that glared at her. Cold eyes and hot cock at the same time.

“Gillis forged your signature. I’m not your wife.”

He stepped forward. His boots hit the floor with loud, slow thunks. One. And another. His eyes never left hers.

"You're my wife, Amelia Smathers MacDougal." He dropped his hat on a table as he passed. "You've picked up some bad habits. No more swearing like a muleskinner."

"It feels good to swear!"

"Then swear away. Your bottom will feel good when I spank you for it."

"What!" His eyes burned the answer straight to her clit. It pulsed, demanding his fingers and tongue. She clenched her pussy, remembering how his hand zapped her bottom.

"But you don't want me. You ran away!"

"I never said I was perfect. You're pretty damn close to it, though." He slipped his vest off his shoulders, revealing the flat, brown nipples she loved to bite.

She blinked. "I can't cook."

"I don't care."

"You don't?" He barely moved his head. "But I can't do anything like Auntie or even Beth."

"I don't want Auntie for my wife." His lip twitched. "I think Beth would be a hot bundle in bed, but even I couldn't take on all three Elliotts and live."

"You jump in another bed, and you'll never lie in mine again," she growled.

His eyes lit up at her reaction. "There's lots I can do to make you squeal that have nothing to do with lying in a bed." He looked at the table for a moment, then the wall. He smiled at the upholstered chair.

She remembered each one. How he sat her on the table and she wrapped her legs around his hips to pull him close. When he pressed her against the wall so hard that she didn't notice her feet were six inches off the floor. And the chair!

"I've ordered a chair just like that one for our bedroom," he said.

A rash of heat surged over her breasts to her face. He took a step

back.

“You’re distracting me.” He shook himself out. “I was telling you why I want you for my wife. You’re smart. Not too many men would think of, much less have the balls, to escape from a locked cabin by burning the damn thing down. Even better, you’ve got a body that makes me so hard I could pound nails with my cock.”

An image hit of Ross standing tall in the meadow, his hard cock straining to reach her. Would she kneel and take him in her mouth, licking his salty goodness? Or would she kneel down and look at him over her shoulder like a she-wolf in heat? She rubbed her aching breasts with her wrists.

“You don’t want me,” she said, her voice husky. “You’re ashamed because they touched me.”

He stopped in front of her and shook his head.

“Don’t deny it, Ross MacDougal! I saw the way you looked at me.”

“You looked away first. You were disgusted with me because I couldn’t save you from them.”

“I only looked away for a moment, and that was because I felt ashamed to be a nuisance to you. When I tried to explain, you ran away!”

He went down on one knee in front of her. She let him pick up her hand. He touched her pink burn marks in a butterfly caress, so soft she barely felt him.

“You’ll never be a nuisance to me, no matter what. It pains me that they hurt you because of me. Because of what I am.”

“That was just their excuse to do what they wanted,” she replied.

He shrugged it off. “I gave them that excuse by having a different skin color.”

“Why did you run away from me, Ross?”

He took a long time to answer. Finally, he faced her. “I didn’t run from you. I ran away from my past. A long time ago, I failed to save someone. It cost me everything but my life. When I couldn’t save

you, I expected you to look at me with hate. I didn't want to remember you thinking of me that way."

Ross looked at her without any of his masks. She saw a hurt little boy, a vicious killer, a lover, and a proud husband, all at once. He was made of all those parts. He could no more deny the memories that shaped him than she could.

She also saw his silent pleading. This man would never beg. But he would give her everything, including his life, if she would take him.

"My ankle hurts," she said. "I need to lie down."

The heat from his eyes seared her. It sent unneeded messages to her breasts, pussy, and clit. Unneeded because they already swelled in anticipation of his touch.

He slipped his arms under her back and knees and gently lifted her. When he held her against his chest, she felt his heart pounding as hard as her own. He smelled of leather, sweetgrass, clove soap, and active man. Home.

He laid her on the bed and went into the main room, returning with two pillows from the chair. He lifted her sore foot, placed the pillows on the bed, and rested her foot on top. He waited, watching her. Needing her.

She watched him take off his boots. His straight, black hair hung loose, obscuring his face when he bent over to place them by the door. His chaps were next. He placed his hand on his belt and raised his eyes in question. She bit her lip. She could see his cock straining to escape. It looked very painful. She wouldn't want him to be in pain, did she?

She nodded. His chest expanded, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled. She watched his hands as they slowly undid his belt and released his buttons. One at a time. She stared until he reached in and released his cock. She sighed along with him. He shucked his pants. He almost dropped them on the floor. She smiled when he padded to the far wall and hung them up.

He settled beside her, not quite touching her shoulder and hip.

“Nevis said you weren’t planning to return to the MD. Why would you give up your home?”

She watched the shadows on the wall while Ross thought her comment over.

“I thought you’d leave if I didn’t. You and our baby need a home more than I do.” She inhaled a hiss when he rested his warm hand on her belly. “The Clan needs you, our son, and the baby. The MacDougals can survive without me.”

She frowned at him. “Our son *and* the baby?”

Ross lifted up to see her better. “Did you hear a scream a while back?”

“I heard screams and yells and everything else coming from the street.”

“At least one was from Daniel’s father. The boy was about to be run down during a drunken race through town. He knew I couldn’t reach Daniel in time. He saved the boy, tossing him to me for safety. The horses ran over him. Daniel’s our son now.” The smile Ross gave her lifted her heart. “He wants to call you Ma.”

“Oh!” Amelia blinked back tears. “That’s wonderful.” She winced. “It’s terrible for Mr. Thompson, but wonderful for us. Now, Daniel won’t have to hide.”

“Gillis will want to use the claymore on him. It’ll have to be a formal ceremony.”

“Perhaps Gillis can do it right after our wedding?”

Ross blinked. Gold flakes filled his hazel eyes. His slow, wicked smile made her toes curl and pussy throb.

“Wedding?”

She nodded. “This time, you’ll sign with your own name.”

He stared at the twin bumps of cotton pushed up by her nipples.

“Do I get another honeymoon?”

“Only if I do.”

His smile faded. “When I caught Daniel, I realized that I would

kill or die for you or our children. I suspect that means I love you.”

“About damn well time,” she said.

“I told you what would happen if you swore,” he said. He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger.

“So you did,” she replied. “But not until after our wedding.”

“When’s that? I find I’m not a very patient man.”

“As soon as I can run on this ankle. Doc says two weeks.”

He touched her nose with his fingertip. “To chase me or have me chase you?”

Such a simple touch, yet it set off explosions within her.

“You’ll have to wait to find out.”

“I can do that.”

He settled back beside her, curving his body toward her. His breathing slowed and deepened.

“Are you awake?”

She whispered the words. No reply came, just soft breathing.

She turned her head. Only in sleep did a hint of softness touch his face. She brushed a few strands of hair away from his mouth. His lips quirked up for a second before relaxing into deep sleep.

She looked at the ceiling and rolled her eyes. They were married, all right. She closed her eyes. She hadn’t slept well without him, either.

Chapter Forty-Five

Two weeks later

“Do ye accept the oath of fealty to Clan MacDougal?”

Gillis held the shining *claidheamh mór* high as he thundered the words. The rising full moon lit the Elliott yard like a scene from a nightmare. But the tears were mostly of joy, though sorrow and loss also sounded through their hearts.

“I do!”

Daniel’s young voice rose high, echoing the words his new father and mother had just given to each other. His friend Billy cheered along with the rest of the guests.

“Then kneel and become one with us!”

Daniel knelt in front of Gillis. Ross placed a MacDougal bonnet on his head, the only article of clothing that would fit him. Gillis, frowning fiercely enough to scare the bejesus out of any foe, approached.

Daniel gulped as he looked up with awe. The mighty sword descended slowly to his shoulder. A tap, then over his head to the other shoulder, and up again.

“*Buaidh no bas!*” roared Gillis.

“*Buaidh no bas!*” echoed Ross, Nevin, Amelia, and Daniel.

Ross held out his arm. Daniel clamped his own and gripped as he’d been taught. He stood and turned to the crowd.

“I give you Daniel Ernest Thompson MacDougal, my son!”

Cheers erupted. A bagpipe’s drone rose, soon followed by the howls of all the dogs in twenty miles. Daniel made the rounds,

shaking hands with his new Clan and their friends. Billy O'Keefe, wearing new clothes and a huge grin, stayed close.

"Can we slip away yet, wife?" Ross wrapped his arms around Amelia's belly. She wasn't showing yet but he knew his child rested within. He nibbled her ear. "You've been with the Elliotts for two weeks. It's been hell for all of us."

"I've had to listen to Beth enjoying all three of her men!" She moaned when he continued his nibbles down her throat.

"Nev is champing at the bit, but Gil is wild. He finally decides to join you in bed, and you move to Beth's for weeks!"

"I wanted our wedding night to be special." She flushed and bit her lip.

"We had the wedding. It's night. You're special. And I want you now."

"I want you, too," she whispered. "But don't we have to stay for a bit?"

"We can take care of things quickly and come back."

"Not if my dress is all rumpled!"

"Did you wear anything underneath?"

"No..."

"Good, because I'm wearing a kilt."

Ross towed Amelia backward and out of the circle of laughing guests. She giggled as he lifted her up and strode toward the trees. A raven followed, just out of Amelia's sight. Ross let her down in the first clearing.

"What do you have in mind, husband?"

He knelt behind her and slid his hands up her legs, raising her skirts as he went. "I'm going to make sure you haven't forgotten how useful a husband can be. Bend over."

He rested her skirts over her back and lifted his kilt. His eager cock pointed to her like a compass at the North Pole. He guided the tip into her hot, wet pussy.

"Oh, yes," he breathed. "That has got to be the hardest two weeks

of my adult life.”

“Show me how hard.” She backed up, wiggling to skewer herself.

“I’m in charge here, woman.” He grasped her hips and drove forward. Her soft flesh enveloped him. He sighed, holding her still for a moment. He was home.

“Oh! Oh, yes,” she moaned.

Knowing he couldn’t last, he dropped one hand to her pussy and found her clit. He rubbed the erect bud of flesh as she gasped for more. He pounded into her heat, his balls slapping against her pussy lips. She inhaled, clenching his cock in her hot, velvet glove as her orgasm hit. He exploded, thrusting again and again, setting off her second climax.

He leaned against her back until he finally managed to get his breath.

“Can we do that again?” She wiggled her ass against his groin, still connected.

“Here they are,” boomed a familiar male voice.

Amelia gasped and struggled to escape. When he let her go she straightened and shoved her dress over her hips. He stood as well, his kilt settling into place as Nevin strolled out from between the trees.

Nev tilted his head one way, then the next. “Yep,” he called over his shoulder. “They were still joined together, like a pair of dogs.”

Ross sighed in relief when Gillis appeared leading a horse. No bagpipes, thank God. The man had spent too many hours practicing during the last few weeks. Even another two minutes would be too much of a good thing. Amelia smoothed her dress, pretending indifference that they all knew was forced.

“Now ye got that over, ye’ll be coming with us.”

“And why is that?” She gazed at her left hand as if the answer didn’t matter one whit to her.

Nevin admired her rings, then kissed her trembling hand. “Because you’ve got two more men needing to celebrate the MacDougal wedding.” Before she could snatch her hand back he

lifted her into his arms. Gillis climbed into the saddle and held out his arms for her.

"But we've got guests to entertain!"

"That's Beth and Trace's job. They're the ones throwing the party," said Nevin. He passed her to Gillis then moved forward to take the reins.

"Ross!"

"The boys have been working hard on a wedding present for you, my love. The least you can do is go see what it is. If you want to come back after, I promise to bring you."

She pushed out her lip in a pout. "But we never go to parties. There's dancing and... and this one is for us!"

"Chances are Ben will bring a wife with him from the East. He knows they're as rare as hens' teeth out here. We'll make sure there's a party for them," said Ross. "Will that help?"

"No," she grumbled, but said no more as Nevin handed the reins to Gillis. He set off for home as Nev brought out two more horses.

"I think the surprise will make up for leaving the party early," said Ross. He led the way toward the MD. "Between the three of us, we should be able to make her scream."

"This'll be the first time with all four of us together."

"The first of many over the years, I hope." Ross clenched his left hand. His ring, crafted from gold found on their ranch, shone in the moonlight.

"If Amelia carries a son, the MD will be ours forever."

Ross nodded. He should be happy that most of his dreams would now come true. A wife to share with his brothers, a son to forge their future with more children, including Daniel, to fill their lives. But would he ever find the man with raven scars on his skull?

He shook off the thought. His future waited. He would focus on his family and let the past stay buried. For now.

"Ross," interrupted Nevin, "if we don't hurry up, Gil might undress Amelia, take her upstairs and show her our wedding present.

You okay with that?"

"Hell no!" He nudged his horse into a canter, guiding it down the trail between the ranches. Once the trees were gone and the path was safe he kicked his heels and went into a gallop. He leaned forward, the wind blowing his long hair back, and whooped a war cry. Nevin's voice rang out like an echo behind him as they raced home.

* * * *

Amelia stomped back and forth on the porch while Gillis, Nevin and Ross put their horses away. "They better have a darn good reason to take me from my wedding party," she muttered.

"Close your eyes," ordered Ross, coming up behind her.

"Ye'd better tie a hanky over them. I dinna trust her."

"Our sweet-tempered wife wouldn't peek, would she?" Nevin tapped his finger on his chin a few times, frowning theatrically. "You're right. I wouldn't trust her."

Ross handed him the white-on-white handkerchief she'd sewn while at Beth's. She closed her eyes and let them fuss over her. Beth warned her they might have something planned and to go along with it even if they acted worse than Daniel and Billy on a dare.

One man took each arm while the other followed close behind. If she opened her eyes a bit she could see her feet, but she let them guide her up the stairs as if she was blind. When she tried to remove the blindfold all three complained, so she waited.

Someone cleared this throat. A moment later, three pairs of hands attacked her buttons. They quickly stripped her down to her blindfold and stockings.

The rustle of clothing and thunk of six boots hitting the floor suggested all four of them would soon be naked. That was confirmed when she felt the nudging of three cocks at her hips and belly.

"We're going to take off the blindfold, but don't open your eyes," whispered Ross from her right side.

"Make sure you untie the knots so that all my embroidery doesn't get ruined. It took me days to finish."

"Is that all you did at the Elliotts while we broke our backs working?"

"They wouldn't let me put my foot down, so I had to do something useful. I helped with the mending and kept an eye on James. As thanks for having me underfoot, I made charcoal sketches. Trace said he'd have them framed as a present for Beth."

"You do any of us?"

"Not really." Amelia held back a smile at the caricatures she'd done of Gillis, Ross and Nevin. After Trace had them framed, she'd keep them until Christmas.

"Open your eyes on the count of three," said Nevin at her left. "One," the other two joined the chant, "two, three!"

She blinked a few times before realizing what she saw.

"You made us a bed!"

She hurried toward the window. They must have lashed together four beds, just like the Elliotts did for Beth. Each held a couple of thick mattresses. The striped ticking matched so it looked like one bed from wall to wall.

"You like it?"

"'tis bigger than the Elliott's—"

"—and we got feather mattresses over the straw ones, just like you wanted."

"Try it out, wife."

Amelia looked from one eager face to the other. Their cocks were equally eager, pointing the way forward. She sat down, smiling when she sank into soft feathers.

"What a wonderful surprise," she said.

They looked at each other, silent messages sent and received.

"You need a glass of cordial," said Ross. He strolled to the side table and poured ruby liquid into a wine glass.

"Aren't you having any?"

“You’re the one who needs it tonight.”

She stood up when he brought it over to her. Instead of handing the glass to her he dipped his finger into the cordial. He let a drop fall from his finger onto her left nipple, then right. Nevin and Gillis moved close and licked them off.

The hot, fast sex with Ross had tempted her appetite for more. The tongues swirling around her nipples, teeth nipping lightly, made her twitch. They gave her one last kiss and straightened up, grinning like wolves.

“Why do I need to drink this?”

“Beth says Rowena Jones’s blackcurrant cordial is famous for its strength. It will help you relax,” said Ross. “And that will make it easier for you to take all three of us.”

“Three?”

He nodded.

“At the same time?” Another nod. She looked from Nevin to Gillis.

“We drew lots to see who got what part of you,” said Nevin.

“And?” When he hesitated she motioned for him to continue.

“And we want you to remember this night for the rest of your life.”

“So that you want to do it again, and again.” Ross held the glass to her lips. She sipped, enjoying the rich flavor, then drank deep. How would it taste when licked off the cocks of her men?

Ross handed the glass to Gillis and pulled her into a hug. She wrapped her arms around his chest and inhaled his subtle mix of wood smoke, tobacco and sweetgrass. He smelled like home.

“Another wee glass,” ordered Gillis.

Already feeling a buzz, she sipped only half of it as the three men watched. “That’s enough for now. You don’t want me to fall asleep, do you?”

“Dinna insult us,” said Gillis with a scowl. “Ye canna sleep with three MacDougals lovin’ ye.”

“Are you sure about that? All of a sudden I feel tired. Perhaps I need a nap.” She yawned and stretched. Their eyes shot to her breasts, as always.

Ross grunted and swept her into his arms. He laid her on the middle of the soft bed. His eyes looked golden in the lamplight. He scanned her face as if memorizing every part of her.

She looked at Nevin, then Gillis, standing a few feet away. These were her men. It was their wedding night. She smiled and held out her arms to them.

“Close your eyes and let us love you,” whispered Ross.

The blackcurrant cordial made it hard to keep her eyes open and the new mattress stuffed with feathers made her feel like she floated on a cloud. She closed her eyes.

The bed shifted as men moved around and settled. Warm hands lifted her feet to their lips. They kissed their way up her legs, moving quickly until they reached the tops of her stockings.

At that point they bent her knees and pressed them wide. It opened her hot flesh to the cool evening air. She shivered when two sets of chapped lips brushed her inner thighs. She pressed her heels down, lifting her bottom to encourage them.

A moustache trailed across her breast. She gasped at the new sensation. Whether it was the cordial or something else, her skin felt a thousand times more responsive.

The men shifted. One kissed her belly gently and then settled between her legs. He licked between her pussy lips, long strokes up and back. Someone else nibbled her breast. She opened her mouth to a set of lips outlined in a moustache and beard. Gillis.

She couldn't concentrate with so many sensations flowing over her. When Gillis lifted his head to catch his breath, a finger pressed into her pussy, curling forward to hit the spot that made her squeal. Tongues licking and sucking, hands and fingers teasing and tickling, teeth nipping, and lips soothing. She moaned, writhing on the bed, overwhelmed by sensation.

She reached out, touching and stroking whoever, whatever, she could find. She discovered a thick cock and squeezed. A moan of encouragement had her searching for another, which was placed in her hand. She fondled them as they did her body, giving pleasure.

“She’s ready,” said a deep voice, husky with need.

They rolled her onto her hands and knees and then pressed her shoulders to the bed. When a hand caressed her pussy she spread her knees wide, hoping for a thick cock. Instead, a finger with cool cream pressed into her bottom.

She tilted her back, thrusting out her bottom to demand more. She heard a chuckle before a second finger joined the first, stretching her. The light sting of a third was offset by someone rubbing her clit. Her fingers found a cock near her face. She pulled it close until she could flick the salty tip with her tongue.

“I’m not ready to come yet,” said a shaky voice as the cock pulled back. “It wasn’t me banging you in the forest a few hours ago.”

“Nevin?”

“Yep. Keep that thought until a bit later, sweets.”

“On your back, Gil.”

She recognized Ross’s voice but lost where he was when the bed ropes creaked and she was lifted once more. Someone pulled her thighs wide before she was set down on a chest. By the tickle of fuzz on her thighs, she knew she straddled Gillis.

“You’re not going to be slow and gentle with me again, are you Gil?” She bounced as the man under her laughed.

“Nay. Ye’ll ride me with Ross in yer ass and Nev’s cock in yer mouth. I’ll not think ye’ll complain about gentle this eve.”

Big hands cupped her breasts from below, squeezing for a moment before encouraging her to lift up. When they let her down she groaned in enjoyment as a thick cock slid deep. She rotated her hips, making Gillis groan in return.

He grasped her thighs and lifted, moving her forward and back. His cock rasped against her clit. She bent forward, dragging her

sensitive nipples against his rough chest. Someone swatted her bottom cheek.

“Hey!” she said, shooting upright.

“You, my love, are overdue for a spanking.”

When the tiny pain he’d inflicted changed into a sharp arrow of desire she wiggled her ass, begging for more. A second swat, then a third made her clench Gil’s cock hard as the spansks heated her bottom.

“Enough. Lift up and bend forward,” said Ross from behind her.

When she did as told, Gil lifted her thighs until only the tip of his cock rested in her. Ross pressed more cool cream into her bottom. He set his cock against her anus. She let herself relax as he’d taught her. The cordial made it far easier to do so even with the head of Gil’s cock stretching her pussy.

Both she and Ross grunted as he forced his way in the first inch. He stopped for a moment as she adjusted to the strain. He added a second inch before pulling back a bit. He pulsed, rubbing his cock back and forth past her rim.

She trembled at the sensation, both hot and wild. She could almost come from the sensation alone. With a bit of help... She slid her hand down Gil’s belly to her clit.

“Nay, lass, none of that.” Gil caught her fingers. He brought them to his mouth and suckled the longest one, pulsing it over his tongue as if to show her how he wanted her to treat his cock.

Nevin turned her face and nibbled her lips. She opened her mouth to deepen his kiss. She inhaled a gasp when Ross pressed deeper into her ass. Someone found her breast and rasped her nipple, distracting her. When her nipple popped free, Ross was so deep his balls touched her pussy.

Ross pulled back, panting hard, as Gillis lowered her onto his cock. She sank down, letting him fill her completely. She’d barely relaxed when he lifted her and Ross pressed into her ass again.

She didn’t know which part of her she most wanted fill with a

thick, hard, demanding cock.

They worked in tandem, ass and pussy, stretching her and easing their way. They started slowly, but she was impatient, wanting more sensation as tension coiled in her belly.

Nevin joined the action, giving her mouth his cock whenever Ross pulled back and Gil went deep. As Gil and Ross controlled her movements her hands were free. She used one to hold Nevin's cock and the other to rub her clit. Nevin's free hand went to her breast, kneading, then pinching, as her movements became more frantic.

Rough breathing filled the air as her coil of tension and need increased. Ross and Gil sped up, grunting with each thrust.

"More," she demanded as Ross pulled back and Gillis thrust forward. "I want everything!"

This time Gil only lifted her halfway, keeping his cock in her pussy as Ross surged into her ass.

"Yes!" She screamed the words, her body so full that the thin membrane between her pussy and ass was the only thing keeping their cocks from touching inside her.

She sucked Nevin deep into her mouth, the tip of his cock almost touching the back of her throat. He shouted and pulled back just enough for her to breathe as his seed filled her mouth. She swallowed, greedy for whatever she could take from him. He pulled out and kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers before letting them both gasp for air.

Gillis pulled her down to sheath his entire cock. He held her there as Ross thrust into her ass. He rammed forward and back so hard his balls slapped against her clit.

Someone pinched her nipple and she exploded, screaming. Her orgasm clenched down on Ross and set him off. He erupted deep into her, again and again until he shrank and pulled back.

Gillis, now free to move, grasped her hips. She put her hands on his chest and leaned forward. He dragged her forward and back, his cock rubbing her clit.

He'd been gentle before, but not tonight. He took what he wanted, giving her the wild excitement she needed. His shout of completion was echoed by her scream as another orgasm ripped through her.

Still quivering with aftershocks, she finally leaned on his heaving chest, gasping for breath herself.

Ross leaned over her back and snuck his arms between her chest and Gillis, holding her tight. Nevin rested his hand on her head in a gentle caress.

Fully satisfied and sandwiched between her men, Amelia closed her eyes and sighed.

* * * *

Ross smiled to himself as a set of full breasts snuggled against his lower back. Nev had claimed Amelia first, hugging her back to his chest. Gillis lay at their feet, absently running his hand up and down her calf. Ross wasn't going to complain. They had the rest of their lives to figure out the best way for three large men to hold one tiny woman.

"I said you'd remember this night," said Nevin.

"When can we do that again?"

Ross snorted a laugh, thinking she joked.

"Isn't anyone going to answer me?"

He lifted himself up on one elbow. Both his brothers stared at Amelia. The same surprised expression must be on his face.

"Next time I'm not having any of that cordial," she said, frowning. "It makes my head buzz."

"You're not too sore?" Ross pressed his hand against his belly to stop Amelia tickling him.

"You're right," she said. She gave a deep, dramatic sigh. "I think I need a long, hot soak in the tub, sweet oil rubbed into my whole body and an hour of three men devoting themselves to my pleasure. Then I'll be ready."

“What three men are going to do that for you?” Gillis scratched his beard as he waited for her answer.

“The ones I love. If, that is, they love me, too.” She looked at Ross, then Nevin and finally, Gillis. “Do you love me?”

Ross smiled down at her. “Only for the next sixty years, my love,” he said. His brothers nodded agreement.

“Good answer, husband dear. Maybe I only need a bath followed by half an hour of pleasure from my MacDougal men.”

Ross raised an eyebrow at his brothers.

“I’ll get ye the tub,” said Gil. He stood up and headed for the stairs.

“I’ll heat the water.” Nevin kissed the top of Amelia’s head and rose to his feet.

That left Ross alone in bed with his wife. He pressed her onto her back beside him. “I’ll start pleasuring my wife.”

Nevin and Gil immediately complained. Ross lifted Amelia’s left hand in his, flashing the gold they shared.

“Since I wear the ring, I get the lady. Let me know when her bath is ready.”

They lay there together, listening to Nevin and Gil’s grumbles from the kitchen. Ross swept his palm over her soft skin, The path went from her neck to her thighs, concentrating on the twin mounds that he found so fascinating. They firmed up, nipples rising, as he watched.

“It was a surprise to discover I’d married the MacDougal Devil, rather than sweet, loving Nevin,” said Amelia.

“Sweet?” Ross snorted.

“Prue thought Nevin was a nice man compared to you.”

“You’re smarter than your sister. Sexier too.” He squeezed her breast in proof. She grabbed his hand and held it still. He was strong enough that she couldn’t stop him moving even if she used both her hands. Both of them knew it, and that he would never hurt her.

“Hush, I’m trying to say something important.”

"I'm listening."

"The second, bigger surprise was that you want me to do this," she waved her hand at the immense bed, "with your brothers."

"As often as we can, love." He squeezed her breast again. She glared. He gave up the play, motioning for her to continue.

"The biggest, and best, surprise was discovering love." She smiled up at him. "I love you, Ross MacDougal. I also love Nev and Gillis, but you're my husband, and first in my heart. Always."

She didn't wait for an answer but snuggled against him and relaxed. He rested his arm over her, holding her close to his heart.

Love wasn't something he learned about as a child. He found it with his mother's people, but they sent him away. His father believed in total obedience to the Clan Chief and nothing else.

He saw love at the Elliotts during the three short years he spent with them. When Trace's father let himself die rather than face life without his wife, Ross realized the cost of love.

He felt that burden when he thought Amelia was hurt because of him. The pain in his heart when he thought she no longer wanted him made him crazy.

Love was like a double-edged knife. It could cut deep to kill, or to remove a bullet and save a life. Since Amelia arrived, he'd felt both sides of that knife.

The price of love was worth the pain.

Ross brushed Amelia's hair back from her damaged ear. She looked up at him, eyes shining. Neither of them was perfect, but they were right for each other.

Heavy feet stomped up the stairs. He brushed a gentle kiss against her lips. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close in an urgent demand for more. The bed dipped as his brothers joined them. Amelia laughed and opened her arms to them all.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Most of the time I live a regular life with my husband and two sons. My day job and other responsibilities fill the few hours when I'm not writing, researching, or thinking about writing.

I love reading about wonderful people struggling with life as they reluctantly fall in love. I also enjoy learning how the characters live their lives, especially when the setting is in a different time or place.

As I had little hands-on knowledge of cowboys or ranching, I needed to see, touch, taste, smell and hear what my characters might experience. Therefore, I spent a week learning to ride, rope and push cattle, followed by ten days researching through south-west Montana.

I fell in love with Montana's open blue skies, fresh mountain air and friendly people as I soaked up everything my senses could take in. I observed quiet meadows and rousing rodeos, the shine of gold flakes, and snug jeans on a real cowboy as he sauntered past.

Now, when I look at the words appearing on my computer screen I can see rough boards catching the hem of my heroine's dress. I hear the cry of a golden eagle as she hunts in the early morning. I smell the chicken coop and horse barn, and the gambler's stained black coat which hasn't been washed since he purchased it years before. And I hear the splat as the same gambler directs an ugly brown stream to the spittoon—and misses. Again.

I hope you enjoy your time in Tanner's Ford as much as I enjoy creating it.

Also by Reece Butler

Ménage Amour: *Cowboy Sandwich*

Ménage Amour: Sequel to Cowboy Sandwich: *Cowboy Double-Decker*

Ménage Everlasting: Bride Train 1: *Barefoot Bride for Three*

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