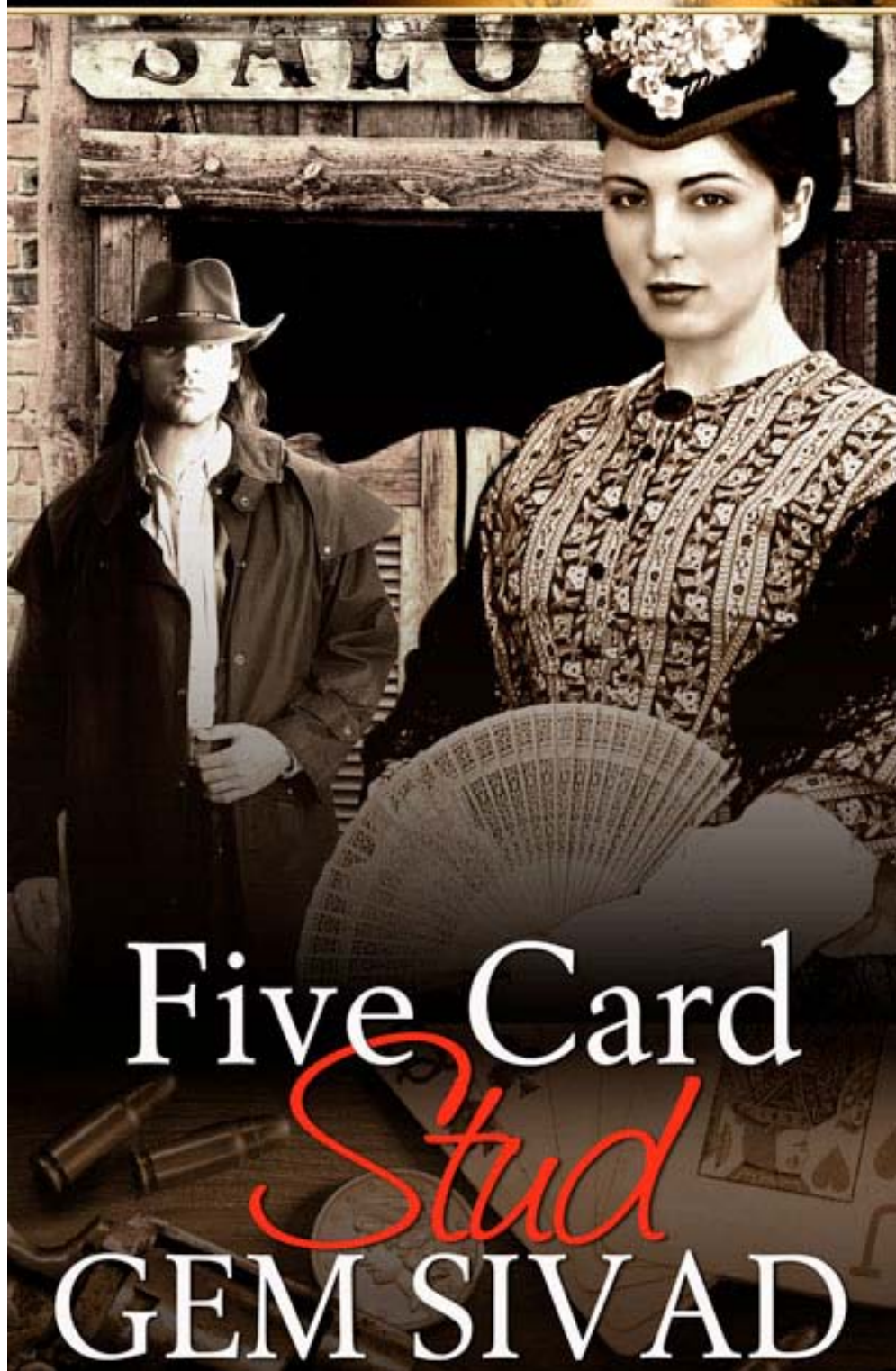


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



## **Five Card Stud**

Gem Sivad

When bounty hunter Sam McCallister sees Eden Pace playing poker for the first time, he loses all interest in the cards; instead, the thought of playing stud with the lady gambler stirs his cock to life. Eden's the prettiest woman and the best card sharp Sam's ever met. Good thing he has a few cards up his sleeve.

Eden's doing her own outlaw hunting. She's on the trail of her husband's killer and Sam's in her way. To get free of this hardheaded, softhearted, gorgeous man, Eden tries strip poker and naked truth-or-dare, but when Sam ups the stakes, carnal submission and desire are unleashed.

When Sam discovers Eden's wanted for murder, he figures his bed is the safest place for her. But taking Eden prisoner isn't as easy as Sam expects. He's in a high-stakes poker game with lust on the table and his heart on the line, because one taste of Eden just isn't enough.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Five Card Stud

ISBN 9781419929809

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Edited by Jillian Bell

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication December 2010

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# ***FIVE CARD STUD***

**Gem Sivad**

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## Chapter One

1883 Texas

Sam McCallister was chugging a mug of beer when he saw the lady gambler for the first time. He forgot to swallow and frothy liquid ran down his front like drool. The woman was in the process of separating every man in the poker game from his week's pay. Sam wasn't interested in poker, but the thought of playing stud with the pretty lady stirred his cock to life.

He spent a good part of the night eyeing the dark-haired beauty. It was more than her being a fine-looking woman that got his attention. Sam was accustomed to seeing barroom light-skirts who didn't want the hard life of one man and a pack of young'uns. Usually they traded that for a line of men and, if they were lucky, only one bastard kid or two. Sam laid that down at stupid's door. Aside from his two female relatives, most of the women Sam knew didn't appear to be quite bright.

It didn't take long to learn the lady gambler's name. He'd heard about Eden Pace from time to time, but never seen her before. Sam smiled lazily to himself as he watched her shake the money out of the poor suckers at the table. He had a feeling he was going to have to up his bright female count to three. The beast inside him, ever scenting prey, raised its head and whispered softly, *interesting...*

Eden had Sam's attention, and he liked what he saw. She focused on the card game and the men she challenged. As she chatted softly, long fingers flashed a green fire ring that distracted her opponents. It seemed to Sam she was playing smart, studying each man's face, no doubt listening to his tone of voice, and watching every shift in seat position as well as amount of alcohol consumed. As Sam would have done, Eden found each weakness and stripped each man of his cash.

He lingered all night watching a master at work. The woman aroused his lust and challenged him at the same time. From the shadows he studied her, startled when he recognized his own kind. *One predator lookin' at another, for sure.*

After the game ended and the show was over, Sam did as usual and hired a whore. But this time, the face of the lady gambler replaced that of the real woman under him, and it was Eden Pace he enjoyed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was three weeks later when Sam saw Eden Pace again. She'd been on his mind some. More than he was comfortable with if he admitted to such things. He was with Deacon and Charlie Wolf, collecting the bounty on twelve wanteds they'd herded to

Abilene. The sheriff, Ed Johnson, was scared of keeping the men in his jail and crying for help while he counted out the reward money.

"I'm telling you, one of those men you brought in is Alistair Pettigrew. His brother's still loose and part of the Ansell Black gang. He'll get him out. Damn it, McCallisters, you can't leave this town unprotected with Ansell Black sure to swoop down on us."

"They're not unprotected," Sam assured him wryly. "Hell, Ed. The town of Abilene has you. It's an election year isn't it? Think of the votes you'll pull down for protecting the citizens from the badasses."

Sam flashed his teeth in a predator's smile as Deacon gathered the paper on the new wanteds. As usual, his brother kept his opinions to himself, but Sam had no such inclination. His cold smile dared Ed Johnson to ask for their help. Sam enjoyed watching Ed fidget with the knowledge of his own cowardice.

"Well, if you won't take these prisoners on to Wichita Falls, at least ride shotgun for Conner Spokes. I'm supposed to send one of my deputies along, but I've got Abilene business to attend to now, and no man to ride up-top the stage."

"Sometimes the measure of your stupidity amazes me," Deacon said.

Sam grinned and settled in to enjoy Ed's lesson. Deacon saved his educated words for pronouncing truths. Sam got a kick out of listening to him wither Johnson with precise contempt. "A deputy sitting beside Conner Spokes is a declaration of valuable content."

Since everyone in the room knew that Ed Johnson had never protected a stage coach passenger in the past, no one could refute Deacon's shrewd observation. The sheriff stuttered hopefully, "You could ride inside."

"That's a coffin on wheels," Deacon snorted. "If you're carrying payroll and Ansell Black knows it, then he already has an inside man." Sam walked to the window where he stared across the street at the stagecoach loading its passengers.

He listened to the conversation behind him, but his gaze remained fixed on the stage depot, riveted by the sight of the lady gambler entering the building. A hotel lackey handed Spokes her trunk and after the coach driver loaded her baggage, Sam spoke. "I'll ride inside shotgun. It'll be hotter than a chili pepper in there. I've a notion to get warm."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden Pace shared the stagecoach with six others—four men and a young mother with her small son. The passengers were crammed together, making the coach a heated box on wheels. Perspiration trickled between her breasts and dampened her chemise.

Eden grimaced, attempting to lean with every jarring motion of the coach, rather than fight it. Her hip hugged against her seat companion's thigh intimately, but it couldn't be helped. She relaxed into the swaying motion and closed her eyes. It was a

mistake. Her mind flooded with images from a night seven months before. *"Don't answer the door, Daniel." Bam, bam, bam. The knock sounded again, this time a hammered fist.*

Eden opened her eyes and shivered in spite of the temperature in the coach. She blinked away the memory, concentrating on the muscled thigh next to her. She was wedged between the big man on her left and the woman who sprawled over more seat area than was her share. The boy climbed up and down, crawling across the feet of the passengers.

"Get away from me, kid, or you'll be wearing this boot." The boot in question was of high quality, attesting to the affluence of the rancher who sat in the far corner threatening to kick the toddler.

Eden pulled the boy away from the other bench, herding him toward his mother, who grabbed her son's arm and jerked him onto her lap. When his chubby leg touched her hip, Eden resisted the urge to cuddle him in her arms.

Instead, she scooted closer to the man on her left. Eden could feel the burn of his skin through both sets of clothing. The flush of heat that seared her flesh had nothing to do with the sun outside or temperature inside the stagecoach.

It was silly. She sat next to a stranger she would never see again and her body was suddenly attuned to his. She blamed the bed-thumping action she'd concentrated on the night before to fill the sleepless hours. Her mouth curved in a smile, remembering how she'd been aroused listening to the people in the hotel room next to hers couple with abandon.

A groan threatened to escape her throat. Startled, Eden straightened and attempted to edge unobtrusively away from the thigh, but there was no place to move on the bench. Her shift away from the child had given the mother more room to claim.

Crowded against the man, Eden's body lurched against him every time the coach hit a rut. In between the jolts, his thigh rode her hip relentlessly. Her breasts ached and her nipples pebbled as desire stirred. *I need to take a lover.* She rejected that idea as soon as it emerged in her mind, but her body said otherwise.

At one point, the motion of the stagecoach and its inevitable rocking course threw her against him again. In a totally unseemly fashion, he leaned across Eden and brushed against her breasts. When his scent combined with the titillation of body against body, her womb clenched and sensual longing rushed through her. She gasped, "Excuse me," and flattened herself against the back of the seat, away from the big man's arm.

That brought a growled explanation. "Kid's about ready to take a dive off the bench."

Reaching quickly for the boy, whose mother snored softly in her sleep, Eden's hand brushed against her male seat companion. She stared at his hand, mesmerized. His big knuckles were cut and scarred. He touched her with long, calloused fingers as they both lifted the boy from his precarious perch on the edge of the seat and set him on his mother's lap.



The woman struggled awake and grabbed her son, cuddling him close. "Sorry," she whispered to them. The boy snuggled against his mother, sighed and slept. Eden's throat tightened as she watched the innocent face of the baby in repose.

Eden kept her gaze from her seatmate, but relaxed and let their bodies fuse together. Her body tingled from the brush of his arm across her chest. Her nipples itched under the silk of her chemise but there was no way to get relief. The motion of the stage became erotic torture.

She peeked through lowered lashes—the three men who sat across from them were engrossed in a card game. Her seat companion's buckskin-clad legs stretched as his big feet jammed against the other bench and still his legs were so long he was forced to bend his knees.

Her eyelids remained closed and she focused on the flavor of the man next to her. Discreetly, Eden inhaled—tobacco, sage, gun oil and sweat—his aroma was pungent, male and delicious. Her nipples brushed against soft cloth as she savored his touch, scent and gruff tones. Desire curled in her belly and her mind toyed with images of bedroom play. Eden's body responded to the titillation and her womb clenched hungrily. *He would fill me.* She hid her response with iron control but her mind whispered temptation. *What can it hurt...a moment of pleasure?*

When Eden had climbed on board, Sam had been thankful for her thin frame. He was a big man and took up more space on the seat than most. The woman with her kid wasn't giving up an inch, so he'd made a space for Eden by half-turning on the seat. As soon as her bottom nestled next to his thigh, his cock started throbbing. She was a slender armful of woman, but it was a softly rounded hip that rode his leg.

The already rocking coach hit an even rougher patch of ground and the passengers were knocked to and fro on their seats. Sam braced his legs on the other bench and slid his arm behind Eden, holding her firmly in place. Another lurching movement of the coach gave him an excuse to pull her slightly onto his lap and he turned on the seat so that the ridge of his arousal pressed against her hip. He felt awareness ripple through her and her fingers curled the slightest bit.

Everything about her demeanor was composed, belying the tension he felt pulsing through her frame. Her eyes remained closed, her body swaying with the jolting motion that thrust her against him.

Since he was in the middle of a job, it was a hell of a time to go into rut. But his hard-on wasn't listening. The poker players on the other bench scrambled to recover cards and money scattered during a particularly rough jounce. Sam's gaze slid across each man, judging which one worked for Ansell Black. The middle seat was occupied by a gambler handling the cards. On his left, a well-dressed rancher lost his money hand after hand, and on the gambler's right, a pious-looking preacher discarded his morals to enjoy the game.

It was the damndest thing. As Sam studied them, he could feel every one of Eden's nerve endings straining for release at the same time she kept her expression cool and aloof. Her desire called to him, as though she hovered between agony and ecstasy.

Lust hit him hard. His gaze traveled to the mother and child sleeping by the window and moved on to the lady gambler. Up close, he could see that freckles scattered across a straight nose. Nothing but the slightest pink blush on her cheeks hinted at her aroused state. Sam waited for the sooty lashes to open so he could claim her eyes and see the passion there, but they remained closed.

The wheel of the coach hit a rock, tottered dangerously and cards went flying again. He doubted that Eden was even aware of the bump. Sam used the motion of the coach as an excuse to shift position. He left his arm in place behind her shoulders, fingers dangling close to her nape, and leaned around her, grasping the bench on her other side with his left hand, effectively making a protective cocoon shielding her from the rough passage. Tension built between them but she gave no outward indication he was doing anything more than cushioning the jolting motion. Sam stifled a groan imagining Eden riding him, her internal muscles tightening around his shaft.

The boy started to slide off his mother's lap and Sam used his left hand to steady the kid, at the same time brushing the fingers of his right hand lightly across the back of Eden's neck. Her breath stalled but she didn't jerk away. Instead, when he returned his hand to the bench, she covered it with hers, as though securing her position.

At the same time, he could feel her body straining to grasp relief. *Almost...* She arched her back slightly—he felt the movement against his chest. When the coach rocked sideways he ran a finger up and down the crease behind her ear. He felt her flinch then tremble as he caressed the shell and captured her earlobe between finger and thumb. One hard pinch was all it took. *Ahhh...* She did no more than tighten her lips, but he felt her pleasure as it rippled through her.

Eyes still closed, Eden rubbed her thumb against his scarred knuckles, her only acknowledgement of what had just happened.

*Not nearly enough...* When she moved to return her hand to her lap, Sam grasped her palm as the riot of hunger in his belly demanded another taste. With the fingers of his right hand, he traced a lazy trail across the back of her neck. He'd like to believe she was recovering her senses, but didn't think she'd ever lost control. That intrigued him.

Abruptly, Eden pulled her hand free and sat forward, ending the connection between them by flicking dust from her dress. Sam knew it was an excuse to break contact and regretted the loss as she edged away from him. He straightened on the seat, watching her slide to and fro on the bench as she attempted to refrain from touching him again. He used his hat to cover his hard length and studied the rest of the passengers.

Eden remained upright on the edge of the seat. It was an awkward situation since she had no intention of dallying further with her seatmate. She was startled out of her

embarrassment when her illicit lover leaned forward and muttered in her ear, "Best wake the kid's mama. We're in for a spate of trouble."

His warning was unnecessary. The increase of speed and sound of gunshots fired outside the stage woke the young mother who jerked in panic. "What's happening?" she screeched and then answered herself. "It's a hold-up, ain't it? We're gonna be killed." In spite of her words, she looked more excited than frightened.

"I certainly don't intend to be killed," Eden murmured, paying attention to the men in the coach rather than the shrieking woman. The gambler drew a pistol from an ankle holster and stared out the window with grim purpose.

The reverend clutched his Bible heart-high, as though the book might save him from a bullet. The stagecoach driver must have slapped the team of six into a dead run, rocking the stage from side-to-side as the horses tried to elude the outlaws.

"The baby..." Eden reached for the little boy who flew sideways. His mother grabbed him at the same time.

"The kid'll be fine." The growled words of her seat companion held authority and Eden believed him. "Do as I say." His command was accompanied by a hand on her head pushing her toward the floor. "Get down and stay down." He knocked her hat off and she ducked to retrieve it as the stage creaked to a halt.

The rancher sat, weapon drawn and aimed out the window. He muttered, "Oh, for God's sakes," when Eden slid to the floor in a fake swoon. She deliberately pinned the feet of the three men, leaving the buckskin-clad legs behind her free of encumbrance.

"Everybody out of the stage." The shouted order didn't come from the driver. A hot breeze fanned her cheeks and Eden peeked from beneath her lashes when the stage door opened, allowing a glimpse of the outlaws outside.

"Throw out your weapons and climb down." A man stood on the ground and ordered the passengers off the stage roughly. "Get your hands up and keep 'em up."

Eden remained in her pretend faint as the preacher delivered an unnecessary jab with his foot while climbing over her. After that, she was largely ignored. She lay still and when the wind blew the door closed, nobody moved to check on her or reopen it. She waited. Her derringer remained safely hidden, tucked beneath her ruffled sleeve in a wrist holster strapped to her left arm.

"Lookee, lookee, lookee." One of the men bawled the words loud enough for all to hear. She assumed he was inspecting some treasure he planned to steal. His next words changed her mind. "If'n it ain't Snake McCallister, as I live and breathe."

The sound of a scuffle and a blow landing was followed by a round of ammunition being chambered into a rifle.

"Careful, Granger," someone warned. Eden wanted to sit up and view the drama unfolding. Instead she used their distraction and eased backward, fumbling to release the door on the off side of the coach. With a wiggle and twist she lowered herself to the ground, closed the door and crawled under the stage.

All she could see of her seatmate was his deerskin boots. Eden edged behind the coach wheel to remain unseen but get a better view. She sighed, cautiously hopeful. The man, apparently "Snake" McCallister, was still standing in spite of the fists beating him without mercy.

The other male passengers were being ignored. The reverend stood with head bowed over his book and the gambler stood with hands up. The rancher in the expensive boots stood apart, separating himself from the violence.

One of the outlaws sidled his horse close to the young mother, who bounced the baby on her hip. She brushed the hair out of her face and grinned up at him. "I thought you'd never get here."

The man leaned down and gave her a big kiss, then scooped her up so that she and the baby sat behind his saddle. Appalled, Eden stared at the man. She knew him. Alexander Pettigrew. She knew him too well...

The confiscated weapons still lay in the dust where they'd landed. Eden looked hopefully at Snake McCallister. He barely moved when each blow landed.

A Colt .45 was almost within her reach. All she needed was a stick to pull it close. Frantically, Eden raised her skirt and tugged at the loose corset underneath, forcing one of the metal rods from the slotted material. *Thank God I left the lacings loose for comfortable traveling.*

One of the other outlaws yelled, "Granger, there's time for that later. We all want a piece of McCallister." The men divided their attention between the driver and the man called Snake. Eden squinted up at the four criminals who were still mounted.

"Throw me the strongbox if you want to live." The harsh order came from Alexander Pettigrew. The woman and child clung to his back. The metal box landed with a thud with no disagreement from the driver. "Now pitch the real box down. You know the one. It's got the railroaders' pay in it."

This time the driver did protest, even as a second metal box skidded to earth. "How the hell did you know about that?"

It landed near her, close to the feet of the McCallister man.

"Bring it over here, Snake." The words taunted Snake McCallister, who stood with his arms raised.

He bent as if to comply, but before Eden or anyone else anticipated the move, he pulled a knife from a hidden neck sheath and let it fly. At the same time he dived headfirst for Granger.

Her fellow travelers remained still, watching the man's bid for freedom and probably life. None moved to help.

She steadied the derringer in her hand and aimed for the biggest target in sight, an outlaw aiming a rifle at the men fighting on the ground. She pulled the trigger. The report sounded before the bullet arrived. Eden watched it fly slowly through the air.

She'd hoped to hit the rifleman's chest, but he grabbed his thigh, dropping his weapon. Eden decided it was time to retreat.

Her derringer held two shots and was accurate only at close range. She was surprised that she'd hit the man at all. She had hoped only for a distraction that might even the odds for the man in buckskin.

One of the outlaws circled his horse, looking for more hidden shooters instead of tackling Snake McCallister. Her skirts bunched around her waist as Eden shimmied backward. A second outlaw spurred his horse toward the coach. He skidded to a sharp stop and jerked on his reins as his horse sidled close to the swinging door.

"It's just a woman, Leon," the outlaw's woman called. "She ain't much to worry about."

The man holding his leg snarled, "Shut up, Lena. She got me good."

Eden's exposed drawers caught on the rough wood and a splinter snagged the material. She felt them rip when she rolled in the dirt to avoid the spray of bullets aimed under the edge of the coach. The outlaw yelled, "Come out of there, you bitch. Don't make me come in after you."

He couldn't tell at which end Eden hid unless he dismounted, which he seemed unwilling to do. She knew where he was, so when he went the other way, Eden hooked her corset stay over the edge of the gun and raked the Colt .45 through the dust to where she lay. She traded her derringer for the more accurate handgun.

One of the outlaws nudged his horse close to the two men writhing on the ground and took aim. So did Eden. Her gun sounded, the bullet knocking the gunman from his horse, but not before he got off his shot. As he fell, the fight on the ground ended too. Eden felt a sob catch in her throat. *Not again. Please, not again.* She had so wanted the big man to survive. She had no time to regret his death, though. The man beside the stagecoach called for help.

"Goddammit, help me get this bitch out from under the stagecoach." Eden steadied the gun, regretting that she alone was left to rescue the other passengers. The outlaws now numbered three. Then as she watched, the number was reduced to two. The big man in buckskins rolled out from under Granger, who had caught the bullet instead of him. *Thank you, God.*

Snake McCallister used the dead outlaw's gun and shot the man firing at Eden. She turned her gun toward Alexander Pettigrew. As though sensing her aim, the gang leader pulled the baby boy in front of him for protection. Eden lowered her gun, accepting temporary defeat. Pettigrew backed his horse away from the clearing, using the boy as a shield until he was safely out of range. Then he turned, spurred his horse into a run and sped away. Just like that, chaos ended.

"Hot damn, Snake. You did it." It was the driver, clambering down from his perch to haul the strongboxes back up top. "What I want to know," he panted under the weight of the second one, "is how the bastards knew about the decoy."

Eden slumped in the dust, forgotten under the stagecoach. The fire of excitement in her belly extinguished as tremors of shock took control. Hysterical sobs bubbled up from her throat. This time when she laid her head down, it wasn't a pretend swoon. The thought flitted through her mind as she reached for oblivion, *I saved him. Today I wasn't too late.*

Sam crouched by the coach wheel, glad he was the one retrieving the lady gambler, whose skirts were hiked up to her hips. He sucked in wind, suddenly scared she'd caught a bullet.

But when he crawled underneath the stage to inspect her closer, aside from ripped drawers and some hard breathing, he couldn't find much wrong. He pulled the scrap of peach-colored cloth loose from a wood splinter on the bottom of the coach carriage, tucking the material in his shirt pocket. He couldn't stop grinning at his unexpected savior. He hadn't planned it quite that way. In fact, bravado aside, for a minute or two, things had been mighty grim.

She'd done good playing possum in the stagecoach, although her swoon had been the weakest excuse for genuine he'd ever seen. *This one now is the real deal.* A rare chuckle rumbled in his chest.

"She okay, Snake? Tell me she ain't dead. They're gonna cut my pay if I deliver a passenger dead." Spokes craned his neck sideways to peer underneath. Sam blocked his view and hastily pulled her skirts down. He lifted her with ease to the inside of the coach. The other passengers stood shamefaced outside as he laid her full-out on the bench. He grabbed his bedroll from the tack he'd stashed with Spokes and covered her with it. In spite of the heat of the day, her skin was clammy and she shivered as if from cold.

The three male passengers started to climb in the coach, but he put a stop to that fast. Instead, he tied their hands and feet with stiff knots and put them on top with the driver. He didn't know if one of them was the outlaws' inside man. That he'd sort out later. For now, he aimed to make it a hell of a lot safer for Eden while she slept.

The fancy-dressed rancher argued, "I'm a law-abiding citizen. You have no right. I know the governor."

"Good for you." Sam snorted and tightened the knots. "Don't give the driver any trouble. That woman is the only reason you no-accounts are alive."

Sam turned away in disgust and told Conner, "I'll take an outlaw's horse and haul these boys in." He loaded the bodies of the three dead men on a loose horse, ready to head toward Abilene. "There's paper on all of 'em. Can't see you to Wichita Falls," he explained. As he spoke, Sam knotted a rag around the wounded man's thigh and tied him to his saddle. "It's too far away. That one," Sam nodded at the wounded prisoner, "won't make it."

He hesitated and then pulled a roll of bills from his inside pocket. "Give the lady this, and tell her I said 'much obliged'. Tell her I'll cash in the wanteds and catch her later to deliver the rest of what I owe her."

Conner Spokes shoved the bills in his shirt and asked, "Wanna write her a note?"

When Sam growled, "Hell no," the driver nodded and agreed to deliver Sam's message and money.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden woke to find herself smothered under a blanket. She sat up abruptly, taking in the coach she occupied alone. The horses were being driven at a sedate pace.

When she craned her head outside, the driver tipped his hat and called down to her, "Got the inside to yerself the rest of the way, compliments of Snake McCallister."

*Well.* Eden wasn't quite sure what to think. *Snake McCallister.* His name brought a throb of awareness pulsing through her. His smell was on the blanket and Eden buried her nose in its folds, breathing his scent. In spite of the horrendous events of the day, it was the memory of the pleasure he'd given her that kept her thoughts occupied.

When they stopped to change the team of horses, Eden thanked the driver for his gallant efforts to save them from the outlaws. "My name is Eden Pace. I want you to know how much I appreciate your bravery."

A blush of embarrassment crept up the man's throat and he grunted, "Name's Conner Spokes, Miz Pace. Reckon the stage company will be glad yer not squawkin'." He sidled closer to her and handed her a stack of bills. "Snake said he'd catch ya later to deliver the rest of what he owes ya."

Eden frowned at the money but didn't take it. "It's Mrs. Pace," she corrected the driver.

He nodded and finished his message. "Snake said 'much obliged' for savin' his life, ma'am," he clarified. "He'll collect the bounty on the robbers and give you the rest of your share later."

"Oh." Her relief was a sigh. The money was needed, and it was an unexpected bonus to an interesting trip. "Snake McCallister is a lawman?" Eden had witnessed the self-assured audacity of the stranger. His occupation seemed to fit him.

"No ma'am. Snake's a bounty hunter, as rough as they come."

When he walked away, Eden looked at the money in her hands and went inside the lean-to that doubled as the stage office. *Snake said he'd catch you later...* She didn't intend to renew her acquaintance with Mr. McCallister. The memory of their encounter would have to be enough. "Is there another coach arriving soon with a different destination?"

The company clerk pointed at the stage schedule tacked to the wall. "Mail coach will pass through this evening." Eden smiled in relief, bought the ticket to Piney Creek and then asked for a place to freshen up. *Some temptations are best avoided.*

The facilities were limited, but Eden managed to change her dress and undergarments, replacing the damaged corset and torn drawers.

When the driver readied to leave, she sent a last message to the bounty hunter. "Mr. Spokes, please explain to Mr. McCallister that I'm not traveling in his direction. Thank him for the money and convey to him my belief that we're even." Eden couldn't resist the final tease. "Tell him I'm quite satisfied with our transaction."

The trip on the mail coach was swift and uneventful. Eden was in Piney Creek by nightfall. Thanks to the reward money, she engaged a room in the best hotel and took the rest with her to the most respectable looking saloon. She doubled her grubstake, giving her another reason to smile about her traveling companion on the stage to Wichita Falls. Memory of the illicit pleasure she'd experienced banished her usual somber thoughts, and each time she touched her earlobe, heat coiled in her body. Eden shook her head in wonder at her startling response to Snake McCallister.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam hurried the wounded outlaw to the Abilene doctor before his prisoner bled out. Once the man was patched up and fit for hanging, Sam took him to Sheriff Johnson's already full jail. "The dead ones are tied on a packhorse out front. Credit the bounty to the McCallister account. I'll be back later to collect."

Business finished, he turned Horse toward Wichita Falls and his thoughts to the woman who'd evened the odds. He'd been expecting trouble on the stage run since every big payroll coming and going all season had been hit by outlaws. Riding shotgun in a hot stagecoach wasn't his line of work, but the last-minute addition of Eden had been a wild card he couldn't resist.

*Make that a very wild card.* Sam grinned to himself. The lady had been hot, aroused and he'd wanted to pull her under him and have at it hard and fast. Christ, his erection was still full-blown and a wet spot marked his buckskins.

When he'd climbed on the half-full coach he'd immediately recognized Lena Jessup, a saloon girl who'd been known to sell her services to outlaws. The other three passengers had been a motley crew — armed, one of them dangerous. He was glad he'd added himself to the mix, more interested in protecting Eden Pace than railroaders' pay.

Sam nudged Horse into a faster lope, ready to take up the hunt for two people. One was Ansell Black, the most wanted outlaw in Texas, the man who had orchestrated the robbery. The other was Eden Pace. He'd found the corset rod and figured she'd used it to drag his gun to her and save him, save them both. His smile grew broader as he remembered the wadded up skirts and the pink rump showing through torn silk drawers. *The woman's resourceful, that's for sure. I figure I owe her a new outfit.*

Before he took off on the hunt for Black, Sam planned to find Eden Pace and claim a different kind of bounty from her. He'd told Conner Spokes, "Take it slow and easy,



Conner. Give the lady inside a quiet ride home." Sam shuddered in the saddle. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, get me to Wichita Falls before I embarrass myself.*

As soon as he arrived in town, Sam left Horse in the livery stable and headed for the sheriff's office. He had some outlaw sorting out to do before he could take up where he left off with the lady gambler. Spokes met him on the boarded walkway and delivered the bad news. "She took the mail coach to Piney Creek. I told her, like you said."

"Is that it? She didn't have anything to say?" Frustration made Sam's question emerge as a deep growl.

"She said to tell you that she'd been well pleased by your transaction." Conner stared as Sam's frown transformed to a grin. He asked suspiciously, "What the hell's goin' on between the two of you? She got the same funny look on her face when I gave her the bounty money."

"Don't suppose the lady said anything more?" Sam was hopeful. It seemed as if he and the woman had several things in common he'd like to explore.

"Eden Pace," Conner told him the name Sam already knew, and then added, "Mrs. Pace said to tell you to not worry about the rest of the money. Said she figured the two of you were even."

Disappointment hit Sam in the gut hard. He didn't fuck another man's woman. In this case, he might be tempted though. Eden seemed as if she could use a good round of bed sports. *Maybe she's married to an old man who can't put it to her anymore.*

He pictured Eden in the arms of a withered old fart. Her clothes were fine and her trunk good quality. *Hell, maybe she's just a loose woman riding any cock that's handy.* Soured by that image, Sam visited the law office to finish up his business in Wichita Falls and tried to keep his thoughts off Piney Creek.

But the three men Spokes had delivered were gone. "What the hell did you turn them all loose for?" He damn near pulled the deputy sheriff's head off his shoulders. "One of those bastards belonged to Ansell Black's gang."

The deputy was just a kid and stammered his apology and reason. "Well, the rancher said he knew the governor. He raised all kinds of Cain until I got Harlan Brown, the circuit judge, in here. Judge Brown said, 'turn 'em loose, turn 'em all loose.' So I did."

The Wichita Falls sheriff came in on the conversation and added his two cents. "They all chased out of here lickety-split. I watched them myself. I reckon they weren't looking forward to your questioning when you got to town."

Sam stared hard at the lawman and said, "It's kinda hard to tell if the law wants Ansell Black caught or free." Disgusted, he left the office, walked to the livery stable and rode out of town. He was of a mind to ride to Piney Creek and check on Eden Pace. But common sense reared its head and he turned toward the McCallister ranch, the MC3, instead. *She's married. It's done. I don't need a round-heeled woman so it's just as well I'm shut of her.*

## Chapter Two

Finished with business in Sweetwater, Sam separated from his partners and headed for the Lucky Spurs Saloon. He was tired, dirty and needed a bath, but he wanted a drink first. "I'll catch up to you later. Right now, I'm heading for the nearest beer."

"Watch your back while you're doing your night of hell-raisin'. Don't linger too long. I plan on going out again before week's end."

Sam grimaced at Deacon's words, even more determined to have some fun before he rode back to the MC3. It had been two weeks since he'd seen Eden and he'd about gotten her out of his head. It was true that the sight of a stagecoach could make him hard, and the tantalizing scent of a certain brand of ladies' soap caused an instant cockstand. But he dealt with it.

She was married and not for him. He had plans to find a bed partner for the night and ease the lust Eden continued to cause. Sam looked over the saloon with a jaundiced eye.

A man sitting at a tinny-sounding piano beat out a loud tune, and here and there, saloon girls grabbed rough cowhands and whirled them a step or two. Like a magnet, his gaze was drawn to the card game in the corner instead of the easy women who offered him pleasure.

Sam was more interested in the poker table and the woman who ruled it. He let his eyes play over the rest of the women in the room. They all came up short when compared to her.

"That's Eden Pace." Shorty Scrubs wiped the bar clean and stared where Sam nodded. "Dresses the joint up, don't she? I sell more whiskey when she's here, that's for sure."

Sam didn't find it hard to believe. He wasn't the only man staring at her with lust in his eyes. "She got a husband hanging around her?" Sam asked without preamble or subtlety.

"Naw, she says she's earning money to pay some debts. Figure the bastard ran off and left her on her own. There's plenty of men hereabouts who'd like to take his place." Shorty had scrubbed one spot without moving on. His eyes gleamed with hunger as he looked at the woman across the room.

Sam's cock throbbed, a reminder of his own unfulfilled lust. He moved from one end of the bar to the other so he could hear her voice over the piano player banging the infernal keys. She'd kept her head in the stagecoach, and she demonstrated that ability when she played cards.

"Mr. Prescott, it's been a pleasure playing with you." One by one, she swept the money from each man and bid him farewell. Sam lingered, watching her at work. He reached his hand inside his vest to touch the remnant from her drawers more than once. *Mrs. Pace, you and me have a reunion ahead.*

He could only see her from the edge of the tabletop up, but he feasted his eyes on that part of her within view. Her hair was a glossy, pine-bark brown, so dark it was almost black. He didn't know much about fashion, or if the lady had done it on purpose, but the way she had it gathered all tight and sedate, then let a curl spring free now and again, had heat curling in his belly. *Wildcat disguised as a kitten.*

Her dress was plain, not really anything Sam would normally notice, but the severity of it accented her slender neck and skin the color of pearls. His gaze trailed a path upward to lips so pink he wanted to savor them, and on to the flush staining her high cheekbones. *Peaches-and-cream.* He licked his lips, imagining tasting her instead of the beer he held in his hand.

As though she felt his inspection from across the room, Eden's gaze locked with Sam's in a heated exchange and her lips curved slightly in a smile.

He straightened at the bar and set the beer on the counter, ready to walk across the room and claim her for the night. But she lowered her dark lashes and turned her attention back to the table of men, denying the moment had occurred.

Whether in the bowels of a dirty saloon or not, Eden Pace was a woman apart from the other females there. Sam drank his beer and relaxed, enjoying the scenery. She might be a married woman, but it didn't change the fact that she stirred the heat in his groin. And if he wasn't mistaken, the lady had an itch for him in her drawers.

*A man who leaves his woman has no claim on her loyalty.* After the game ended he watched her walk alone from the saloon. He wanted to get up and follow. *Hell no, I want to escort her to bed and get up tomorrow at noon.* But she ignored Sam, didn't catch his eye again and departed. He didn't have it in him to hire a whore. Sam was suddenly only interested in having one woman under him, and her name was Eden Pace.

Eden couldn't afford distraction. And the man who held her gaze promised to be more than that. He pulled her attention from the game.

But when she'd met his blue-eyed glance, heat had coursed through her, her nipples had pebbled beneath her dress and Snake McCallister's name had almost escaped her lips.

A smile curved her mouth before she looked away, embarrassed at the blush of arousal she couldn't control.

*Temporary insanity, Daniel,* Eden assured her absent husband. *It's you I want.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam had Eden on his mind over the next three weeks as the McCallisters finished up an outlaw hunt and brought in their prisoners to the Baker's Fork jail. After Deacon sorted through the new handbills and split the money three ways, the bounty hunters rode in separate directions.

Sam stayed in town and went looking for a woman and a game of cards. He didn't explore the fact that Eden represented both. As soon as he entered the saloon, he saw her. She was playing poker at a far table. He found a seat and settled in to watch her skill. He wasn't alone.

The lady gambler stirred up a lot of interest, and not all of it was in her card games. Sam uncoiled and studied the room. It was the other men who had his focus. He knew when each man shifted toward a weapon, a woman or Eden Pace.

When he inspected the rest of the lowlives lusting after her, his earlier conviction that she was beyond his touch disappeared. *A woman who associates with these buzzards night after night can't be too choosy.* And then he smiled his slow easy smile and felt the heat in his belly burn hot while he waited until the night wound to a close.

Sam was pleased to see that Eden firmly declined all invitations from the dozen or so men who swarmed around her after the game. He was interested in how she'd greet him and made his move when Eden gathered her cards and her winnings and started for the door.

He eased in beside her and a soft, spicy scent teased his nose, adding another layer to the sum of her charms. He smiled down at her, enjoying the total package. Her straight back and graceful carriage suggested a tall woman but it was an illusion. She had to tilt her head up to see him better and her lips were firmed into a straight line promising a stubborn nature. "Eden, it's not safe for a lady to walk from here to the hitching post, let alone to a hotel down the street. I'll be seeing you home."

"It's Mrs. Pace," she corrected him. Then her lips curved and the dimple in her left cheek showed itself. "Mr. McCallister. I'm glad to see that you've survived your dangerous enterprises." Her eyes sparkled with green fire when she stepped around him and headed for the door. "But I must decline your offer. As I said before, we're even. I prefer to keep it that way." And away she sailed without a backward glance.

A hoot from the back of the bar signaled that the exchange had been noted. Sam felt heat rise within him and figured his ears were red enough for all to see. He pulled his hat tighter to his head and fell into step behind her, guarding her back. *So she does recognize me, and she's not interested.*

Sam followed, maintaining the same distance between them. Eden paused for a moment and cast one look his way, the hand in her pocket obviously holding a gun. *At least she's got sense enough to carry protection, and the lady definitely knows how to use it.*

After she crossed the street, she inclined her head, acknowledging his escort. *Guess she's figured out I'm not leavin' 'til she parks that fine rump for the night.*

Head high, she turned and marched away. Sam grunted in satisfaction. *Call it what she wants in her mind, I'm seeing her to safety.* He snorted at his own thoughts. *Her safety, yep, that's sure as hell what I've got on my mind.*

He followed her into the hotel and up the stairs, waiting until she'd locked herself in her room for the night. Her hand never left her pocket, and although she was obviously aware of him, she refused to look his way. It didn't matter that she didn't offer conversation. Sam growled a soft "See you around," as she fumbled with her door and counted himself the winner.

He returned to the saloon and made it a point during the rest of the night to learn as much about her as he could. Everyone from the bartender to the saloon girls said the woman was a new face among the usual gamblers who moved from town to town. According to the regulars, Eden Pace played poker in the most reputable saloons, and some that were a little less praiseworthy. She played for big stakes and was making a name for herself already.

"She sellin' it?" he asked Susie, one of the whores in the bar.

"You buyin' if she is?" The other woman gave him a disgusted look. "You men are all the same. You want a good toss and tumble, but ya think yer better than us yer beddin'."

Sam repeated his question as he drank his beer, ignoring the woman's complaint. "She sellin' it, Susie?" He didn't want it to be true, but if it was, he had plenty of cash in his saddlebag and didn't much care what the price was.

The saloon girl sighed and answered wryly. "Yer out of luck. She don't have a reputation for bein' an easy woman."

Sam's jaw unclenched and a knot in his stomach uncoiled. *I should be disappointed.* Instead, he was relieved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden always knew when the rough bounty hunter was in the audience. He made her nerves jangle in alarm whenever she saw him across the room. Although she understood the arousal he caused when he was near, it didn't make it less difficult to deal with.

*The fool won't stop following me.* Eden felt exasperated affection for the man who seemed genuinely concerned about her safety. Even as she rebuffed him, she appreciated the care he displayed. When she left him standing in the hall, closing him out of her life once again, she leaned against the door and sighed. *I miss you, Daniel. I miss our marriage bed.*

Snake McCallister caused a fevered longing that plagued her when he was near. To help her through her nights of sleepless despair, her mind conjured images of their pleasure they could have together and that was enough. Thoughts of the bounty hunter became a spot of enjoyment in her world of despair and fear.

Over the next month and a half, Eden had occasion to see him often. He never played poker, but he had begun to appear on a regular basis in the same saloons she did. He insisted on walking her back to her hotel each time, and each time she made it a point to be reserved and disinterested. It didn't matter that she refused to speak to him. The bounty hunter popped up when least expected and became a face she looked for in the crowded saloons. Each time, as he had in Sweetwater, Snake McCallister followed her, guarding her trip along the dark, dangerous streets.

One night, instead of his usual, "See you around," he drawled from the end of the hall where he waited until she entered her room, "I'll be out on the trail for a while, pretty lady. I won't be able to watch you sashay back and forth from saloon to hotel. You take care, Eden."

His absence was as disquieting as his persistent presence had been. She found herself searching the saloons each night, hoping that he'd reappear. Worry for his safety began to nag at her as she waited, remembering the way he'd put himself in danger during the stagecoach holdup.

Three weeks later, Eden was playing cards in Fort Worth. Rumors of her skill earned her a chair in a Hell's Half-Acre gambling parlor. It was a male establishment frequented by high-stakes poker players. Every bit of her skill was necessary to hold her own against the professional gamblers who swarmed around like coyotes waiting for a kill. Nevertheless, her attention turned away from the cards when the rangy blond with the wicked smile entered the gaming hall.

"Damned McCallister's probably here hunting," one of her tablemates muttered. A lifted eyebrow and interested look was all it took to elicit more information. "That one's Sam McCallister, or Snake, as he's known by the men he goes after. He's one of three bounty hunters who ride together." Several of the men at the table followed her gaze to where the rough-looking predator sat.

His eyes were a cold blue, assessing the men at the table. *Sam, not Snake...* She reevaluated the attention she'd been receiving. *He's a bounty hunter. Maybe he's tracking outlaws and watching who comes to the poker games.*

Eden considered that until their eyes met and he lifted his hand to tug on his earlobe. Heat flooded her body and she lost concentration. She looked away from him, angry with herself. By sheer luck, she managed to claim the pot and took the deed for Isaac Anderson's ranch with the rest of the night's take.

As she gathered her winnings, one of the hard-eyed men who ringed the table eased toward her and murmured nervously, "That's a mighty fine ring you're wearin'. I heard tell of a doctor who owned it last. It didn't seem to bring him much luck. He's dead. Pettigrew says better keep your mouth shut or you will be too." The messenger scanned the room anxiously.

A big-framed-body edged between them and Sam McCallister stood next to her, asking, "Got trouble, Eden?"

The other man gave a startled look and backed away. Eden frowned up at Sam, annoyed that he'd interfered with her contact.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Glad to see you've stayed all in one piece since the last time I saw you." From the corner of his eye, Sam watched the other man pause and give up. Then he turned his attention back on Eden.

He didn't give a damn that she ignored him when he trailed after her each time. And this time, he was determined to have his say. "Eden, you might want to watch your back. Anderson won't take losing his spread to you easy. He's a damned fool, but that's family land."

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. McCallister." She stepped around him, intent on making a solitary journey.

As usual, he tagged after her, catching up this time to take his place beside her. Eden's voice was sharp, irritated when she said, "Sam, I prefer walking alone."

He escorted her along the dimly lit street in spite of her attempt to discourage him. "Kind of a dumb thing for a woman to be doing." Sam had been waiting to tell her his opinion. He'd mulled it over on the trail long enough to feel as if he'd already had this conversation with her.

Not knowing much about respectable women—and he wasn't sure whether Eden fell into that category anyway—he decided plain speech would be best. "Where's this man you call husband?"

He wasn't surprised when her lips thinned and her dainty steps became a determined stride. In his snooping, he kept hearing the mention of an absent spouse but no details of the man. He wanted to hear what Eden had to say.

"I have a few debts to settle before I join him."

Sam couldn't imagine where the bastard was to let her wander all over Texas and risk her safety every day of the week, but he held back his criticism. *Shit, I might have hauled her old man into the Territory Prison.*

They'd almost reached the hotel when he figured he'd better do something besides talk.

"Eden, I want a taste of you, sweetheart." He growled the words as he swept her into the shadows and leaned into her slim form. His hands molded her hips to his groin, letting her have the feel of what he wanted to give her. Before she could protest, he took her mouth.

At first, Eden stood stiffly in his arms, attempting to remain cold to his touch. But when he sucked on her bottom lip and then licked the seam she held tight, she opened for him. Her arms circled his neck and she hugged her body close to his. A soft moan of desire escaped her, and even through the fabric of their clothes, Sam could feel her nipples, pebbled into hard points of desire.

*Jesus God, I've needed this, needed her.* Sam tasted her hungrily as he pushed his thigh between her legs, seeking the heat he knew was there. He loosed her mouth and planted kisses along her jaw and down her neck, brushing his whiskers against soft skin. Her back arched into him and he slid his hands beneath her rump and lifted her higher, brushing her mound against his cock.

"When are you going to let me in?" He teased her ear with his teeth and kneaded the plump breast in his hand. He was ready to lift her skirts he was so crazy for her, but she caught his face between her hands and stopped his unbridled lust with soft words.

"You are a magnificent distraction." Her face was flushed and her lips swollen from his kisses. Sam savored her caress as she rubbed the back of her hand against his whiskers and smiled up at him. "But..." She stalled as if searching for a reason, then said, "You're a complication that I can't allow myself to enjoy."

Sam had been a complication to a lot of people so that excuse didn't play well with him. He kept his hands on her rump and the V of her legs lined up with his cock. "Sure about that, Eden?" He nudged his groin against hers.

She pulled his head back down for a kiss, exploring, tasting his mouth, withdrawing until she traced his lips with the tip of her tongue. She groaned and pulled away with a soft laugh. "Put me down before I behave any more scandalously."

She kissed the side of his mouth, rubbed it with her thumb, then pushed against his shoulder, silently asking to be set free. "You're a very persuasive man, Mr. McCallister, but I'm afraid I must resist your indisputable charm."

Sam stared into her green eyes and tried to see beyond the teasing look that warmed him at the same time she held him at bay. He had a feeling that he wasn't getting to know Eden any better for all of her admiration. Regretfully, he set her on her feet and said, "Eden, you're playing the wrong hand this time."

She stepped around him, still smiling, apparently determined to end their interlude. Her retreat was interrupted when the report of a gun exploded in the night and a bullet kicked splinters up from the boarded walkway.

In one motion, Sam lifted Eden, set her deeper in the shadows of the building and pushed her head lower when she stiffened in protest. "Get down, you damned fool." He left her there and ran in a crouched, zigzagging sprint across the street toward the shooter.

His thoughts were focused on catching the sonofabitch who almost hit Eden. The shooter was Anderson, too drunk and angry at losing his ranch to have good sense. Sam knocked some into him and pointed him toward home. Then he doubled back to find Eden gone. *Guess I shouldn't have called her a "damned fool"*, he thought wryly and went looking for her.

She was already at her door, composed and unruffled, when he caught up with her. Nothing but the glitter of excitement in her eyes indicated that she'd just escaped a bullet in the dark. She shook her head and put her finger to her lips before he could say a word.



Eden pulled the gun from her pocket and unlocked the door. Sam decided if she thought there was trouble inside, he'd clear the way. He reached over her head, pushed the door wide as he set her aside and moved in.

Eden didn't wait for him to check the likely hiding spots. With gun in hand she searched, moving steadily around the window side of the sitting room. Thick drapes were drawn closed and cloaked the windows of the suite. She stepped to one end as Sam did the other. Two guns trained on the blue velvet as Eden grasped the pull and they slid open.

No one hid there. When Sam moved as though to look outside, she drew the drapes closed before he could. Silently, she continued searching, leaving the sitting room to enter the bedroom. It was an elegant layout, making Sam squint at her appraisingly. *For all her debts, she don't stint on her comfort.*

They each took a side of the bedroom, covering the closet together as they had the window in the outer room. She didn't say a word until they'd made sure the suite was empty of anyone but them.

Sam didn't realize how tense she'd been until her shoulders relaxed and she admitted, "I just needed to know..." For a moment he saw the vulnerable woman who hid within Eden.

But then she veiled her emotions and resumed the distance she'd cultivated in their acquaintance. "Thank you. You saved me from being shot. Are you hurt?" Her question was a husky whisper as if she feared being overheard.

Sam was fascinated at the way her nose crinkled just the tiniest bit and she bit her lower lip, studying him, looking for blood or evidence of injury. When he denied any damage, Eden picked up his hand and frowned at his skinned knuckles.

He assured her, "Anderson just thought he'd scare you some. Like I said earlier, Eden, you go separating a man from his land and you might get more than a patch of dirt to worry about."

Sam had knocked the man on his ass and growled a warning in his ear. It would be enough to scare Anderson home. After that, he could only speculate about how much trouble the rancher might try to make for the lady gambler.

Eden ignored his warning, seeming more concerned about Sam's bruised knuckles than the danger he pointed out to her. "Wait here," she ordered him. Without explanation, she slipped into the other room and returned holding a jar. "Let me see your hand."

Her fingers worked magic on the scraped skin as she concentrated on applying the ointment and refused to meet his eyes or even look at his face. Sam felt every stroke in his groin.

She stepped away from him and put the cap back on the jar, inspecting her work. "It won't do any good for me to repair you if you keep getting hurt. Be safe, Mr. McCallister. And thank you for escorting me home tonight." Satisfied that he was intact, she turned away.

Sam wasn't having any of that. "Do you really think I'm leaving?"

A delicate blush stained her cheeks and he stepped closer, determined to reignite her earlier passion. Now that they were finally alone, Eden didn't seem nearly as sure of herself.

Sam waited, willing her to come to him. She moved closer, surprising him when she slid her arms around his neck.

Her fingers played with the hilt of the blade holstered there. "How do you know I won't take this very sharp knife and hurt you with it?" Her question was teasing. Eden's guarded emotions were freed for the moment, and her eyes sparkled with mischief as she smiled up at him.

Sam's eyes drifted half-closed as desire clawed his throat. "Take off your clothes," he growled. "Playtime's over. Take 'em off or I'll use that very sharp knife you're fingering to cut 'em off."

Her eyes crinkled in laughter as if the savage in him didn't scare her. She giggled and said, "I guess *you've* decided."

Lust had him in its grip and he wouldn't take another moment of her torment. "Damn straight, I've decided. We'll do this thing now, tonight. No more runnin' from me, Eden."

Sam stared down into deep pools of molten desire. "One time," she whispered. "Just so we know..." She sighed. "I'm a woman traveling alone. It has to stay that way. But..." She pulled his head down and continued the moment that had been interrupted earlier. Sam held a woman on fire with passion in his arms.

Her nimble fingers trembled as she unbuttoned his shirt and brushed it from his shoulders. She bent forward, touched her tongue to his nipple—a feathery stroke teasing the bud 'til it puckered. At the same time, she trailed her fingers down to his belt.

Sam's control snapped and he did what he'd threatened. The sharp blade sliced through her dress and chemise and they fell loose across her shoulders, exposing her back. "I owed you an outfit. Now it's two." He flicked his knife again and the corset strings parted, releasing firm, rounded breasts as he pushed the material from her body. The rest of their clothes he kicked across the floor before he pulled her close, skin to skin, his cock pushing in demand against her belly.

## Chapter Three

Eden pulled Sam's head down for a hungry kiss. *I want this. I need this. Just once...I will have this man just once. This is only physical relief. I don't need to know him after and we'll be finished with this crazy attraction. I need to keep my head, enjoy, but not abandon sense.*

After that moment, Sam gave her no time to think or retreat. He took possession of her, pulling her tight in his arms, breast to chest, her nipples brushing against his. His erection jutted between them and he kneed her legs apart, sliding his thigh between hers to press against her soft folds.

A whoosh of carnal desire flamed through Eden. Nothing mattered but the need to find relief. She gasped and arched her back to savor the friction of her open cleft moving against his iron flesh.

Eden leaned away to look at him. "You're beautiful." She trailed her fingers from his navel to his nipple, admiring the golden brown color of his muscled chest and the darker tan nubs summoning her. "Pretty, very pretty." She flicked her tongue against one and watched it pucker.

His groan acknowledging her power over him made her smile. When she closed her lips over the bud, sucking on it, tasting the salty tang of his flesh, his thigh tensed under her cleft and he thrust his hips, teasing her pearl with the rocking motion.

She clasped his flesh and savored the feel of velvet over steel. "You're very large." She admired him. A silvery trail seeped from the slit and her attention was drawn from his nipple to the liquid that tempted her. She tightened her hand on his shaft and pumped up and down. The coil of heat in her belly wound tighter and tighter as she touched and stroked his manhood. "Come for me," she ordered him.

His huff of laughter said she wouldn't control his body. He pressed against the nub of nerves at her apex, creating sparks of pleasure. "A lady always goes first," he grinned at her, clearly having fun in their ongoing battle of wills.

Eden gave herself up to the moment. Sam was a delight, offering pleasure to be enjoyed to its fullest. He stroked her breasts, caressed the skin on her belly and then dropped his hand between her legs again to toy with her already slippery flesh.

"You're on fire for me, sweetheart." He explored the soft tissue, trailing his fingers through the heated liquid that readied her for his penetration. It was true that from no more than the erotic slide of his thigh against her pearl, her body already edged toward release.

Eden tightened her hold on the thick length of his manhood and dipped her head, preparing to taste him. "I owe you one and I always pay my debts."

"Nope, I like to keep the count on my side." He arched her back across his arm her breasts jutted upward, her nipples pointing at him. Even the touch of air on the tips threatened to send her into a cascading orgasm. Sam roughly delivered open-mouthed kisses across her breasts, then with strong sucking pulls captured one hard tip.

Eden bucked under his attentions. *My God, I need this so much.* She couldn't get close enough, thrusting one nipple into the molten warmth of his mouth as the other itched and burned, begging for attention. He flicked the tip with his tongue before he sucked it between his lips. When he pinched the other nipple and pulled on it with a hard tug, Eden's climax jolted through her. She rocked her pelvis against his leg, clutched his head and muffled her screams in his hair.

He didn't stop. Instead, he devoured her, sucking the peak, squeezing it between the roof of his mouth and his tongue before sliding it out to bite the end. *Yes, my God, yes.* She tangled her hands in his hair and pressed into him, writhing with pleasure under his ministrations. The waves of her climax hadn't stopped before she reached for another. "Don't stop, Sam. Don't stop tonight."

His rough laughter tickled through her body, resonating across her nerves and muscles. He brushed his hand down her ribs, lower past her stomach, until it rested on the nest of curls that covered her mound. She opened to his touch and felt him delve in the wet heat of her folds before sliding one finger inside.

"Christ, you're tight." He took her mouth again, swallowing her moans as he thrust his finger deep and then pulled almost out. Her channel closed around his flesh demanding more of him.

"I need to see you," he muttered, kissing his way down to her splayed thighs, pulling her legs wider, thumbing open the lips of her cleft. Eden wobbled on unsteady legs when he set his mouth on her. She watched him suck the tender bud, sending an exquisite sensation of sparks skittering along taut nerves.

Even as Sam pleased her with his mouth, he worked another finger inside her tight passage, stretching her, coaxing her with mumbled words. "Come on, sweetheart, make it good for me, I need you soft and warm so I can get inside of you."

"Oh God, Sam," she moaned as he tickled her with muffled words and moved his fingers harder than before. She convulsed around his flesh, her internal muscles rippling with the power of her release. He licked the honey that flooded from her and then kissed his way back up her body to claim her mouth with the taste of her juices still on his tongue.

It was only because he held her in his arms that Eden remained standing. The aftermath of her climax hit her and she swayed in his embrace. *My God, where did that come from? I've never...* She had no time to wonder about her body's response to Sam's attentions. As if she weighed nothing, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. As soon as he laid her down, he sprawled next to her.

"No babies." She had just enough sense left to whisper the reminder. He was in control enough to nod his assent.

"Put me in," he growled as he came over her. He settled his weight on his arms as she surrounded his hips with her thighs and clasped his cock in her hand.

Eden moaned, "I need this," as she brushed the head of his rod up and down her cleft, wetting him with her release. Then she fit the thick wedge against her opening and spread her legs wider for him. For a minute Daniel's face superimposed itself on the one staring down at her and Eden flinched, gasping harshly, "I want you in me. Stop teasing and do it."

Closing her eyes, she stopped a sob from escaping her throat as she thought, *Pretend. I'll pretend I'm making love with Daniel. That will make it all right...* But it wasn't to be. Sam demanded her awareness of him.

"Look at me, Eden. I want to see your eyes when I take you." He reared back on his knees, grinning wickedly at her as he paused. "And I want to see my cock sink into the pussy I've been chasing for months."

His words were crude, so different from the tender passion of her husband. None of that mattered as he nudged through her opening and began a series of short thrusts that brought him closer and closer to her core. Rough talk or not, her sex clenched around him and rejected her mind's stuttering hesitations.

Sam's passion overwhelmed her and washed away thoughts of anything but the man who labored above her. She tangled with him in sensuous pleasure, ignoring who he was while she savored what he gave her. She almost came when he withdrew the first time and Eden saw his flesh glistening, slick with her emissions. She writhed under him, trying to get him to nudge deeper instead of inching along with care.

"God, sweetheart, you're so tight. But damn, I need in you." He thrust his hips enough to gain another inch.

Eden pulled his mouth down to hers and bucked upward, forcing her pelvis against his groin. She felt the glorious slide of his shaft stretching toward her womb until he filled her. Her internal walls hugged him, milking his length as whimpers of pleasure escaped her lips.

He stroked her pearl as he plunged into her and withdrew, until she squirmed under him, groaning her need for more at the same time she gasped at the size of his offering. "I won't be able to walk tomorrow," she laughed in half-protest.

"You can take me." He proved his point with a deep thrust that hit her sweet spot. Eden stiffened then arched her pelvis under him.

"There," she gasped, "do it right there." She reached her arms above her head and grabbed the rungs of the headboard. Sam lifted her hips and positioned her as he pounded into her. Eden couldn't stop the words that flowed from her. "Do it, Sam, deeper."

He rotated his hips and grinned at her, sweat dripping off his face and onto her breast.

"Harder, faster, don't stop...don't stop 'til I can't think anymore." *I need this. I need to be able to just once, not remember, not hurt, not care...* Eden suspended all awareness of

anything but the sound of their carnal grunts of pleasure filling the room and the feel of Sam's hard body so attuned to her own.

Releasing the headboard, she stroked his back, caressed the hard muscles in his rump and tasted his maleness as he took control of her body and introduced her to mindless bliss. All the rage and sorrow she'd held inside flowed from her and was transformed into erotic passion.

The lust that Sam had held in check for months took over and he drove into her, hooking her leg over his thigh as he ground against her pubis, going as deep as he could. He wanted all of her. He wanted her screaming her pleasure as he fucked in and out of her hot channel. He fought his own release to prolong the moment and he was rewarded when he felt her climax building again.

His balls were drawn up tight against his body, ready to go off at any moment. Then she convulsed in an orgasm so powerful her back arched off the bed and she ground her pelvis against him as tiny whimpers of ecstasy escaped her. He slammed in and out of her, holding her hips, pistoning his cock in hard thrusts through the rippling orgasm that shook through her. He pulled out in time to grasp his jerking cock and shoot his cum in thick spatters of white across her belly. Sam couldn't suppress his own moan as he came harder than he ever had before.

He collapsed over her, vaguely aware that he was too heavy for her small stature but too drained to move for a minute. When he groaned and started to roll off her, she wrapped her arms around him and held on.

"No, stay. I like the feel of your weight on me."

They lay together, his cum a sticky reminder of what had just happened. His cock hardened again and he asked when he eased inside her, "Too soon?"

"Never." Her whispered response begged him to continue. He nuzzled her ear and kissed the spot on her shoulder that made her shiver. Her cunny clenched around his erection and he felt the pulse of her arousal rise to meet his.

Common sense told him he needed to stop while he was ahead. He'd had a taste of the woman and that should be enough. But he couldn't pry himself off her silken skin or leave the warmth of her body. Her internal muscles squeezed his hardened length as she tilted her hips to take more of him.

"Good, it feels so good." She murmured the words against his shoulder and Sam felt her back arch under him as she rubbed her breasts against his chest.

He forgot about everything but the feel of Eden's pussy wrapped around his cock. He rolled them over so that she straddled his thighs and sat impaled on his shaft.

He scooted to the top of the bed and slammed pillows behind his back as she began pumping her hips up and down, riding his cock to glory. Her pink breasts thrust upward and his mouth watered, wanting a taste of the cherry tips.

"Come here," he growled and took her nipple between his teeth, biting the end before sucking on it with strong pulls. Her pussy tightened around him as she slid up and down. He was slick, greased by the honey that flooded from her body.

She moaned her pleasure, arching her back as he pulled and rotated the nipple he couldn't suck on. Her hips started jerking and he felt her release clasp and pulse around his cock as he tongued and suckled her breast.

She collapsed, but his release was on him and he had to roll her off to get out in time. Eden grasped his cock in her long fingers and stroked up and down, milking cum from him as it spattered on her belly. He slumped next to her, drained.

Hours or seconds later, he couldn't tell, Sam came back to himself and staggered to the pitcher of water on the table. He dampened a cloth, returning to the bed to clean the evidence of his raw passion from Eden's body. That done, he lay back down to recuperate. Eden nestled against him, her long hair a blanket around them on the bed. He brushed it aside, rested his head against her neck and curled his body around hers. Eden sighed contentedly, "Good night, Sam," and fell asleep.

Sam felt pretty smug until he remembered her first words. That brought a frown to his face. *One time, hell...* He lay awake thinking about how he'd take care of her and where he could put her until he secured her future. There would be no more of her visiting gambling halls and saloons.

He felt an uneasy stir when he remembered that the woman he'd just fucked into oblivion was married. He stared down at pink lips curved in a sleeping smile. Something clawed at his chest and caused a riot of panic there.

He shifted her in his arms, brushing the hair away from the side of her face so he could see her better. She was a beautiful puzzle. It wasn't desire that he felt, but a tender melting ache in his chest that stopped his breath. He didn't know what the hell was wrong with him but he had a sick feeling it wasn't going away. Nevertheless, he fell asleep holding Eden in his arms with a satisfied smile softening his usual grim expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden woke when the heat of Sam's arms and the hum of his snore drove her from sleep. For a minute, just a second really, she closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of their mingled essence. Arousal and need flooded her. *I knew...* Before she could act on her desire, she eased out of his embrace and off the mattress.

Careful to be quiet, she slipped on a robe and carried the pitcher of water and a washcloth into the sitting room. There, she cleaned her body of all evidence of her carnality. But her flower-scented soap couldn't wash away all proof of their night together. Her hair was sweat-drenched and still damp. She had no time to wash it and wait for the hip-length mass to dry. Eden plaited it into a long braid, savoring the smell of Sam McCallister that she still wore.

Wanton behavior or not, she intended to present a picture of decorum when he finally woke. She wound the length of braid into a sedate coil at the nape of her neck. Dressed and composed, Eden walked to the window and pulled back the heavy drapes to let the sun shine in. Her fears of the night before, when she'd searched the room for the messenger, seemed silly as the light of day spread over the dirt street below.

Eden sat at the cherrywood desk and pulled a stack of hotel stationery in front of her. She composed two letters, copying one of them four times. Each sheet of paper she blotted carefully, making sure the words were written in clear script.

The first letter, she folded and put in an envelope with the Anderson deed she'd won from the foolish rancher. With that finished, she sealed the envelope, addressed it to Mrs. John Anderson, and set it aside.

The other five notes she stared at, deep in thought. Finally, she folded four of them, putting each in an envelope and writing across the front, "To be opened upon my death". Then she slid them into larger envelopes addressed to scatter her message across Texas.

Exhausted, Eden sat back and looked at the last missive waiting her attention. Quickly, before she could second-guess herself or lose her nerve, she wrote with a flourish, "To be delivered to the office of the sheriff in Clover, Texas".

When Sam shambled out of the bedroom, his hair was tousled and unruly and he wore a teasing grin. "Damn, Eden, I haven't slept like that since I was a kid. I'm hungry as a bear comin' out of hibernation. How about you? You want to tie into breakfast here or the café down the street?"

What Eden wanted was to cross the room and hug him. But she didn't. "No time for that. I have to catch the stage back to Sweetwater for a poker game that promises to be profitable." Her tone was crisp and sure.

Sam's friendly expression changed to determined. His voice was a rough growl when he said, "Damn it, Eden. You need a man to take care of you."

"Don't be silly, Sam. I'm fine by myself. I've learned to be cautious. I've debts to pay. Then I'll be returning home." Eden stiffened her spine and remained firm.

"I've got more money than I know what to do with," he offered. "You need to get settled someplace and send for your man." When she shook her head and frowned at him, he spoke sternly. "Eden, I can't be here to escort you back to your hotel room every time. If you're playing cards to raise money for debts, let me pay them for you. When you and your husband get on your feet, send the money back to me."

His gruff offer stirred tender feelings inside Eden but she steeled herself against them and shook her head. "No, I manage quite well alone. Thank you for the offer. But no, I need to settle these debts by myself."

Sam pulled his hat on and walked toward the door. He hesitated with his hand on the knob and asked, "Eden, does that man of yours know you mix it up with the likes of me? Because if he gives you trouble over this —"



Eden interrupted the offer. "I will tell Daniel when I join him. I have no doubt that he'll understand."

Sam studied her face for a minute before he shrugged indifferently and grinned. "Hope you win that big pot you're chasin', Eden. See you around."

She waited by the window and followed his progress down the boarded walkway until he crossed the street heading toward the livery stable. Eden ignored the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. "I'm sorry, Sam," she whispered aloud. "This is a game of war, and I play it alone."

\* \* \* \* \*

Of all the dumbass ways a man can be a fool. Sam swallowed disappointment and shoved hurt aside. *It's a damned shame and a waste of a fine-looking woman*, he told himself, denying the importance he'd set on the night with Eden, denying his feelings. *She finally named him. Daniel, she said.* He tried to let that put an end to his interest, but thoughts about her plagued him anyway.

*Named or not, her man ain't watchin' over her right. She was sure as hell expectin' trouble when we hit the hotel suite last night. And it didn't have a damned thing to do with Anderson, unless I miss my guess.* That fact gnawed at his mind and kept his gut in an uproar. It didn't matter that she refused his help. He couldn't let thoughts of her go.

The way she traveled alone worried him, so he put the word out before he left Fort Worth, starting the message in the Hell's Half-Acre Saloons. "Any man lays a finger on Eden Pace gets his neck slit. She's under McCallister protection."

It was the best he could do. Fear of Snake McCallister's reprisal would have to be enough to get her through the season and to wherever she planned on meeting up with her man. He'd be out on the trail through spring and summer and he didn't have time to nursemaid a married woman from one poker game to the next.

In spite of his pledge to forget Eden, she stayed on his mind. At first he found women to ease his needs, imagining Eden in his arms instead of the whores he paid to pretend. But when one of his night's companions mentioned her own sudden popularity, Sam stopped using prostitutes altogether.

"Half the men in Texas are lined up to have a poke," the dark-haired saloon girl bragged. She was more than half-drunk, as was Sam, but her words sobered him up fast. "I favor Eden Pace, the gambler woman, and men like to pretend." Her tone was conspiratorial but her look shrewd as Sam's face flooded with guilty color.

It didn't improve his temper any, and a coil of anger simmered in his gut. Eden didn't want to know him, he couldn't have her and his world was more out of kilter than it had ever been.

Of course there wasn't much the three bounty hunters didn't know about each other, and Sam's blanket of protection for Eden Pace got their attention. They were riding home from another hunt when the subject of Eden arose.

"I heard the McCallisters are watching over a lady gambler now. You know anything about that, Charlie?" It was Deacon asking.

Charlie Wolf gave Sam a sly look and said, "Nope." Both of his partners waited for Sam to comment but he shrugged off the question and offered no explanation. He didn't have one.

He couldn't forget the lady gambler and kicked himself later for his hankering. He showed up at the poker game in Mineral Springs but Eden did no more than nod at him. When he took his place beside her to walk her back to the hotel, her words were abrupt and firm. "One time—you agreed. There are many men in Texas, Mr. McCallister, and you are interfering with my meeting the rest of them."

He'd stood stock still in the middle of the boardwalk and let her walk away. His gut felt as though she'd hammered a fist in his middle. *A man doesn't beg*— He cut the thought short and turned away from Eden, filled with bitter contempt. *'There are many men in Texas...' I guess one taste of me was enough.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The man who sometimes became Ansell Black stared out his office window and thought about the letter from Mrs. Pace. It had arrived in Clover, and that idiot Billy Lubbock had, for once, done something right when he sent it up the chain of communication.

The widow's audacity in threatening him piqued his interest. It was said that she was a beautiful woman. Evidently she chased him with the mighty sword of justice. He snorted at that thought. He was, as always, ten steps ahead of the bucolic lawmen in the state. Mrs. Pace thought that dismantling Clover would stop him. He'd already stripped the bank of his holdings, having Aaron Richards empty the safe the night of their last meeting.

Richards would have been hard to replace had there been need. But it was time for the Clover operation to come to a halt. With Eden's help, the outlaw Ansell Black would disappear.

Eden Pace was an irritant, no more than a horsefly to be brushed aside. He chuckled wryly, planned the message he'd send to his associates and murmured out loud, "Eden, you have been most helpful. But I'm afraid, my dear, you will be joining your husband soon."

## **Chapter Four**

The McCallisters were in Randall's Crossing, cashing in their wanteds, when they had a run-in with Beau Beauregard. Sam enjoyed the dispute between Deacon and the kid, but when it began to look as if the two of them would never stop slinging insults, Sam scooped up the wanted posters in question and tucked them in the pocket of his vest.

The kid had the gall to lean against the sheriff's desk and laugh at both him and Deak. "That's all right, McCallisters. I took my pick of the bunch afore ya ever got here. Thought I'd do some cherry-pickin' while ya old men took your rest. I left ya some easies to gather. I'll be done by the time y'all hit the trail again." The kid slung his sly observation into the room at large, but it was Deacon he goaded with his taunt.

"You no-account, toad-eating coyote, stay out of my way or I'll knock you from here to Sunday." Sam's brother looked ready to carry on the fight, and the kid was just getting warmed up. Sam ended the war of words by leaving.

Deacon followed him out the door, silently fuming. Beauregard's pet wolf waited outside. Sam gave the monster a wide berth. Deacon, on the other hand, stood spraddle-legged and defiant in front of the animal as if ready to take up argument with the beast in place of the kid.

"Deak, I need a bath, a whiskey and a woman. I don't see any of 'em here. You can talk to the pup some other time. Let's go, we're burnin' daylight."

The three McCallisters rode back to Eclipse and toward their spread, the MC3. Charlie Wolf's usually stoic expression relaxed into a lazy grin as they approached the ranch.

When they neared the fork in the road that led to either the ranch or town, Sam was ready to split off on his own. "Give me my share. I'm going into Eclipse tonight to have some fun. I'll do my banking before I ride back to the ranch tomorrow night."

Deacon slowed enough to pull the wad of money from his pocket, peel off a chunk of bills and thrust them at Sam before continuing.

Sam grinned at Charlie Wolf's back as his cousin kept riding, unconcerned with anything besides getting home to his wife, Naomi. Sam's taunt carried to the other rider. "Roped, tied and branded, Charlie Wolf, I never thought to see the day."

Charlie Wolf returned the insult with a grin as he yelled words over his shoulder and kicked his mount into a lope toward home, "Seems like I heard of a lady gambler who's got you by the short hairs, pulling you all over Texas."

Sam shifted uneasily in his saddle. Charlie's jab was a little too close to truth for comfort. He'd not been able to erase Eden Pace from his mind.

Charlie Wolf, on the other hand, was looking damn pleased with himself these days. His seed would start a new generation of McCallisters. Sam imagined his grandfather Jonas McCallister's horror. *"Rachel's brought home a goddamned half-breed savage. He's a mongrel animal, a good-for nothing bastard."*

Sam's grimace turned to a taut smile as he reminded himself that both he and Charlie Wolf each owned a third of the Old Man's ranch. The MC3 belonged to the boys he'd loathed 'til the day he died. Sam's gaze slid from Charlie Wolf to Deacon, who turned his mount toward the ranch too. "Sure you don't want to ride into town with me?" Sam called to the other man.

"No, I'm going back to the house and lay out the path for our next trip. If we don't get on the trail soon, that snot-nosed kid will have all the wanteds running and it'll take twice as long rounding 'em up." Deacon was still caught up in the quarrel he'd left behind.

"Hell, Deak, you need to find a woman and work off that energy. You're lit up like a firecracker. For a minute back there, I thought you and the wolf were goin' a round or two."

"Everything about that weasel pisses me off."

"It's a wolf, not a weasel, Deacon." Sam couldn't help poking fun at his brother.

"Goddammit, you know who I'm talking about." Deacon snarled the words as he nudged his horse into a faster trot.

It occurred to Sam as he watched his brother ride toward home, that a good fucking in the arms of a whore was a better place for Deak right now. As he considered that, he decided it was a good place for him to be too.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't until later in the afternoon, when Sam undressed and readied to climb into the hotel's tin hip bath that he remembered the wanted posters in his vest pocket. He carefully laid them on the chair next to him for study.

He frowned as he lathered his head with the hotel soap. He needed a barber to clip the ragged length of dark blond hair and get rid of the darker whiskers on his face. With no barber at hand, though, Sam relied on his hunting knife and plain soap to scrape off the worst of the facial hair.

Done with that, he leaned back in the hot water and soaked two week's worth of trail dirt and grime from his body and thought about the counsel he'd given Deacon.

*It was sound advice for Deak, and I sure as hell better take it too. I need to get shut of thinking about that woman.* His cock waved at full staff even as he derided his thoughts about Eden Pace.

"Goddammit, what's wrong with me?" he muttered aloud at the same time he pumped the offending appendage until he felt his release surge upward. He caught his spill in the washcloth then grimaced in disgust at his own loss of control.

He didn't feel a bit better. The fact that he'd been reduced to giving himself hand jobs he deemed pathetic. *I'm finding a whore tonight and fucking her 'til noon tomorrow*, Sam promised himself, then shrugged away the decision when it didn't offer much appeal. He dried his hands on the towel by the tub and picked up the top wanted poster to study it.

Sam sorted through the lot, separating the ones with pictures that interested him. Those he set aside to concentrate on, memorizing the face of every outlaw in the pile. When he got to one picture, he lost interest in all the rest and spent most of his soaking time studying that handbill.

That done, he climbed from the tub, ready to get dressed. His clothes were pretty ripe from three weeks tracking outlaws. Since he'd already determined he'd be back on the trail by sunup, he checked them for bloodstains and pulled on the least offensive buckskins he carried in his gear.

Sam's eyes became hooded slits as he stretched and acknowledged the raw need to fuck flooding through him. He planned to get a bite to eat, grab a little sleep and hit the trail by early morning. If a woman he could stomach offered herself, then he planned to get laid too. Rage laced with lust thrummed through his body, one specific female the focus of both.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam marked the alleys and hideaways along the path he took to the Golden Eagle. Of all the McCallisters, he was the only one who spent much time in Eclipse. He had no illusions that his presence was welcome. The bounty hunters were tolerated because they owned land and the town of Eclipse enjoyed a remarkably low crime rate because they lived close.

The McCallisters weren't invited to the social events nor encouraged to make friends, but Sam's money was always welcomed in the town's poker games. He paused outside the saloon entrance, scanned the room and stepped inside before walking to the bar. As usual, any McCallister's arrival brought a pause in the conversation.

"Fix me up a plate of steak and eggs, Teddy." Sam ordered food first and a bottle of whiskey second. He'd been eating Deacon and Charlie's cooking for three weeks and his mouth watered at the thought of a decent meal. Sam's gaze hesitated at the corner table in the back where a poker game was in action. One of the men motioned him over.

"Bring it to the table in the back when you get it fixed." Sam didn't have much use for Teddy James and it pleased him to order around the saloon keeper.

"I'm ready to cash out, McCallister, if you're looking for a game." Alex Quince stood up from the poker table, inviting Sam to take his seat. It wasn't good news for the remaining players, but it was a smart way for a high winner to get out of losing his night's take.

"Your daddy know you're playing with the men now?" Sam couldn't resist needling the kid. The Quince boy was spruced up to beat the band and looked as if he

was dressed for sparkin' a woman, not tradin' cards with a bunch of saddlebums. Sam looked around the room again and didn't see anything worthy of the boy's effort.

The kid eyed Sam appraisingly before he said, "Got chores to take care of early in the morning. A man's got to earn his keep."

"Hell no, Quince, you're not stepping out now. You've got half our money." Ben Jenkins was red in the face and belligerent.

"Glad to hear you've got half your grubstake left, Jenkins." It was all Sam said, but it shut Jenkins up.

Teddy James used that moment to slide a plate of steak and eggs on the vacated space at the table and Sam lost interest in teasing the Double-Q heir or challenging Jenkins. He brushed the kid aside but watched his back for him, eyeing Jenkins while Quince walked through the saloon doors. Then Sam sat down behind his food and made short work of the meal.

Finished, he set the plate on the floor next to him, and with saddlebags full of money and no likely woman in sight, he settled in for a round of cards. A new girl brought drinks to the table and bent close to Sam to retrieve his dirty platter. He considered her carefully. Before he could make her an offer, Ben Jenkins stretched across the table and grabbed her arm, squeezing it 'til the bare flesh turned white in his grip.

"Keep your eyes off Sharon here, McCallister. This is my private pussy." Jenkins was drunk and cruder than usual. The woman looked at him with disgust and tried to twist out of his grip.

"Best turn loose that arm, Jenkins." The growled warning stopped all the talk in the room.

"Make me," Jenkins sneered and went for his gun. He hadn't cleared the holster before Sam stepped from chair to table to floor and stood next to him, holding a knife at his throat. Feeling the razor-sharp blade held against his flesh, Jenkins relinquished his grip carefully.

It was clear to those seated that Jenkins' life depended on the answer to Sam's next question. "You all right, Sharon?"

When she nodded and turned to go, Sam called after her, "Better soak that arm before it swells." Then he slid the knife slowly across the man's throat, leaving a trickle of blood behind. "Don't give me a reason to do this again, Jenkins. Next time I'll bite deep." His words were a promise as he shoved the man toward the door. "Get out of here."

When the belligerent asshole turned back and tried to scoop up his pile of money, Sam stopped him. "Leave it. I figure you owe Sharon damages." Sam watched the saloon girl gather the cash scattered during the altercation as Jenkins stumbled toward the exit.

Sam's gaze followed his path to the door and the men at the table waited to take up cards, still not sure Jenkins would be smart enough to keep his mouth shut and live 'til morning.

Easing back into the game, Sam watched the room for threat or excitement. Either would serve his purpose. He'd been on the trail for weeks and was filled with the need to raise hell. He nursed his drink to take the edge off, played a desultory hand or two and waited for the right woman to appear. He was focused on a fancy piece wearing a red dress when the seat across from him was vacated and a new player approached the table.

His nose told him first that someone special had arrived. It shocked him that in his scrutiny of the bar, he'd missed her. He followed the scent of Eden to the source. She wore her dark hair in a loose knot atop her head and a few stray tendrils escaped to brush against creamy skin. White ruffles on her dark blue dress called his eyes to the elegant neck and determined chin.

Every man at the table, Sam included, was spellbound when she asked, "Gentlemen, may I join you?" Green eyes ringed by sooty black lashes swept the table and included everyone seated as her full pink lips softened in a smile that revealed the dimple in her left cheek.

She stood waiting for an invitation before seating herself. Sam took the opportunity to study her form for the hundredth time. He already knew he was looking at premium stock. Tonight the dress she wore was almost severe in its cut, relieved from being drab by the white ruffle.

"You sit right down, Miz Pace." Carl Sanders fumbled a chair out and seated the lady. Evidently she'd played cards with some of the men before, which meant she'd been in Eclipse while Sam was gone.

Excitement curled in Sam's belly as a tepid night turned tasty. He had to shift on his chair to make room for his swollen cock. There was no doubt that even the swaying south end of a horse going north would have prodded Sam's need to fuck. He'd been without too long, and hard-core lust filled his loins. This woman, though, wiped out thoughts of fucking anyone else.

She sat gracefully at the table, folding her hands so that the green ring she wore sparkled at the men. "I'm Eden Pace," she introduced herself in a husky voice meant to seduce every one of them. "May I have your names? I like to know who I'm playing with."

Her words sent a jolt of desire through him, making it hard for Sam to concentrate on the cards when his head was filled with images of a different kind of play.

"Ah, hell, Eden, you know me." Carl Sanders leaned toward her in an attempt to claim friendship.

She tilted her head and acknowledged him formally, "Mr. Sanders, how nice to see you again."

For a minute Sam almost laughed out loud. The men straightened their slouched postures and scooted closer to the table as though at a tea party. She repeated each man's words as he introduced himself, saying the names as though each was important.

Sam tilted his chair on two legs to lean against the back wall. When Eden reached him, he nodded, did his own version of smiling, and said, "Ma'am." He leaned sideways, spat and hit the spittoon with accuracy, punctuating his hello. From his peripheral view, he could see her eyebrow tilt upward and a hint of smile touch her eyes.

She waited until he looked directly back at her and said before moving on, "Sam, how nice to see you again." *Damn, the lady's good.* Not by the twitch of an eyebrow did she indicate that they'd fucked in Fort Worth. Her greeting relegated him to being just another saddle bum getting a free look while she picked him clean.

Angry and ready for fun, Sam deliberately let his gaze slide south, appreciating her breasts with his glance, then moved back up to meet her eyes. The other players at the table shifted uncomfortably. There wasn't a one there with gumption enough to tell him to mind his manners, but her eyes shot the message at him. *You're rude.*

Her soft smile didn't change, though, as she moved on. Sam could see that Eden was determined to control the events at the table and his poor etiquette wasn't going to be allowed to interfere. *She doesn't know what bad manners are yet.* Sam's palm itched with the need to turn her over his knee and wale some sense into her. Better yet, he wanted to kill the bastard husband who left her to fend for herself.

Eden suggested a round of five card stud, focusing attention back on the purpose for the evening. It was okay with Sam. In fact it was one of his favorite games.

There wasn't a man at the table who wouldn't have emptied his pockets for a taste of Eden Pace, Sam included. She knew it and used it. Sam appreciated the sharp mind behind the beautiful face. She wasn't here to sell her body. She was here to strip every man at the table of his bankroll. Sam had other things in mind. Anger as well as lust burned in his belly. He kept his rage tamped down, but every now and again he caught a questioning look from her.

By the time they'd run through two hands, Sam had studied her for imperfections and found none. She was still the prettiest woman he'd ever seen and the slickest card sharp he'd run into in a while. The burn in his belly told him the stakes were higher than what was on the table. Eden just didn't know it yet.

The yahoos they were playing with were easy marks. Sam emptied their pockets on a regular basis and none of them knew his ass from a hole in the ground about playing smart poker. The lady might be elegant, but she was merciless in her performance. As she took the last of Carl Sanders' stake, the man looked flummoxed, not because he'd just lost his week's wages but because she left him no reason to linger at the table.

"Good night, Mr. Sanders. Maybe next time your luck will be better." She smiled at Carl as she bid him goodbye. The poor sap almost thanked her for letting him play poker and lose to her.



*Luck, hell! Carl never even saw it coming.* Sam continued his wall slouch. Unlike the other men, he stayed aloof. She skimmed her gaze past him each time he played, no doubt disgusted by his appearance and habits. Sam hid a grin.

Professional card sharp or not, Eden Pace was a lady. Sam shifted the wad of tobacco in his jaw and leaned sideways again, hitting the spittoon dead-on. She noted his action with a raised eyebrow, but then moved her glance and continued chatting softly to the other men at the table. When Sam saw the tiniest wrinkle of her nose, he settled into his chair and gave her more to think about than the spittoon.

He had a full-blown erection and there wasn't a way in hell he could disguise it. He spread his thighs for her to see. Neither shock nor disgust marred her face when she caught sight of his obvious desire. But he noticed after that, Eden accorded him no more than a fast glance as she spread charm and pleasantries around the table. She raked in her winnings and avoided looking at him again.

*Best, Eden, that you understand early, I'm part of your future.* Sam didn't analyze the thought he telegraphed to the lady gambler. He knew in his gut that he'd own this woman before the night ended and nothing would stop that from happening.

He was enjoying her discomfort when Sharon returned to the table to thank Sam for his earlier intervention. "I'd be pleased to join you for the night. No charge, just me and you."

It was a generous offer she whispered in his ear as she leaned against him. Any other night, he would have been upstairs fucking her already. But tonight he had an inclination to stay right where he was, watching Eden put on a show. He had a few of his own surprises to share with her.

"You can grab a couple of those fancy cigars Teddy keeps for himself," he told Sharon, peeling off some bills for her. "Keep the extra for your trouble, honey." Sharon's smile of gratitude was almost enough to make him change his mind. It was hard keeping an eye on the lady gambler at the same time Sharon draped herself over his shoulder.

"You sure about the other, Sam?" Sharon asked loud enough for the players at the table to hear. Her eyes weren't green, and her hair was an unlikely yellow color, not a glorious raven.

The intriguing nose across the table wrinkled again. "I'm good, Sharon. I'll be playing cards tonight." *Doesn't matter how I play the cards, the lady gambler will know me a lot better by morning.*

When it was Eden's deal, she shuffled with long, nimble fingers, handling the cards with subdued elegance. Sam stretched on his chair, easing his hard length into a more comfortable position. She watched him manage his erection, then sedately offered the cut before leaning toward each man to slide a card his way.

Eden Pace was refined in her dress, her hair and her manner. Every one of her movements made it clear that she was too good for the likes of him. Sam shifted the wad in his cheek and squinted at Eden. She made a pretty picture all right. The green

stone in the ring she wore on her middle right finger matched the color of her eyes. It was hard to say which sparkled brighter in the dim light of the bar.

Her scent, a mix of soap, woman and expensive perfume, was a tease, distracting her marks and leaving them with an unforgettable picture of beauty. Sam had watched her in action plenty of times before. This time he planned to change the outcome a bit.

*The pretty lady is good.* Sam studied Eden for an hour as he played cheap and bet only enough to stay in. Each hand, she accorded him the same polite smile she shared with the others at the table, silently dismissing his skill and him. His ego would have been bruised if he hadn't realized that she was intentionally ruffling his feathers to throw him off his game. He'd offended her with his hard-on. He'd figured to unsettle the lady a mite, but he had to give her credit. Eden didn't let him rattle her.

Sam liked a worthy opponent. He rarely came across one who was, and never one who was female. He let her whittle down the players one by one as she emptied their pockets, until it was just Sam and Eden facing each other across their cards. Since he'd stripped the men at the table from their money many a time, Eden was the only one surprised when he was the last man in the game. It was time to make his move.

"It's just you and me now, sweetheart," he told her.

That got a real frown from her. "My name is Eden Pace, Sam." She rebuked him with her look and stated her name clear for all to hear. The lady seemed real set on being remembered by all the men in the saloon. There was no doubt about that. She also made it plain that she had no interest in furthering their acquaintance.

"Where's that man of yours, Eden? You still earning money to settle his debts?" Sam taunted her and didn't give her a chance to regain her composure. He'd already discovered Eden's temper.

"Whereabouts are you from, Eden Pace?" He emphasized her name, mocking her rejection of his endearment.

"Clover."

"I don't think I know that town, Eden. Whereabouts is it?"

"It's just a small place with a small number of people. Houses, horses," she paused, "a bank." He annoyed her with his questions. He knew exactly when she lost her cool objectivity and decided to wipe the table up with him.

"Sounds like most of Texas," he drawled and spit again. He knew that annoyed her too. Eden tried to avoid watching, but each time he leaned sideways in the chair, her gaze followed the stream of brown liquid to the waiting spittoon.

He squinted at her winnings, estimating the amount there before he pulled more bills from his pocket and threw them down. "Let's make it interesting then, Eden Pace. I'd like to see if you can take what I've got over here." His voice was gravelly rough as he deliberately shifted on his chair, showing the hard ridge under his pants that seemed to get longer every time he felt Eden's gaze on it.

Someone in the room snickered. *If Eden could, she'd slap my face.* Instead, as he taunted her, she focused on winning Sam's roll of money. *Damn, she's a fine player. Keeps her head and doesn't let anything distract her.*

"All right." She accepted his challenge as he knew she would. The game's followers watched, eager to see her kick Sam's ass. He grinned. *It ain't gonna happen, boys. This lady and this game are all mine.*

Green eyes calculated the odds. The rest of her face remained expressionless, hiding any hint of what she might do next. Then, as Sam watched, her nose wrinkled the tiniest bit and her chin elevated as she made her decision. *I'll have to tell her someday that her nose is a giveaway.*

Alex Quince's budding interest in poker suddenly made sense. *If the lady gambler is used to toying with a boy, a man might just throw Eden off her stride. She'll take my bet and more.* She quietly assessed the pile of money he tempted her with. When the pink tip of her tongue appeared to moisten her lips, a shot of pure lust hit Sam in the groin.

She murmured, "All right, Sam. We'll play a round of stud." The edge in her voice mocked the show he'd put on all night long.

*Daniel, I believe this gentleman wants to share his wealth with us.* She hid her disgust as Sam splayed his legs wider, displaying the ridge of aroused manhood outlined by the pull of his pants. *Oh, taking his money will be such a pleasure.*

Eden's palm itched. She brushed against the spot before stroking the back of her ring with the pad of her thumb. *Eclipse was supposed to be peaceful. I need to rest up and replenish my stake for Wichita Falls.* Eden talked to Daniel in her head to calm herself. *Why is he here?* Before, when she'd been firmly disinterested in his offer of help and protection, he'd respected her "no thanks". Eden knew something had changed. Every hand or two, Sam asked Eden a question as though he had the right.

*Polite and indifferent, Eden... Steady, dear heart, you'll be just fine.* Daniel's voice filled her mind.

"It seems that you're the winner again, Sam." She bowed her head after intentionally losing another small pot to him and then straightened, discreetly easing tension in her back and shoulders.

Her eyes drifted again to the hard length that lay displayed prominently against his thigh. The distraction irritated her. So did her body's response. She could feel the heat coiling in her belly at the same time her nipples became hard buds. Disgust at her body's wanton reaction didn't stop it from happening.

Deliberately she called on Daniel for help. *It's time to even the odds, dear heart. We need that roll of bills he keeps teasing me with. It's not cheap leaving a trail of memories across Texas.* She focused again on the money and the game.

They played three hands. Sam won the first, she the second, then on the third, he pushed his stack of bills and coins into the center of the table. In contrast to his amiable pose and blatant come-on, his glance was steely cold.

Eden stared at the wager, seeing unexpected opportunity even as alarm bells clanged in her head. *It's too easy, and he's too sure of himself.* Stalling for time, she riffled through her own night's winnings as though unaware of the count.

*Time to say good night, Eden.* Daniel's warning drifted through her mind bringing with it prickles of awareness. She was cautiously attuned to the danger in the man across from her. "It has been a long day and I'm afraid I'll have to say goodnight now."

"Hell, Eden, we're just gettin' started. It ain't uncommon for me to go all night long." Eden swallowed back a scathing remark. When she didn't give a response, he added, "I've got a pile of money here for you to rake into that honey pot you're sitting on." His words were crude, blatant and insulting.

Eden could tell from the easy way he talked to the men, Sam was more than a stranger passing through Eclipse. The saloon's occupants watched as Eden retreated from both the card game and his suggestive remarks.

She bowed to her instincts. "I don't have that much, Sam. I'm afraid I'll have to decline." Eden scooted her chair away from the table, impatient to be gone. Before she could retreat with the money she'd already won, he stopped her.

"How about those earbobs you're wearin'?" he drawled. "They must be worth a little something. I'll make it easy. My pile against your pile and you throw in your jewelry, including that pretty ring on your finger."

His voice was a deep, rough growl. *What is the matter with this man?* Eden looked him over for head wounds or signs of recent violence that might have jarred his senses. She had no idea how to handle him.

Her stomach twisted in anger. The table was ringed with bystanders who had watched her win steadily all night, defeating the other players with skill. Sam issued a challenge and the night's losers waited expectantly for her to accept the bet.

She allowed her gaze to be caught and for a moment, he let her see truth. The man who stared at her with eyes as cold blue as a winter lake wasn't going to let her leave.

"This ring," she held up her hand and flashed the impressive emerald at their audience. "I'm afraid you don't have enough cash there to cover this jewel, Sam. It's a family heirloom, anyway, and I could never part with it."

Again she attempted to leave, this time with a sense of urgency beating a steady warning in her head.

"I think I can change your mind, Eden. Let's put this in the pot. It's the deed to some property I own."

Eden opened the folded paper he pushed across the table and hesitantly looked at it. Shock rippled through her when she saw her own face staring up from a wanted poster. Hastily, she slid it to join the money being wagered.

"I think that equals the worth of your gewgaws," Sam said. Eden lifted her head and looked at him before angrily stripping the jewel from her finger. When she tried to

hand it to him, he said, "Just put the ring in the pot and let's play." *What did I expect, tears? Ain't likely, this woman is as cold as that damned green ring she flashes around.*

Sam thumped his chair down to four legs sitting up straight, ready to teach Eden a lesson. He could already see she wanted to concede and run away as fast as her pretty legs would move. *Doesn't matter a goddamn bit how fast she flies, I'll follow and damned if I won't...* He shut his thoughts off and concentrated on the game. Her ring sat in the middle of the table, part of the pile that also held the wanted poster. *Ain't no way the lady is walking away from me this time.*

"You're tired, Eden." Sam could see her drifting, which was strange since Eden never lost her focus. *She for damned sure needs someone to take charge. The absent husband sure as hell ain't helpin' her any.* The shadows under her eyes and the taut skin across her cheekbones had Sam's attention. *She's lost weight and she's exhausted.*

Sam said, "One hand, high card wins and winner takes all." It was a fool's bet. There was no skill involved, just chance.

"Your deal or mine?" she asked sharply. He handed her the deck. Without hesitation she revealed his card, the seven of spades. Sam could see her fingers tremble as she touched the back of the remaining deck. The odds had shifted in her favor.

He reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a cigar, raising an eyebrow for consent. When she nodded, he struck a lucifer and squinted at her through the flame. Before she could turn the next card, he asked, "Care to add a side wager?"

When she didn't answer, he prodded again. "Lost your nerve, pretty lady?" He sat forward on his chair and drew deep on the cigar, enjoying himself.

She had an unexpected urge to reach across the table and scratch lines across his smug face. "I'm afraid everything I have to wager is already on the table." No side bet, or inducement for such, could change her mind. Sam was being a complete ass. The odds were in her favor and she wanted to wipe that smile off his face. "Not a chance," she muttered.

"If that card's anything but a heart less than seven, you take your winnings and walk. I won't bother you again," he paused, then added, "tonight. Might want to take care though," he cautioned. "A piece of property like I just bet will get a lot of interest from other players. Hate to see you miss out on a sure thing and an easy ride home."

A unified gasp from their audience sounded in one loud protest. *The odds already make me favorite with more high cards available than low.* But if he kept his mouth shut about the wanted poster to others, she could ride out of town tonight and have time to plot a new strategy.

*So much for him being a rough gentleman.* Eden shed her illusions and focused on the man who offered her freedom on the turn of a card. Her trembling fingers stilled their movement. "And if I lose?"

"You're mine." Eden watched Sam draw deep from the cigar, obviously enjoying his sport, daring her to take the bet. He smiled and for the first time that night he let her see desire in the eyes staring back at her. He was a menace.

She stroked the top card thoughtfully, calculating and recalculating his chances. The deck was fresh and he'd not handled it. *At this point Sam would already have stacked any deck he handled.* That gave her pause. "All right," she agreed. "Side bet is acknowledged and accepted." Eden flipped over her card and stared at the five of hearts.

A loud whoop erupted from the watchers and uncomfortable laughter escaped some of her earlier marks. She waited for one of them to protest on her behalf. None did. When rescue wasn't an option, Eden conceded with a shrug. She didn't look at him again. Not when he put out his cigar, and not when he collected her winnings, her earbobs, the emerald ring and the folded handbill from the table.

"Guess that's it." His words acted as a dismissal for those who had witnessed the game. The saloon patrons scattered.

Eden's face burned hot with shame. *Daniel, I have to get away from this big lummo.* All of her skill had meant nothing. She'd lost everything on the turn of a card. She felt bitter betrayal at the hands of this man and the pain of it constricted her throat.

"Eden?" He stood and walked around to pull out her chair, looming over her.

*Daniel, my room has a nice big window with a porch overhang.* Eden handed her key to Sam, her panicked thoughts keeping her mute. It had been a long day, and it seemed the night was not yet ended. *I have a fifty-dollar gold piece sewn into the hem of my gown and the lady's derringer you gave me in my reticule. I've been in tighter corners. He'll let down his guard one way or the other and I'll free myself.*

Sam accompanied her from the saloon. He held her arm as he put his body between her and the darkened street on their walk toward the hotel. "Pretty night out, isn't it Eden?" He made small talk. She didn't answer. "What's a woman like you doing in a town like Clover?"

"Surviving." Her one-word answer didn't invite more questions.

"Your man still waiting on you?" he asked.

"Yes." *Whatever happens tonight is no more than a stop on my journey back to Daniel.* She'd trusted Sam and he'd humiliated her publicly. It was a measure of his effect on her that his disrespect was more alarming than the wanted poster.

"Seems like you've been a busy woman since last we met. Want to tell me why there's a handbill circulating with your face on it?" There was no mistaking the controlled rage in his voice. Where his hand tightened on her arm, Eden expected to find bruises on the morrow.

"I have no idea why I'm wanted for anything," she replied, then added, "If you don't release my arm, Mr. McCallister, I'm going to—"

"What? Scream for the sheriff? Hell, sweetheart, in case you've forgotten, I'm a bounty hunter and you're my prisoner." He snarled the words and turned to look at her as they stood in the middle of the boarded walkway. He slid his hand up her arm and rested it under the crook in her elbow, lessening the strength of his hold but keeping her chained by his side nevertheless. She stopped listening to his questions then.

When they entered the lobby, a night clerk came from behind the front desk as her escort led her up the stairs. "We don't run that kind of place, Miz Pace. I'm sorry but—" The clerk stood nervously at the bottom of the steps, trying to do his job.

Eden's companion paused long enough to reassure the hotel employee with money and words. "Private poker game, Henry. We won't want disturbed until late morning. Then have them deliver coffee and breakfast from the café down the street." From the deferential look on the man's face, she surmised that Sam was either very rich or very dangerous.

The clerk grabbed the bills that were tossed his way and nodded. "Okay, Snake. Sorry I bothered you. I was just doing my job."

"Why do they call you Snake?" Eden discreetly tested the strength of his hold but found the seemingly loose clasp of his hand unshakable. It was his turn to ignore her question, but he tightened his grip. His smile was a hard grimace and his blue eyes chilled her with cold rage.

*He's male, and that's all you need for an edge, Eden.* The words played in her head as if Daniel walked up the stairs with her. Sam had her money. She needed it and her jewelry along with the roll of bills he'd stuffed in his saddlebags. *One way or another, I'll escape this man.*

"I presume you're not stopping outside the door tonight." It was a silly question she regretted as soon as she asked.

His headshake confirmed his intent, and it was clear when he used her key to enter the room, it was Sam who controlled all the outcomes.

## Chapter Five

Eden prepared to be mauled as soon as Sam closed the door. Instead, he slid his hand down her arm, taking her reticule with him. She lost her first planned defense as soon as he opened her purse and took possession of the derringer. She watched him put it in his saddlebag. "When were you planning on using this? You were better protected when you carried it in your pocket."

"As soon as the opportunity presented itself," she answered truthfully. And yes, she'd let down her defenses tonight. Eclipse had seemed such a safe haven after the rough places she'd visited lately.

"Is that why you've got a murder charge hanging over your head? A man got you in a corner and you had to fight him off?" He fairly bristled with rage as he asked her the question. Turning his back on her and any attempt she might make to leave, he paced the room. Eden didn't appease his curiosity or move toward the door.

She already knew it was a futile effort. Each of his questions led to another, and she was tired of listening to him. She'd witnessed the speed of the man. She wasn't a complete fool. For all his seeming disinterest in her movements, Eden knew Sam would block any attempt she made to escape.

She looked around the room for ways to even the odds. No weapons were readily at hand. Her yellow parasol leaned against the second chair, but it would be a useless twig beating against an oak. She clasped her hands in front of her and waited.

"Your man teach you to play cards like that?"

Eden smiled at the idea. "No, I taught him." Daniel was fascinated at how she could remember every card played and figure the odds of winning.

Sam abruptly ordered, "I've got a bottle of whiskey in that saddlebag, Eden. Fetch it over here to me." He sat on the chair facing her, commanding her to obey.

Her derringer was in the saddlebag. She could... She calculated the time it would take to fumble open the flap and pull it out. Sam's gun was holstered, the knife he'd used earlier sheathed, but Eden knew he might use either swiftly if she attempted to get her gun. *Wanted dead or alive...* She stared at him, considering the possibility.

*Do what you need to do.* For once she wanted to ignore Daniel's instructions. She was tired and at the moment she wasn't sure that dying was such a bad idea. For all his questions and seeming interest in her life, the man across the room was really intent on only one thing. Any friendship that she had thought blossoming between them was a sham. *I mean nothing more to him than an opportunity to slake his lust before he collects a reward.*



She studied Sam, repressing the unexpected pain as she looked for ways to gain her freedom. When she continued to ignore his order, he repeated the one word coldly. "Fetch."

Eden gritted her teeth as he used the word, taunting her with it. *He wants me to lose my temper.* She tensed, fighting the fever of want he stirred in her. *I have to remain in control. If I choose to continue my journey, seduction seems the only weapon at hand.*

Eden carried the saddlebag and a glass she found on the nightstand over to where he lounged in his chair. When she handed both to him, he pulled out the bottle and poured enough whiskey in the glass to cover the bottom inch with amber liquid. His eyes had changed color again, into the darker and more intense blue she'd seen once earlier in the night. "Drink up," he ordered her and tipped the bottle to his lips.

Eden sipped her drink, swallowing as he did. *You can do this, Eden.* The whispered thought and the false courage of alcohol made her brave. Her body flushed with heat as the liquid burned a path down her throat. Sam didn't stop drinking, but when she reached into her pocket, his eyes returned to the flat, icy stare of before.

Pulling out the deck of cards, she fanned them open, holding them outstretched in both hands. "Let's play," she invited him. "You pull a card, I pull a card. Low card removes an article of clothing." As she watched, the harsh cold in Sam's eyes disappeared. *Good, I have an edge. I surprised him.*

He growled, "And then what?"

"After we..." Eden paused and delicately moistened her lips. "After we play, then we can discuss our other transactions." His eyes shifted back to the darker shade of blue. Without a word, he drew and revealed a ten.

"Draw for me, please," she requested. "My hands are full."

"The lady gets to choose," Sam said and displayed the Queen of Clubs.

Eden answered quickly. "Your shirt, please."

His chest was broad, rippling with strong muscles and browned by the sun. She inspected the pelt of blond hair curling around his nipples and meandering in a light trail to his belt. Eden touched her lips with the tip of her tongue, remembering the taste of him.

He sat forward and pulled another two cards. Again hers was higher and she directed him. "Remove your belt, please."

He smiled when he stood and unbuckled the heavy leather strap that wrapped his waist and held his gun. He didn't hurry, seeming to enjoy the tension that mounted as she waited.

When she moistened her lips a second time, his left eyebrow went up. "Thirsty?"

He set his gunbelt on the arm of the chair, though close enough to retrieve in a hurry. Lifting her glass, he held it to her lips. As she sipped the whiskey, she deliberately inspected his gaze. His eyes had darkened into points of midnight blue.

Before he set the glass on the table, he drank from the place her lips had just touched. Every nerve in her body tightened when his tongue licked a drop from the rim.

Eden lost the next three sets, and with them, her shoes, her hair combs and her handkerchief. They were not the articles of clothing she would have chosen. She wanted this interlude over and forgotten. He deliberately drew out the game to remind her he was in control.

When he lost the next round, she ordered him to remove his boots. He stripped off his socks as well, evidently eager with his own disrobing.

Frustrated fury roiled in Eden's stomach. When Sam spoke, his rumbled words stirred the nerve endings beneath her skin. Even the hair on the nape of her neck rose like the hackles of an animal preparing for battle.

"You've been watching me for almost two months. Why?" Eden hid her rage and made conversation as she maneuvered him.

"Four," he corrected her.

"Well, if I had to run into someone with the handbill, it's actually fortunate that Snake McCallister found me first." Deliberately she used the outlaws' name for Sam. *Don't let your hurt feelings get in the way of your head.*

Eden didn't know whether it was Daniel speaking to her or her own common sense, but the thought steadied her enough to focus on lulling her captor into a moment of carelessness. The letter she mailed in Fort Worth had brought results and Sam McCallister was the courier carrying the outlaws' response.

She couldn't suppress a shudder when she blurted, "Are you a messenger from Ansell Black?" She knew the answer before he frowned. It was testimony to her exhaustion that her battles were becoming mixed in her mind. She tried to relax.

Sam's eyes shifted from deep midnight back to a pale study in icy reserve. "You carryin' messages for the wanteds, Eden?"

Sam interrupted her plan of seduction with hard questions. He was aroused and ready, she had enticed him in every way she could think. And still he watched her from hooded eyes, deciding what to do with her.

For a moment she considered asking for his help. But this wasn't the attentive admirer who gallantly escorted her on lonely nights. This was a skilled hunter, a killer, and Eden realized she didn't know him at all and had no reason to trust the man who had once made passionate love to her. *It wasn't love. It was pure lust and that's what will defeat him this time. I owe him nothing.*

She held the cards toward him and waited. "Are we playing?"

His expression was grim, not the impassioned focus of a would-be lover. But the red slashes of heat that burned across the tan skin on his cheekbones told their own story. He nodded as if coming to a decision and drew a card.

She lost the next match and with it, her dress. When she stood before him in her linen shift and petticoat, he walked around her, openly assessing her body. Dread and arousal mingled in a confused tangle. She felt the familiar wild surge of need only he called from her. Her body quickened. Her breath became a shallow thread.

"Feels like silk." He held a strand of her hair that had fallen from its knot and tickled her bare shoulder with it. She tried, but couldn't control a shiver that raised goose bumps on her flesh when his breath brushed warmly against her neck.

"I don't carry messages to wanteds," she told him. The lock of hair stilled in its teasing path, replaced with his lips.

"Sure hope not, Eden. Things could get a mite awkward between us."

Eden didn't know what his words meant. She'd measured the distance to his gun when he stood behind her. She knew he had too.

Abruptly, he returned to the game. He took the remaining cards from her clenched hand, unfurled them, handed them back and said, "Your turn, Eden."

She lost, and lost and lost again, until her only remaining garments were her ribbon-tied silk stockings and the thin linen shift that gave cover only to her knees. She drew the King of Spades for Sam and the Ace of same for herself.

"Please remove your trousers." He stepped from his pants, including with them the long underwear he wore. She focused on the darker hair on his ankles instead of the naked man.

Her breath stilled in her lungs as the moment for courage was on her. *At least he's clean.* From the state of his clothes she had expected caked filth. His feet had given her hope, so Eden considered Sam's dirt-free body a bonus.

"You can look up now, Eden." He lifted her chin with his finger and her gaze traveled up long legs, strong thighs and stilled for a moment on the hard length of manhood that jutted from his groin. Then he cupped her face in his hands so that she had to look at him when he asked, "You sure you don't want to tell me what this is about?"

Eden ignored his question and jerked her chin from his grasp. She would control this part of the night. She said in a husky whisper, "You're overdressed." She stared fixedly at the knife strapped to the back of his neck. *If I kiss him now, I can...* Before she put her thought into action, Sam answered.

"So are you." He removed the knife and stepped closer to her. He still hadn't touched anything but a strand of her hair and a spot on her shoulder that burned from the brush of his lips.

Her body coiled anticipating his next move. But when his sharp blade cut the thin straps of her shift, the silken cloth slid down her body and she gasped in denial at the same time her nipples became hard buds reaching toward him. "Do you ever just undress a woman?" she asked him in exasperation.

Then the reality of her situation struck her. She stood in her ribbon-tied stockings and nothing else and measured the distance to the weapon. *I can do this, Daniel.* Her mind rejected her body's desire and she prepared to lunge across Sam to reach his gun.

But she hesitated too long. Sam lifted her as though she weighed nothing and carried her to the chair across the room. He stood her before him then seated himself.

Scorching heat surged through Eden's body when Sam leaned forward and cupped her breasts. His calloused palms caressed her sensitive skin as he inspected them, teasing her nipples gently, rotating the pads of his thumbs against her flesh while he watched her face. When he spoke this time, his voice was a rough parody of before, gravelly proof of his aroused state. "You're a beautiful woman, Eden Pace."

She gazed down at him, trembling under his touch. He pinched the budded ends, his touch not quite hurtful but hard enough to send a jolt of desire roaring through her.

*I will not cede control to this man.* Eden met his eyes. Instead of the gaze of a besotted lover, he studied her ruthlessly, a hint of contempt in his expression. She looked away from the mesmerizing stare, studying his fully aroused member instead.

Heavy veins traced a pattern up the thick shaft. White liquid seeped from the slit on the plump head. Her body tightened and her womb clenched remembering the way he had been almost too big to fit inside her.

Sam dropped his hands from her breasts to fondle the heavy sac between his legs at the same time he pumped his other hand up and down on his staff, pleasuring himself.

"Taste me," he invited, spreading his thighs wider to make room for her.

Sam knew Eden's game was a diversion aimed at escape, not shared pleasure. He prepared to enjoy her offer anyway, since her body called to him for relief even as her mind resisted. She stood indecisively before him, as though maybe seduction hadn't been the right choice after all. *It's a little late to change your plan, Eden.* Sam's cock waved in the air, and just touching it, he risked coming. Slowly, he pumped his fist up and down. As he watched, she licked her lips, arousal painting a rosy glow across her alabaster skin.

"Taste me," he challenged her. He wanted her willing and hot, like she'd been before. He was caught in a web of lust more powerful than any force he'd ever encountered. He didn't expect it and was caught by surprise when she sank to her knees between his legs. Her hair brushed against his thigh and his cock swelled bigger, jutting toward what it wanted.

"Christ," he shuddered, already under her spell as she nipped along his inner thigh and moved toward his groin with lips and teeth. Eden's face was flushed, her full bottom lip pink against the ruddy cock she tasted.

He didn't suppress his groan of pleasure when she sipped delicately along his hard length, stopping to swirl her tongue or trace a thick vein. He held on to his control as she licked him like a kitten eating up cream.

*God, what a mouth she has.* She wasn't shy about taking what she wanted, either. Sam had been fucking women since he turned fourteen. He'd tried every position or method of coupling known to man or woman and enjoyed every one of them. As he watched Eden part her lips and take him, he appreciated her skill at the same time he rejected her knowledge. Then he forgot everything but pleasure.

He couldn't suppress a growl. Her skin was hot where she leaned against his leg. As she worked his cock with her mouth, he caressed her breast. The rounded globe was a paradox, both yielding and firm. He thumbed her rigid nipple and she shuddered against him, burying her face between his thighs.

She laved his balls with her tongue and delivered velvet caresses with her lips. Her mouth was a tantalizing miracle. Sam was coiled tight riding the knife edge of almost pain as his body demanded completion. He fought to prolong the exquisite agony. Setting his back teeth, he gripped the arms of the chair and let her play.

"Easy, sweetheart," he murmured as she tilted her head for better access. Eden rolled the sensitive flesh between her tongue and the roof of her mouth and Sam spread wider, encouraging her. "Don't stop, Eden. Use that pretty mouth on me some more."

Watching her work her lips and tongue back up his cock turned his flesh to pulsing stone. He fumbled loose the knot confining her hair, and when it tumbled free, he stroked the back of her head, savoring the exquisite feel of her worshiping his flesh. The silken mane cascaded in a shimmering mass. He drew it away from her face to see what she did better.

Eden was flushed, her eyes glazed with passion as her lips played along his length, nuzzling his flesh, enjoying him. Sam didn't know many women who liked this form of love play, but it was clear Eden was one of the few.

By the time she reached the top, Sam's control was gone and he growled, "Time to get down to business, Eden." When her lips surrounded the head of his cock, he cupped her face and thrust into the warm moist heat of her mouth, withdrawing and then thrusting again. "Take more of it." His order was delivered in gravelly tones. She widened her jaw upon demand, and he angled her head to take him deeper.

He had intended to have her pussy first, but his cock had other ideas. "Suck on it." He guided her effort to take his size. "Relax your throat and let me in, Eden." His directions were unnecessary. She adjusted her position and swallowed his length, throat muscles caressing the sensitive head. Her hands came up to fondle his balls as she rested her head against his thigh, opening her throat for his thrusts.

Eden made a humming sound and the claspings muscles of her throat vibrated around his pumping cock. Sam came with a shout. His cum released in hot spurts of cream she swallowed greedily. Her breasts bumped against Sam's calf as she milked him with her mouth. Sharp nails raked his thigh to add yet another point of sensation and his hips came off the chair, bucking upward in short jabs. At the last moment, she gripped his hips with her hands, pulling him deeper.

When Eden had drained the last drop from him, Sam sank back and closed his eyes, savoring the extraordinary pleasure she'd just given him. Delicately, she stroked his left thigh with her hand, prolonging the ecstasy as he sucked air into his lungs and fought to regain his hold on sanity. "Hang on a minute, Eden, and I'll satisfy you."

Sam's head was spinning from the powerful orgasm knocking him almost senseless. He barely noticed when Eden's silken head left his thigh. She claimed his attention a moment later, though. When he heard the click of a hammer cocking, he opened his eyes.

"I've found my own release." Her husky reply mocked him as she stepped into her clothes while pointing the gun at him.

Her cheeks were flushed, her lips swollen and even facing the derringer, Sam wanted to gather that mane of black hair and wrap himself in it.

From the determined look on her face, he didn't doubt that she planned to use the gun if necessary. Sam accorded her respect. She'd kept him watching his six-shooter on the chair, all the time intent on the derringer he'd put in his saddle bags. She held the weapon steadily, dressing as he sat still and waited.

"Want me to button you up?" he mocked her.

Eden shrugged into the dress and ignored his offer as she methodically stripped her things from the room and packed them in her knapsack. "You plannin' on shooting me before you leave?"

Her glare was more irritated than threatening and Sam relaxed. He couldn't figure out any other way the lady was going to get out of the room. She was too intelligent to try to tie him, and by the jut of her chin, he was pretty sure she'd blast him with the gun if he made a grab for her.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Eden. I'll take care of the wanted poster on you." As a matter of fact, she didn't look scared, she looked angry.

"I've just experienced an example of your tender care of me, Mr. McCallister." Her words were a scathing rebuke. "I believe I'm better off handling my own problems."

"You're going to have to put down the damned gun and exercise some sense." Since he was sitting without a stitch on and she was the one armed at the moment, his demand was ludicrous. Sam had to swallow hard, afraid that she'd shoot him if he fell out laughing. Before he could start enumerating all the reasons why Eden might as well give herself up to him, she moved to the window and tugged it open, careful to keep the derringer pointed at him.

"Damn it, woman, you'll break your neck crawling around out there. Shit, Eden, do you have no common sense at all? At least you know me. Hell, there's a bounty on you. You can't go runnin' around the countryside free and easy anymore."

Her delicate snort was the only answer to his words as she moved back into the room and gathered his boots, belt, pants and shirt. Without taking her eyes off him, she returned to the window and began tossing out his gear. "You might want to have these cleaned. Your clothes reek of sweat and you, Mr. McCallister."

When she finished throwing the whole bundle out, he let his smile show. "You'll pay for that, Eden." She was something else standing defiantly before him. He was hard again, needing more than her talented mouth to ease his swollen cock, but it didn't look as though Eden had plans to stay and play.

"So will you," she replied as she topped off her knapsack with his saddlebags, closing it with a snap.

At the door, she turned back with the answer to one question. "Yes, I killed a man. And if I could, I'd kill him again." Then she walked out of the room and left him sitting bare-assed naked on the edge of the chair.

Sam could have raced after her. But he was too caught up enjoying her victory over him to bother. "Well I'll be damned. Guess I didn't handle that quite right." *Whoever she killed, it was out of pure hatred.*

All his earlier anger disappeared as he thought over her declaration. *I'd kill him again.* That's all Sam needed to confirm that the man deserved to die. *But if she's not running from a murder, what in the hell is the woman up to?"*

"Eden, I suspect you need me a lot more than you realize." Sam was talking to an empty room as he made his plans. It was only the second time in his life anyone had ever gotten the drop on Snake McCallister. The first time, he'd been fourteen and an untried youth. This time he was a man and he had no excuse.

Admiration for Eden's nerve settled over him. His face relaxed in an unusual smile. The sun lines around his eyes crinkled in true merriment and a chuckle turned into a gruff laugh of amazement. He stared at the closed door and around the empty room she'd left him in. "It's your pot, Eden. Shuffle the cards, pretty lady. We've another hand to play."

\* \* \* \* \*

After considering Eden's win from every angle, Sam climbed out the window to retrieve his clothes. The hotel's fancy slanted roof overlooked the street and he scanned the dark shadows for a glimpse of his prey, but only spotted his shirt lying in red dirt below.

"Damned woman," he growled quietly, retrieving the pants and gunbelt that had been too heavy for her to throw. His neckpiece hung precariously on the edge of the slanted roof and he almost went over retrieving it. "Jesus, she's going to pay for this."

But his complaint held no anger and his lips quirked in a satisfied grin. He paid no heed to his own place two windows down until his pants were on and he stood buckling his belt. Then a shadowed movement in a place that should have been empty caught his attention.

As stealthily as his namesake, Sam moved down the roof to the window of his room. A quick look inside confirmed his need for care. Ben Jenkins swayed drunkenly, a shotgun clutched in his hands, ready to blow apart the first person through the door.

Sam eased open the window and took Jenkins from behind, his knife slicing through jugular and bone before the man even knew he was prey not predator. Sam cleaned his blade on the dead man's shirt, then stepped over him and out the door to report the killing to the sheriff.

"You've got a mess to clean up," he told the wide-eyed clerk when he passed him. He suspected the clerk was having an eventful night, what with Eden coming down earlier with her dress undone and her knapsack in hand.

All in all, explanations to Sheriff Potter cost Sam time in following Eden's trail. It occurred to Sam that in a roundabout way, Eden Pace had saved his life again. *As furious with me as she was when she left, I'd not count on it happening a third time.*

A quick question at the stable elicited the description of the horse she'd bought. "I sold her Henley's big roan, Sam. She said she was heading for Wichita Falls."

Sam wondered about that as he tracked her. She was traveling fast in the direction he'd been given. She might as well have left him a map, and after an evening with Eden, he knew that the pretty lady didn't do anything without first calculating the outcome.

Whatever her reason, Eden wanted him to follow her. Sam didn't put it down to his charm. Her creative escape had earned his respect and his earlier contempt at seeing her name on a wanted handbill disappeared as he followed where she led. *I reckon a woman has to use whatever weapon she has at hand.*

About the time he remembered her question about him being Ansell Black's messenger, Deacon and Charlie Wolf caught up with him. It was already late afternoon. Talk and explanations didn't take place until they stopped to walk the horses for a breather.

"Heard you had a run-in with Ben Jenkins that left him dead," Deacon said. "Shame there was no paper on him." In the way of Eclipse news, Sam's had already been published by word of mouth, including the night clerk's second edition of the story.

Charlie Wolf was more interested in their destination. "We chasing the woman? Guess you didn't get to eat breakfast with her like the hotel clerk said you planned."

Charlie, being more observant than most, also noticed his missing pouch. "Must have been quite a poker game if the Pace woman won your roll of bills and your saddlebags."

Sam rubbed the rough stubble on his chin and admitted, "Little devil bested me for sure."

"Someday, brother, you need to explain how you came to be out on the roof of the Eclipse Hotel in the middle of the night." Deacon looked at him curiously and shifted the wad of tobacco in his jaw, waiting.

Sam couldn't hide his smile when he remembered how he'd come to be naked on the roof. "Eden's a damn good player," was all he offered as an explanation.



The next time they pulled up for a breather, Charlie Wolf mentioned his visit with the sheriff of Eclipse. "Since you took off with the handbills yesterday, we picked up another set when we were in Hiram Potter's office."

Charlie lit a cigar and drew on it, all the time staring hard at Sam. "Seems like a woman wanted for murder would be hightailing it out of Texas, not sitting in poker games and flashing a fancy ring guaranteed to make a man remember her."

Deacon scratched his red beard and added, "Unless she wants to get caught."

Sam figured the same, but not by the law. "Who'd she kill?" Soaking off trail dirt in the Eclipse Hotel tub, he'd recognized her face and the charge she was wanted for. Murder had its own distinct signature. The particulars weren't important at the time. But now they were. There was cold-blooded murder, and then there was killing. Some folks were better dead. Sam wanted to know who Eden had hated that much.

*She could have shot me.* He almost smiled. *She could have slit his throat there for a moment after he'd come. Christ. I'm hard again just thinking about it.* He shifted his stance and eased his horse between him and the other two men.

Deacon frowned at Sam. "She killed the bank president in her town. Dammit Sam, she's got paper on her all over Texas."

"She described Clover as a town with houses, horses and a bank. Pretty strange she'd drag in mention of that when she's being hunted for killing the banker."

Deacon looked perplexed. "I don't know what her game is, but if your gambler woman is a smart enough to beat you at cards, she's got a reason."

Sam let that misunderstanding lay quiet. Eden had bested him, but it wasn't with cards. Heat collected in his groin at the memory.

Charlie Wolf, who knew Apache strategy, swung onto his horse, saying, "I'd say she's baiting a trap." And then he looked at Sam and laughed. "And I'd say she already caught more than she reckoned on."

Sam shifted his chew and spat, hitting a cactus a good ways distant. He ignored Charlie's final words and said, "One way or another, I'll be there when the trap is sprung."

The three split up and Sam rode into Wichita Falls alone, with borrowed money from Deacon to pay his way. A quick question at the livery stable got him pointed to the most expensive hotel in town. He didn't doubt for a minute that Eden Pace waited for him there.

## Chapter Six

When Eden bought a horse from the Eclipse livery, she asked the owner about Sam. "Would you know a man named Sam who is sometimes called Snake?" she asked the stableman as she mounted.

"That would be Snake McCallister, ma'am. He's part of a family of bounty hunters. They've got a ranch not too far from here. Doesn't pay to cross 'em," he warned her.

Eden wasn't surprised that Sam was considered dangerous. She'd seen her share of violence where he was involved. Even in the card game, he'd stalked her and separated her from the crowd. She'd been outmaneuvered by him into a private game.

*I must have been insane to ever trust him.* Eden harbored a personal grudge against Sam. Unbeknownst to him, he'd made her feel safe in a dangerous world. His disaffection seemed worse than all the betrayals coming before.

Anger and determination to remain free had made her pit her wits against his to remain in control. But once away from him, she knew immediately she'd not be able to elude him. His final, "You'll pay for that," was a promise. She'd spent enough time studying men to know dangerous intent when she heard it.

Eden barely noticed her surroundings on the trip to Wichita Falls. Whether walking Horse when he needed a breather or riding steadily toward her destination, Sam McCallister was on her mind. She needed to be in the Wichita Falls poker game and he couldn't be permitted to interfere with that plan.

She considered half-formed ideas, trying to replace the memory of his hard flesh between her lips and the moment every part of her body had reached for the release she craved.

*Give me a minute and I'll satisfy you, Eden.* His offer was unnecessary. She'd climaxed when his ejaculate filled her throat.

Eden's womb flexed remembering how his big hand squeezed her breast in time with the pulsing jet of his spill. He'd growled in wanton pleasure. Her face flushed, aroused and ashamed as she relived the jut of his hips when she'd pulled him deeper, spiraling with him into ecstasy.

Disgusted by her loss of control, Eden turned her thoughts to her husband. *You were right, Daniel. Being captured by a bounty hunter who thinks with his shaft isn't all bad. I used his weakness once, if need be, I will again.* She tried valiantly to reduce the incident to no more than a battle tactic.

*He has a wanted poster on me, I have his money.* She didn't doubt that Sam McCallister would come after her. Part of her counted on it. *I might actually survive this game, Daniel,*

*if Sam McCallister guards my back.* Then she wondered at that thought—until recently, her desire to live had been focused on one end—justice.

"I'm tired," she muttered. "I need a good night's sleep with the assurance of safety." She thought of Sam McCallister's offer. *I'll take care of the wanted poster on you Eden.* She wondered how he could "take care of" a murder charge.

Ruthlessly she shoved those thoughts aside. *If I can't control him, I don't need him.* The handbill had been a surprise and was now another obstacle in her path. It was recent, yet she'd killed Aaron Richards months before.

Eden considered employing the services of the predatory hunter, then rejected the idea as impossible. *He's made his interest in me clear. I'm to be a prisoner he toys with 'til he collects my bounty.* She could handle the clamoring physical need he kindled. She'd already proven her power over him and wouldn't forget again he was an adversary, another element in the game to be managed. *I will do what I must to gain his protection until my business is completed. Then he can turn me in, dead or alive, and collect his reward.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden stood in the best hotel in Wichita Falls, fumbling with the money in Sam's saddlebags while the clerk stammered his refusal.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he stuttered, taking in her bedraggled appearance. Her buttons were still undone and her face covered in trail dirt. "There's politicking going on in town. I'm afraid we don't have any vacancies."

She was too tired to argue and was turning away when she remembered the reaction of the last clerk to a name. "I'm Mrs. Samuel McCallister, Snake McCallister's wife. He'll be joining me soon and expects to have a room here." Suddenly her unkempt appearance didn't matter and not just a room but a suite was available. She'd tested the power of Snake McCallister and found his reach spread farther than Eclipse, Texas.

The change was instantaneous and apologetic, so Eden added, "Send up a tub of hot water and make sure I'm not disturbed until my husband joins me later in the day."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden sank into the hot water and groaned. *If I get nothing else out of my encounter with the bounty hunter...* Protected by his name and for once able to relax, Eden soaked her aching muscles and rested. When Sam let himself into the room, her body sighed with relief as though it had been waiting for that moment and she leaned back, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

She woke to the sound of men talking. Sam and his partners spoke quietly about criminals they pursued. She listened and silently explored the area where she rested. It wasn't a tub. She was naked under the covers on the bed. Without opening her eyes, she had no idea where her clothes were. Eden stayed still and luxuriated in her unexpected sense of safety. She'd slept well for the first time in months. Her mind

played over the events that had led her here. They stalled on the man she'd tasted so greedily in the Eclipse hotel room. He'd been a presence in her life for months.

She didn't move, but felt a flush of shame as she remembered the stagecoach encounter, their Fort Worth night of passion, and her escape from Eclipse. Although she was sure that she hadn't moved or changed the rhythm of her breathing, he walked to the bed and stared down at her. She tensed—suddenly afraid. She didn't need to open her eyes to know it was Sam McCallister. Her nose wrinkled as it relayed the smell of sagebrush, cigar smoke and him.

"Time to open your eyes, Missus McCallister," he growled the words sarcastically. "Being's how I've got a woman now, maybe I can get these clothes washed that your nose takes such exception to."

Eden met his gaze and said, "Maybe." She relaxed and let a smile rearrange her features. Humiliation and anger eased into humor at the way he drawled the word "Missus". Her captor didn't appear ready to embarrass her in front of the others and acquiring a laundress seemed to appeal to him.

His words were teasing, but when their eyes met, heat seared her. Her nipples rubbed against the sheet, tenting the fine material and announcing her unbidden response to his nearness. She pulled the cover to her neck and sat up, clutching it as she leaned against the headboard. Eden used the first distraction that came to mind. "Please introduce me to your business associates."

He shocked her when he scooped her up along with the sheet, moving them across the room to where two men sat watching.

Sam clarified, "Partners *and* relatives. The business is bounty hunting." Bouncing her in his arms he said playfully, "Eden, meet the family. The Indian over there is Charlie Wolf, my half-Kiowa cousin. The red-headed savage is my brother, Deacon." He grinned at the men and drawled, "Boys, meet my bride, Eden Pace..." he paused before adding, "McCallister."

Kicking a chair into place, he and Eden sat facing the two men who eyed her speculatively. There was nothing separating her naked flesh from Sam but a thin covering, a poor barrier she pulled tighter as she pushed insistently on his arms. Sam ignored her. Politely she said to the other two men, "I would prefer a seat of my own so that I might see you all as we have conversation."

"This is not a poker game, Eden, and what you prefer doesn't count for much right now." Sam ignored her request, settling them more comfortably on the chair, as he cradled her in his arms. His engorged sex pressed against her rump. It was too large to ignore when every shift in her position rocked her against his length, teasing her as much as him. Her skin pebbled and she shivered, remembering the wanton response he'd called from her more than once.

"Cold, Eden?" Sam murmured the question in her ear.

Their silent battle of wills was interrupted by Deacon. "Eden Pace," the red-haired man said. "I knew a Daniel Pace when I attended the seminary. He was a man to my boy, but we were friends just the same."

It wasn't what she'd expected him to say. Eden sighed and closed her eyes as she prepared to face the man who Daniel had once described as his friend. The red-haired bounty hunter must be Robert McCallister. A fleeting thought brought her eyes back open. Perhaps she wasn't alone in this mess. She studied the man across from her closely.

Sam's arm encircled her waist tightening as he stroked the folds of the white material covering her stomach. His hand, calloused and browned by the sun, stirred a primitive awareness in Eden. His behavior was indecent. So was her response. The other two men in the room offered her no rescue from Sam, and struggle seemed futile, so she spoke to the two across from her and ignored the one behind.

"Robert McCallister." She nodded. "I should have recognized the McCallister name when Sam and I met. Forgive me, I've been distracted." Of all the twists of fate she'd encountered, this meeting seemed the most incredible. "My husband spoke of you often." Daniel's rich laughter filled her mind.

Eden smiled in resignation and said, "He told a story about the ministerial candidate with a temper matching the fire in his hair. That would be you, I presume." She risked a swift look back at Sam, comparing the brothers. Her eyes met his and her breath quickened.

"Please allow me to sit alone." The shake of his head was his answer. Sam's hand stopped its mesmerizing movement to press her tighter against him, reminding her of his *ownership* with the prod of his cock against her rump.

Eden strained away from him, holding her internal muscles taut to deny the flexing of her womb. But Sam knew. He pressed harder, bringing their joined hands to the lower edge of her belly. Eden shivered violently and brushed his hand aside. "Stop it," she ordered him and focused on Robert, Daniel's old friend.

"It was a connection he regretted losing." Eden tried to turn the conversation back to earlier times, not ready to discuss the last year. "Daniel used to say you would be a mighty force in the pulpit. He also said you intended to marry and become a minister. What happened?"

"Half the school burned down the year we were there together. I went home after, so did he. We lost touch. Did he finish his studies?" Robert adroitly avoided the question about his own change from minister to bounty hunter and returned to his probing.

Across her stomach, Sam's hand resumed its sensual rhythm and Eden's attention was divided.

Finally she grabbed the big hand and held it with her own to stop its bold and mesmerizing movements. When she turned to glare at Sam, he was grinning down at her, smug with his accomplishment. She shifted to face her husband's friend as Sam

McCallister spread her fingers and merged their hands again. Eden relished the strong grip as she prepared to speak of her dead husband for the first time since Daniel had been murdered.

Sam held Eden on his lap and listened to a tale of desperation recounted in emotionless tones. Eden's fingers biting into the back of his hand told a different story.

It was clear Daniel Pace had been a man well-loved. It also seemed a fact that Eden hadn't accepted his death. Sam had spent the better part of four months lusting after a married woman. *I'll be joining him as soon as I settle some debts.* A dead husband was a step in the right direction, but it was apparent Eden still had plans to join Daniel.

"Eden, you've not got it in your head to follow Daniel to the grave, now do ya?" Mercilessly Sam ignored her sorrow, prodding her back to now and forcing her attention on him.

She ignored Sam's question and asked Robert, as she called him, about his wife and the way she'd died.

"I was preaching a 'cleanup the riff-raff and get straight with God' sermon every Sunday. A couple of the town animals I'd been pushing to get decent or get out, decided to shut me up. They sent a message that an old man outside Abilene needed spiritual counseling." Deacon stopped there, pain etching his face as he remembered. Sam was astonished. His brother never spoke about Annie or of the day she'd died fighting off her attackers.

Sam experienced a curl of jealousy as Eden and his brother spoke as friends renewing their acquaintance. He wanted to grab her away from Deacon and... Before he finished that thought, his brother ended the story.

"The three of us hunted them down and I killed them."

Eden's response was surprising. She relaxed against Sam, pressing her back once again to his chest and whispered, "Yes."

Deacon stood and walked across the room to hand her the poster the bounty hunters had all stared at earlier. When Eden took the handbill to read, Sam slid his arms around her possessively. "Eden, I've got an unpleasant notion growing that I'm not goin' to like what this is all about."

It irritated him the way Deacon wasn't backing off. The other man stood close beside the chair where Eden sat on Sam's lap. Both men waited while Eden looked at the warrant for her arrest.

She studied the piece of paper, reading all the words before turning it over to inspect the back. "There's no date on this. How often do you obtain new...?" She paused as though looking for the right word. "Requests?" She directed her question to Deacon and Charlie, denying Sam's right to be involved. He shifted under her, nudging her again to remind her of his presence.

Charlie Wolf who had remained quiet, observing them all during the conversation, answered her. "Your face was new out when we picked that up. But it'll be in every law office across Texas by now."

"Then it's good I was captured by the McCallisters. Divine intervention, Daniel would call it." Eden seemed to bask in Daniel's approval at the same time she embraced the safety of Sam McCallister's arms. Refocusing her conversation on Deacon, she spoke in warm tones. "He became a doctor, you know. Daniel says that God gave us minds to explore new ways."

Sam froze as Eden lapsed for a moment into a world where Daniel still lived.

Deacon's tone was gentle when he answered part of her remark. "I figured he might just do that. The Daniel I knew had problems deciding which was more important to save—the body or the soul. He helped treat the burn survivors at the school."

Deacon paused for a minute and added, "Strange sometimes how things happen to change a person's course or direction." He looked at Eden meditatively, maybe pondering his own choices. Deacon caught Sam's glance and shook his head slightly.

Sam didn't realize 'til then that he was squeezing Eden too tightly. He relaxed his grip, but as soon as he did she moved, bent on switching to her own chair. He stopped that plan and she shrugged, ignoring him, and resumed talking to Deacon about a dead man who still lived in her mind.

"We moved to Texas when a town advertised they needed a doctor. Daniel set up practice there. The town citizens provided us with a house on the edge of Clover. It was small and Daniel tended his patients in the kitchen." She laughed softly, caught up in her memory. "If I hadn't helped him, we would have rarely met. He couldn't turn away from those in need and I couldn't set aside the baking for the day, so we worked side by side."

Even wrapped in his heat, Eden shivered beneath the sheet. "I've got you, pretty lady," he whispered in her ear. Eden relaxed against his chest, her body unconsciously molding to the contours of his. Sam settled her closer. Nothing had ever felt so right in his life. He held her as she told her story. He wanted to slip his hands under the sheet and touch her skin as her body trembled as if with ague.

"We made a decent living. Most people paid with produce or promises, but we managed. Daniel took some of my baked goods to town and traded them for dry goods when things were tight." Then she stopped shaking and her voice took on a dreamy quality that made Sam want to shake her back into the controlled lady gambler.

"The town businesses extended us credit so that Daniel would stay. He did more doctoring with the outlying ranchers than the people of Clover, but the owner of the bank was adamant that we were needed. Aside from the usual broken leg, childbirth or toothache, occasionally Daniel treated men with gunshot wounds who heard about the doctor in the area. They usually paid well and we managed to replace the medicine and equipment, but there wasn't much left over at the end of each month."

Sam didn't know much about the town. "You ever been to Clover?" he interrupted Eden's story to ask the other two. Deacon still hovered close by the chair. Sam intended to turn his brother's thoughts away from the woman and toward Clover, the small, out-of-the-way place no one ever visited.

Eden leaned against Sam, oblivious to his embrace while she continued her story as if they hadn't spoken. "I had a ring. It was the only real valuable that we had between us and Daniel was determined that we'd keep it in the family—an heirloom he called it." Her voice stuttered to a stop and her body went rigid under the sheet. Sam could feel the pressure of despair as she gasped, barely able to speak the next words. "I don't want to continue."

Sam shifted under her, regretting that he couldn't honor Eden's whispered plea. "Pretty valuable keepsake if it's the one you've been flashing at the marks." He chided her harshly to keep her going. But he also hugged her trembling body close, deliberately forcing her to be aware of him instead of the awful memories filling her senses. Eden's nails bit into his arm and he leaned closer.

She startled him when she turned her face into his chest, rocking her forehead back and forth as if to exorcise the pain. For a minute, raw need to protect and care for this woman claimed him. Sam rested his forehead against Eden's bowed head and whispered, "Easy, girl, I've got you."

She brought her hand up and pressed it against his chest, but her fingers clutched his shirt, holding on to him, not pushing him away.

As if he'd been waiting for a sign, Deacon crossed to the chair he'd left earlier. His nod was an agreement not to interfere.

Sam's voice was a gruff rumble as he murmured unfamiliar words of comfort he'd never said before. Gradually the shudders stopped and she regained her control, seeming content to lean against him as though she found solace in his touch.

He'd called her back from despair, but it didn't take Eden but a minute to remember who he was and why she was there. She turned toward the other two men in the room, denying the intimacy they'd briefly shared. *Too late, pretty lady.* Sam rubbed her back, ignoring the way she stiffened under his touch. Her posture was rigid when she continued.

"It's really foolish of me to hate an object, but I despise that ring." Her words were a flat denial of any sentimental value for the jewelry. "Clover is a small town with a small bank, and when our expenses increased, I persuaded Daniel to go to the bank president and offer the ring as collateral for a loan. If I'd never pressed him, none of this would have happened."

"I don't expect Daniel Pace would agree with that." Sam hated calling on the absent man, but guilt for the crime wasn't something that Eden needed to shoulder since she was already weighted with the shame of surviving. She had a lot of hurt festering inside, and all of it had Sam's attention.



Eden remained tautly upright. "Daniel laughed when he came home that day. Aaron Richards, the bank president, said he'd have to check with an expert before he could authorize the loan, but he didn't keep the ring to have the value appraised. Daniel thought it was just a polite way to turn us down. The banker assured Daniel, though, that he'd have an answer back quickly."

She whispered the next part. "We received his answer that night."

Tragic as her story was, Sam's body refused to show proper respect for her sorrow. His cock grew harder under her restless movements and he knew the moment Eden was again ware of it and him. She sat up straighter, her rump clenched tight as though trying to rise above his arousal.

Still, her voice remained low but steady as she told the next part. Sam surrounded her in safety as her mind revisited that night.

"We were already in bed. I told Daniel to ignore the knock. 'Just once pretend we're not here, Daniel. Nobody decent needs a doctor this time of night'."

The hair at the nape of Sam's neck stirred at the singsong tone she assumed to tell her story as she relived that moment. Eden surprised him again when she fumbled for his hand, threaded her fingers through his and gripped him so tightly her nails bit into him. He squeezed her palm, bringing her back with his touch.

In a more normal voice, she continued, "I grumbled the whole time we got dressed until he finally told me to go back to bed. It was cold in the loft where we'd set up our bedroom and he puffed white air when he spoke." Eden stopped talking, her body rigid, teeth chattering loudly and chills racking her body as she relived the cold and fear of that night.

The other two men waited for Sam to take charge. To distract her from her thoughts, he ran his hand up beneath the sheet and squeezed her breast. His fingertips touched clammy skin, reminding him of the day he'd hefted her unconscious form into the stagecoach. It occurred to him Eden might be ready to keel over again.

He should have known better. She rounded on him, slapping his face with her free hand. The loud smack echoed in the room. "You have no right." Her fierce denial was ludicrous as far as Sam was concerned. Eden Pace was his, and he had every right.

"Just tell the story, Eden," he said harshly. "Save the fireworks for later." He fed her anger and it kept her strong.

Eden glared at him, but she was in control again when she turned her back on Sam and continued her story. She spoke in a remote voice, describing the event detail by detail. "Daniel told me to stay in bed, but I always put on a pot of coffee and helped him with his patients. A man came that night. He introduced himself as Alexander Pettigrew and he had a gunshot wound that needed tending. It wasn't the first we'd treated."

"That'd be a wanted we've been hunting, Eden. It seems like we can add another crime to his count." Deacon frowned.

Sam muttered, "Hell, Eden, Pettigrew was one of the outlaws attacking the stage that day."

Eden murmured, "I know that. I was more concerned with saving you than shooting him." Her glance made it clear it might go differently if she had a chance to do it over. She turned back to the others and continued. "Texas is a dangerous place. Daniel never asked his patients questions about their wounds. He just fixed the men and sent them on their way."

"Daniel removed the bullet and bandaged his arm. Pettigrew told Daniel that he'd been shot on his way into Clover. When he refused a dose of laudanum, Daniel offered him whiskey. He said he'd rather have coffee. He said he liked to keep good sense about him. With nothing else to distract him from the pain, Daniel talked to him."

Eden's voice was filled with loathing as she continued. "Daniel told him that he and I enjoyed a friendly game of poker now and then. He laughed about how I always beat him when I lured him into a game of five card stud."

She turned to Sam recounting her memory in disjointed thoughts. "We thought he'd leave when Daniel was finished. I cleaned the blood from the floor. I didn't want it to stain."

All three men listened intently as she continued her tale of the late-night visitor and the others who waited outside.

"Two more men came in when the leader went to the door and called them. I was impatient. I wanted them to go away. When Daniel told me to go back to bed, I knew something was wrong. We always cleaned up together and often talked about the treatment after a patient left. But the men came in and all three sat at the table. Daniel told me to leave again while at the same time he humored them. He knew they were dangerous. I ignored his orders to go upstairs."

Eden stopped as though remembering the last defiance in her marriage. Then she added, "I served them apple pie and coffee. Mr. Pettigrew complimented the recipe and asked for seconds."

She stared hard at Sam and said fiercely, "I should have poisoned them. I could have. They were paying no attention to me. But I didn't. I missed the moment when I saw a chance because I was afraid to do it."

Sam saw regret written in her eyes. "Eden, it's not that easy for a woman to kill someone. I don't think you're the kind of woman who could live with poisoning a roomful of men."

Her face took on new determination and she told him, "I was weak then. I've changed. I had a chance to kill him again when he attacked the stage. He held a baby in front of him for protection. What kind of evil man is he?"

Sam didn't think Eden had ever been weak a moment in her life, not then and not now. But she had for sure changed after the events in Clover had robbed her of husband and home.

Eden returned to the night of her husband's murder. Her voice was filled with scathing self-recrimination "While I was busy filling the cups and fussing over the men as if they were guests, *Mister Pettigrew...*" Her tone dripped irony, according respect where none was due. "Mr. Pettigrew said he'd heard about a fancy ring that Daniel had. He described the ring and told Daniel we'd be fine as soon as we gave it to him."

She'd turned away from Sam, telling Deacon and Charlie this part. Sam wanted to be able to see her face. Instead he rubbed her shoulders, touching the black waves of hair that cascaded down her back.

"I didn't want to believe it was happening. Daniel told them the ring was upstairs. He said, 'Go get it for them Eden. Do what you need to do.' I knew before I went up the ladder what he meant. As soon as I got to the top, the leader started up behind me. I slammed and barred the trapdoor and obeyed Daniel's order."

She stopped and directed her next remark to Deacon. "He had an aversion to a house with two stories."

Sam's brother nodded, saying, "The fire at the seminary trapped a bunch of the boys on the top floor. If they'd had a rope or anything... But no one thought of that 'til after."

Eden took up the story again. "We had a rope ladder. Daniel had made me practice on it when we first moved there. He said to never be trapped in a room without two exits." Sam remembered her room at the Eclipse Hotel with the wide roof jutting out. Daniel had taught Eden well. Sam had the same philosophy, if not for the same reason.

"The leader yelled, 'come on back down here, Mrs. Pace, you can't get out, and it'll go better for your husband if you cooperate.' He played at being a gentleman reassuring a flighty female. I grabbed," Eden hesitated, "a gun Daniel kept loaded upstairs, and the ring." Her voice became bitter in tone. "I should have thrown that damned ring downstairs and killed them..."

The curse word sounded strange coming from the lady. "You'd have been killed too. Forget carrying that blame, Eden. What happened then?" Sam's voice was cold. It was too easy to picture her panicked fear.

"First I put the ladder out the window. I was clumsy and it clunked against the side of the house. I was sure they'd hear it, but then a fight started down stairs. Daniel must have heard it and attacked them to buy time for me to get away."

Daniel Pace deserved Sam's admiration. He'd paid for Eden's escape with his life.

Her tone grew fierce, angry in the final part. "They were stupid men. They left their horses in front of the house, not even hiding them from sight. I untied all three and led two of them behind me as far as I could. When I heard the shot, I let the other two go and circled back. I had the gun ready when I reached the clearing."

"I killed two of them. The first man I shot in the head. The second, I missed and hit in the shoulder. I avoided his attempt to knock me from my horse and shot him again. This time he was dead."

Sam pictured the woman, wild to help her fallen mate. The fierceness of her, *I killed two of them*, left no doubt that she felt no remorse. Her size and ladylike demeanor could not disguise the avenging angel who lived within.

"There were three. What happened to Pettigrew?"

"He was gone." Eden's tone assured them that she'd wanted to kill that man too. "He took our horse from the barn and evidently left the other two men to walk. They'd ransacked the cabin looking for the ring."

Her face clouded with anguish when she spoke her next words. "They were stupid, stupid men. I should have shot them when I had the chance in the loft. Had I not been a coward, Daniel would be alive."

Sam could have told her the men weren't necessarily stupid. They'd just not planned on anyone coming out of the house but themselves. Why would they? A city-bred doctor and his wife offered no challenge. His respect for the widow went up another notch. She'd taken two of the outlaws out that night, and saved Sam's hide on the day of the hold-up.

It seemed as if maybe the banker had planned on a robbery with no one left to point any fingers. He didn't have a problem with Eden killing any of the bastards. But the fact that she was wanted for the bank president's murder made it a sure thing that there was a hell of a lot more to the story than what he'd heard so far.

She stopped there as if the story was finished. The men across from her waited. Sam wasn't sure she'd speak again but she did. "May I have a glass of water?" She scooted forward on his lap, ready to stand.

He didn't want to let go of her, but he didn't want anyone else in the room tending her either. He stood, cradling her in his arms, and crossed to the pitcher on the nightstand. From his embrace, Eden poured her water and he carried her back to their chair. Deacon's eyebrows were up, and even Charlie Wolf looked surprised at the possessive nature of Sam's action. Sam didn't give a damn what either of them thought. His arms were right where they needed to be.

"Daniel was dead, the house ransacked. I cleaned the mess." She delivered the words remotely as though talking about Saturday housework. Sam felt the tension in her body and waited to hear the rest of the story. "I was ill afterward. I had to lie down."

She said it as though her weakness had been another fault. No one prodded her for details and Eden lapsed into silence until Deacon questioned her again. "Did you go to the Clover sheriff for help?" Deacon's question drew her eyes but Sam needed her eyes on him.

He turned her sideways on his lap, watching her face as she spoke. Her lips trembled when she answered. "Not immediately. I stayed at the house and when I could, I dug the graves and took care of things."

Sam could sense her parsing each sentence, calculating what to say again. He didn't enjoy pulling the wings off butterflies or smacking puppies. He felt much the same way

about forcing memories from Eden she didn't want to revisit. But he pressed her anyway.

"Eden, stop dancing around the truth and spit it out. What happened that you're keeping quiet about, because it sure as hell is something."

He prodded her roughly with his next words. "The handbill says you killed the bank president. Did you walk in and blast him the next day?"

"Not the next day," she replied calmly. "But when the opportunity presented itself, I took it." Her words were deliberate and cold when she added, "And then I decided to find the other man and do the same."

"And how does playing poker all over Texas get you closer to Pettigrew?"

As he watched, Eden hesitated.

She finally answered him after he squeezed her ribs. "I know that Alexander Pettigrew is a murderer, and he knows I know. And I know he wanted the green ring that started all of this. I think those things will be enough to bring him out of hiding."

Sam eased back from Eden, studying her eyes. Tears sparkled like diamonds against the green depths. Still, he demanded, "Now, how about the real truth?"

Her creamy skin turned ghostly white and her fingers gripped his arm, nails digging into his flesh as she whispered desperately, "How do I know who to trust?"

It was Deacon, speaking as Robert, her dead husband's friend, not the rough bounty hunter he'd become, who answered. "You can trust the men in this room, Eden. You trust the McCallisters."

Eden wet her lips and looked up at Sam, searching his face for reassurance. He didn't figure anything he could say would convince her, so he remained quiet.

Her low words could be heard by all in the room, but they were directed at him. "I talked at the poker tables and I listened. I waited for the one name I heard that night, Ansell. He's a mystery to the law. But the outlaws spoke Ansell Black's name when they didn't know I heard. And they were afraid of what he'd do when he found out about the killing. Clover is his town. He uses the bank to hide his money and the citizens are outlaws who need a place to rest up."

"Damn." A grunt of surprise from Charlie Wolf's corner.

Sam had to clench his back teeth to keep from yelling the question. Instead it came out in a guttural growl. "And you didn't think that was information you should share with them who can do something about it?"

"No. I have no reason to trust anyone. I know what I'm doing and I am getting closer to my goal. Men with their own plans would just get in the way."

Sam could feel the heat rise as anger spread through his big body. One hand rested on her hip possessively. With the other, he clasped her waist. He had to fight his desire to throw her over his shoulder and carry her from the room. He didn't know where he'd take her, but he sure as hell needed time alone with her to get the idea that she had "no reason to trust anyone" out of her head.

His less-than-sterling behavior in their earlier acquaintance kept him seated, however, mindful that she was a grieving widow and not a loose woman who played cards for a living. As a matter of fact, he was about as close to a respectable woman as he'd ever been. Sam didn't figure showing her his meaner side was the right impression to convey.

"So this plan of yours, does it include you gettin' your ass shot off?" His hands and feet he controlled, but Sam found he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"If need be," Eden calmly answered him. She then explained how she was traveling across Texas, flaunting the ring and daring a monster to come and get it.

When she finally paused, Sam shook her. "You little fool. You think you're going to use yourself as bait to catch your dead husband's killer?"

"Exactly," Eden's smug answer assumed her audience would think her clever. Instead, the three bounty hunters exchanged grim looks before Sam tackled her again.

"And you're tempting the most wanted crook in Texas in the bargain? Why in the hell didn't you go to the law?"

He was furious with her. As plans went it might even work, if she had someone covering her back. But Eden intended to play a solitary hand guaranteed to get her killed. "Only a fool would present himself at a poker table for a chat with you, gambler lady. Alexander Pettigrew's more inclined to back shoot a man than face up to danger and Ansell Black sure as hell ain't a fool."

Sam was about to share more of his observations when she turned around and snapped, "Must you shout in my ear? And your language is distasteful to me. You curse too much."

His mouth shut on his tirade as he choked off the rest of the curses he wanted to yell at her.

"Eden, Sam's right. The odds of you surviving either encounter..." Deacon paused. And then his thoughtful tone changed and his wrath escaped, "Hell Eden, I can't believe you've lived this long."

Sam noticed Deacon didn't get a scold for *his* cussin'. Eden just brushed aside both men's comments, treating Sam like a dense schoolboy as she continued explaining. "I'm not trying to catch Alexander Pettigrew. He's going to come after me and when he does, I'm going to kill him." She shook loose from Sam's arms and this time he let her go.

"I was close in Fort Worth. You got in the way." Her stare was accusing. "You ran off a messenger from him that night."

At Sam's snort of disgust she turned away, talking instead to Charlie Wolf and Deacon. She stood wrapped in her sheet and faced them. "You can help me."

Sam didn't like that at all. He was the McCallister she needed, not the other two men in the room. Possessive anger had him reaching out to turn her around. Her next words stopped him.

Mustering a reasonable tone, she said, "Alexander Pettigrew is an outlaw and you're a bounty hunter. You can turn a profit on this. You figure how to get close to him if you don't like my strategy."

"And the bounty on you...?" Sam was asking about how she ended up being wanted for murder, but Eden answered in another way.

"Yours," she snapped. "Turn me in, dead or alive when it's over, and collect. I don't care." And it was clear that she didn't. She wanted Pettigrew dead, and when that was finished, it appeared that her plans for living stopped right there too.

Eden waited tensely, green eyes fixed on him only as she clutched the white sheet. *Goddamn if she's not the prettiest thing I've ever seen.* Sam's gut burned hot as he looked his fill. She stood barefoot, her shoulders displayed and her hair crackling with life where it cascaded from head to hips.

The truth was simple. Sam knew it. He'd follow Eden Pace into the fires of hell, if that's what it took. But the way it looked to him, it would be a damn sight easier to keep her safe and find the bastard this side of the blaze.

"Well, Eden." Sam drawled. "Until we check out your story, you're a wanted woman and I hold the paper on you. I don't plan on letting you run the countryside risking a bullet while we untangle you from this mess."

Her jaw was set, her mouth firmed into a hard line and Sam read rebellious intent in her stance. He admired her grit but there was no way Eden was ever getting a chance to fulfill her mission of death. "You'll do everything I tell you from now on. No more traipsing in and out of saloons and flashing that eye-popper at the marks. You hear me, Eden?"

Green eyes met blue in a staredown neither would quit. "We'll be traveling together as man and wife for a while." Sam had the satisfaction of seeing her mouth purse up in a moue of distaste.

Eden's denial was sharp. "Don't be silly. We're not married."

"Sure we are. You're Mrs. Samuel McCallister," Sam reminded her smugly.

Eden scanned the room as though for help, but none was forthcoming. "That's ridiculous. You'll keep him from coming near me."

Eden's words seemed a mite frustrated and that pleased Sam no end. At Sam's "Yep," her pale skin flushed with anger.

Sam ignored her rage, pushing her toward *his* goal. "Now you're Eden Pace, a woman wanted and on the run. When you leave here, you'll be Eden McCallister, and nobody messes with the McCallisters."

Eden rolled her eyes at that remark but left it unchallenged. Sam understood that the woman still considered Daniel Pace her husband and he didn't fault her for loving the man's memory. But Eden needed someone alive to take care of her or she was going to get herself killed. Sam didn't plan on letting that happen.

She didn't answer him. Instead Eden watched the other two men in the room to see what they'd do next. Sam, she quit looking at altogether.

Charlie interrupted the exchange with an observation. "There's two unattached McCallisters in this room today. It's good for a woman to choose." Sam was unprepared for the knife edge of jealousy that went through him. Eden didn't claim his offer of protection immediately as he wanted her to. Instead, she studied Deacon.

The man Eden knew as Robert looked her over with interest. His expression reflected neither rebuff nor encouragement. Sam suddenly realized she might choose Deacon, feeling safer with an old friend of her husband.

"Might seem a little strange for her to claim kinship with one brother and waltz out of here with another." Sam's tone was indifferent but his gut burned fiercely. He remained stoic as he regarded the woman who had caught him flat-footed and empty-handed in the hotel, mocking his record of never being taken unawares. "You already chose the McCallister you're wed to, not me. Don't cry now over your earlier actions."

He taunted her into a fury and added, "Figure getting my brand slapped on you, even if it's only temporary, keeps my bounty more secure." He didn't count on her cooperation, but admitted to himself that if she chose the wrong brother there would be hell to pay.



## Chapter Seven

They were serious. Eden faced the three McCallisters who awaited her decision. She studied both Robert and Sam, the man called Snake by killers. A smile played around his mouth, and part of her yearned to slap him again.

"Stop grinning at me that way." Her palm had met his cheek once for his earlier crude behavior. Now his assumptions that she'd do as he told her and choose him for protection made her hand tingle with the need to hit him again.

"Come and get it, pretty lady." His taunt made her breath hitch as she clenched her fist. He knew she wanted to scratch his eyes out.

He made her furious. *He is insufferable. He has no respect. He is an animal preying on my weakness.* She told herself she despised him, at the same time she knew she would walk out of the hotel wearing Sam McCallister's name.

"How much longer you think you can keep runnin' the gauntlet?" Sam's quirked eyebrow indicated that he knew she was near collapse. He'd found her asleep in the bathtub because her exhaustion was bone-deep.

"Can't travel dark roads without someone watchin' your back, Eden," Charlie Wolf spoke.

Her misreading of Sam during the past months proved her senses were dulled. She'd misjudged him at every turn. "Once I thought you were part of Ansell Black's gang."

She watched the splash of color touch his cheeks as he recalled the occasion.

"Told you it would be a mite awkward if we ended up on the wrong side of each other." Sam's smile stretched into the familiar grin and the jackass winked at her.

Eden looked away from him. The whole macabre affair of Daniel's death, her months of enforced solitude, her lack of rest and recent wanton behavior with the mangy beast in front of her, threatened to overwhelm her senses. She had to dig her nails into her palms and bite her tongue to quell laughter that might spiral into never-ending hysteria.

"Cat got your tongue, Eden?" Deliberately, slowly, he cut a plug of tobacco and tucked it in his cheek, seeming to enjoy Eden's disgusted shudder.

*The man won't stop badgering me.* Sam seemed determined to keep her eyes glued on him. And they were. She didn't trust what he might do if she turned her back on him.

He lounged across from her, his half-smile taunting, every ounce of the man a brutal predator. *It takes a savage to kill a savage.* Eden tried to forget how earlier, Sam had clasped her tight and held her when she screamed Daniel's name inside her head.

Eden studied Sam as he stared back with his taunting grin. They ignored the other two in the room. Sam wore dirty buckskins, shaggy hair, a knife buckled at his throat and had poor manners. He was, in fact and deed, the opposite of Daniel in every way.

"I don't suppose my opinion matters here, but I find this to be a useless enterprise. I'm fine on my own, and I'd prefer taking my chances with the rest of the bounty hunters in Texas before pretending to be married to Sam McCallister." The three men stared back at her, confirming their lack of interest in her view of the situation.

The McCallisters made it clear Eden was leaving with one of them. She realized too late, by her own words, she'd already chosen which. Sam squinted at her, displaying smug satisfaction. He shifted the tobacco he'd earlier tucked inside his cheek and glanced speculatively around the room.

Eden snapped, "Don't you dare." Her order seemed to startle him. At least she had his attention. Then she remembered it was something she'd been trying to avoid. He held her gaze and swallowed.

"That is so disgusting." She refused to keep silent a moment longer. It was rude behavior on her part, but social niceties were lost on him anyway.

Daniel was dead and Sam McCallister stood ready to help her find his killers. Daniel's last words, "*Do what you need to do...*" echoed in her mind.

Eden shivered, remembering.

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Days after Daniel's death, she'd ridden into Clover expecting the sheriff to call together a posse to hunt down her husband's killer. Instead, he'd left her sitting on a chair in his office and gone to consult a higher authority. When he'd come back, he'd arrested her for her husband's murder. It had been ridiculous and she'd fought him when he shoved her toward the cell in back.

She'd been weakened and ill and no match for the burly lawman. When Eden had forgotten the gun in her pocket and scratched at his eyes instead, he'd slammed his gun against her head and knocked her out. She'd come awake, lying on a narrow cot, blood trickling down her face from the blow the sheriff had delivered.

The jailhouse mouser traveled back and forth between the outer office and the cell where Eden lay. When the cat jumped on the rough bed to investigate the new prisoner, Eden stayed still. She focused on the conversation of the men in the outer office rather than alert them to her conscious state. Nothing made sense and her horror increased every moment.

"You figure Ansell will be angry if we just take her out back and finish her off?" It was the voice of the sheriff asking.

The bank president, Aaron Richards, answered, "Shut up, you fool, and get out of here. You've botched this job enough."

The outer door banged shut, punctuating the exit of Sheriff Lubbock. But the banker had continued talking, shocking her into awareness when he said, "Don't come back to this town, Pettigrew. The less Ansell knows about this the better. Don't forget again or you'll be dead wondering how it happened."

Richards had spoken furiously, "I told you to get your arm fixed by the doctor. I didn't tell you about that damned ring to have you steal it. You're a fool, Pettigrew, and I'm a bigger one for telling you about Dr. Pace's collateral for a loan. How the hell are we supposed to explain this? Nobody kills a doctor, for God's sake."

Eden knew that part was true. She and Daniel had always felt safe. They'd been respected and protected by the people in the community. A doctor was too important to lose in an area otherwise uncared for.

Alexander Pettigrew had left, making a mistake by presuming she'd die in the jail. Eden had lapsed into half-consciousness, aware of the sheriff when he returned to the outer office. He'd left her alone in the cell with the cat her only companion. The mouser's low purr offered Eden solace in her desperate hours. Anytime the lawman came close, Eden moaned loudly as if dying. Sheriff Lubbock had never seemed intelligent and her assessment proved accurate.

On the second night of her incarceration, she was again roused from half-sleep by the voice of the banker. Curious, the cat hopped from the cot and ran through the cell bars to join the men in the outer office.

This time, Richards was ingratiating and humble as he spoke. "We're really sorry this happened, Ansell."

Eden heard fear in the banker's voice.

There was a scuffle and then a new voice said, "I hate cats. Get that animal out of here." It was the wheezing tones of an elderly male. But old man or not, his authority over the banker was clear.

Avoiding imminent eviction, the cat reappeared in the cell, hiding under the cot where Eden lay listening.

"Aaron, you know I brought that doctor here to Clover for a reason. I've invested a lot in making this town what it is, my friend. I'd hate to think you'd be so careless with our enterprise. Make this problem go away." The raspy tones were almost kindly, the man spoke conversationally about murder. "I don't care how you do it, but I expect you'll find a way." He'd coughed and blown his nose, adding pleasantly, "It's a lot easier to replace a bank president than it is a doctor, Aaron."

And then the monster left. It hadn't taken the banker long to act on his orders. When Richards tried to strangle her, Eden used the gun. The sheriff was absent, unwilling to witness the death. His squeamishness aided her escape. She made it to her home and hid there. Nobody came. Nobody looked for her. She could have drifted away and been safe. Instead, she planned.

She had a green ring, a fifty-dollar gold piece, and the card skills her grandfather had taught her. It was enough. It hadn't taken her long to discover that Ansell Black

was an outlaw whose face was unknown to the law. She'd heard his voice and would recognize the educated tones that set him apart from the usual Texas drawl.

Her pursuit of Alexander Pettigrew and the shadow man behind Clover had been focused. Nothing had been allowed to distract her. Grief and pain had been ignored as she played cards throughout Texas, leaving a memory for each man to retell until Ansell Black got tired of hearing about Eden Pace, the lady gambler who flashed a green ring and made it a point to mention his little town.

When Eden had written her letter threatening exposure of the town if anything happened to her, she'd added a cautionary note at the end. "Tell Mr. Black, I'll be listening for him. He has a very distinctive voice." She'd mailed one copy to the sheriff of Clover and the other copies she'd sent where they would be read if anything happened to Eden Pace. Ansell Black had a secret he wouldn't trust to many. Eden hoped he'd try to silence her himself.

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Returning to the choices before her now, Eden told herself Sam was proposing nothing more than a business deal, a short-term contract. But his intensity—and her response—frightened her more than the outlaws she pursued. She trembled when he stood next to her, his arm brushing her shoulder as he waited for her to acknowledge which brother would become her guardian.

"Will you help me find my husband's murderer?" She stared fiercely at Sam McCallister and waited for his promise.

"Yep."

His one-word answer infuriated Eden.

"Yep? You expect me to trust my plans to you, with no more than a *yep*?" Eden clenched her hands, ready to swing on him.

"Yep."

Eden said sharply, "I'll pay for your help, Mr. McCallister." She stepped closer and jabbed her finger against his chest. "This is a simple business transaction and you will follow my orders. When the men who killed my husband are dead, the green ring is yours. It's worth more than the bounty on me. You'll have the bounty too."

He leaned down and shoved his nose in her face. "I don't want your goddamned ring, Eden. As a matter of fact, the ring's already mine. I won it from you, remember? As for the bounty, I already own your ass, so get over it. I'm the boss, and that's the way it is now, and that's the way it's gonna stay."

Eden could see the pulse beat in his temple and his eyes glittered with fierce determination. "You are an insufferable swine." Eden hissed at him. "You are not my boss, and I do not recognize your authority over me."

Sam pulled her into his arms, ending her argument with a sweeping claim on her body, molding her to the contours of his lust. "Recognize this, Eden?"

Hastily she shrugged away from him and turned her gaze on Robert, the other choice she'd been offered. He looked as much a predator as Sam. She saw no tender sympathy for his friend's widow. *Obviously, just Daniel's loss has altered me, Robert has changed since the death of his wife.*

Warily she retreated from his expressionless gaze and bumped into Sam waiting behind her. "All right." She turned so she could see all the men in the room. "Sam will accompany me." She knew she'd been out-maneuvered when Robert's stern features relaxed into a smile.

"Good," he grunted. "Sam's already taken you prisoner. As he's pointed out, he owns the bounty on you now."

Then he crossed to Sam as if it were a real wedding and slapped him on the back. "Damn, brother, that's the fastest courtship I've ever witnessed. Next thing you know I'll have to whip out the Good Book and read the words over you two."

"Don't forget the part about obey, Deak." Sam rumbled the caution at Robert McCallister as he readied to leave. Eden stared at the brothers and questioned her sanity. She'd been oblivious to the tension in the room until it eased as soon as she'd agreed to Sam's plan. But her own doubts assailed her. She was trusting two men who might be lunatics.

"Seems to me that obey part starts now." Sam turned Eden around to face him. He tilted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "How about getting some clothes on, Mrs. McCallister? We've some traveling to do."

Eden tried to pull her jaw from his hand but he held her still, staring into her eyes with his own cold blues. All humor of moments before was absent from his face. She felt a ripple of fear cascade through her as she recognized a will as strong as her own.

Then he let her go and stepped away to gather the saddlebags she'd taken from him. As the McCallisters prepared to leave Wichita Falls, Eden protested, "No."

She spun on her heels to speak to Sam directly. "I need to be at the poker table tonight and wait for him to come."

Sam said, "Eden, you can ride naked with that sheet flapping in the wind, or you can get dressed and ride decent. We're leaving and you are too."

Eden shrugged into her clothes grimly. Her plan to lure Ansell Black into the open had been derailed. She studied Sam McCallister as she dressed. She had no reason to trust him. But without the support of his partners, Sam was one man with an animal's appetite for passion—persuadable. She wet her lips, measuring her opponent. *Do what you need to do, Eden.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where are we going?" she'd asked as soon as they rode from town and received no answer. Now she asked again. Her tailbone hurt from the long ride the day before.

She was glad she'd soaked in the hot bath but her body still ached with the pounding pace the three men set.

Any thought of escape had been squelched when Sam placed his horse next to hers and the other two rode front and behind. They rode 'til early afternoon when Charlie Wolf veered off the trail they followed. He led them down a rough incline into a gully and dismounted without explanation.

Sam was beside her, lifting her from the saddle before she could dismount by herself. His touch was impersonal as he set her on the ground. "We've got company. Keep your horse quiet."

Eden nodded and tended her animal the same way Sam handled his. Quickly, she wet her handkerchief, wiped down her horse's face and cleaned its nostrils before she muffled its nose. Soon they heard horses pass by and waited 'til the thud of hooves vanished in the afternoon. Eden was shocked at the change in all three men. They were savage in their intensity, feral hunters. She began to understand Sam's earlier statement, "Nobody messes with a McCallister."

Sam's smile chilled her as he crouched on the ground, hand flat against red dust and dry pebbles. The men remained tense until he gave a silent nod.

Deacon said grimly, "Now we're following them."

Charlie Wolf grunted his agreement, satisfied that they'd become the predators and no longer the prey.

Sam crossed to Eden where she stood, her hand on the pommel, one foot in the stirrup and her leg stretched to mount. He stepped close behind her and dropped his hand to her buttocks, pressing against her tailbone. She groaned softly as he stroked the point from which all pain radiated up her spine. Eden frowned at him over her shoulder.

"Aside from the scandal of you patting my rump in front of your relatives, Sam, I must protest for another reason. That hurts." Each conversation, Eden tried to reclaim her distance from him, but it was a futile effort. This time was no different. Sam continued to move his thumb in a circular motion. Suddenly the tension of the day disappeared, replaced by a flush of arousal. Instinctively she leaned into the exquisite pressure. When he stepped closer and lifted her astride her horse, the low throb of awareness in her sex replaced her backache.

Sam ignored his stirrups and swung atop Horse with one lithe motion. Had it not been for his blond hair, he could have been mistaken for an Indian. He brought his horse up next to hers, ready to help if needed as the animals picked their way up the rough incline.

Deacon brought up the rear, explaining, "We'll go slower from here. We wouldn't want to run into an ambush." She cast him a grateful look over her shoulder. Sam didn't volunteer any information about their destination or plan.

The men scanned the ground and set a pace meant to keep the tracks fresh without alerting the unwary ahead. When Eden glanced quickly at Sam, he seemed as intent on

the trail as the others. But when he turned his head and caught her gaze, the slash of red staining his cheekbones telegraphed his desire. He reminded her with his look what was between them. She wanted it to be nothing, but he had her attention and she couldn't erase the knowledge of him from either mind or body.

It was hot under the Texas sun. Perspiration beaded her forehead and trickled down her spine to the spot he'd massaged. But her fingers gripped the reins and trembled, chilled by the full realization of what she'd agreed to.

Sam was aware of every move Eden made as she rode beside him. His hand itched to touch her again and feel that sweet flush of heat that had pulsed through her under his ministrations. He concentrated on the tracks they followed, but the burn in his belly reminded him of what waited at trail's end. He would have her again, this time on his terms in his way.

Eden ignored him, or tried to. But he'd felt her tremble under his touch. He didn't ask himself why it was important that she acknowledge him as her man, but it was. Impatient need to get her alone clawed at his belly.

They traveled 'til midafternoon before Charlie Wolf stopped again and slid off his horse. "Fools finally figured out that they lost our trail. Time to see who's interested enough to track the McCallisters. It won't be long before they turn back." He pulled soft, shaped leather from his saddlebags and covered each of his horse's hooves with the shields, then swung into his saddle.

Sam said, "It's time to confuse them a little. Eden, you'll ride up behind me." He dismounted and lifted her onto his animal situating her tight against the leather seat. He remounted and ordered her, "Wrap your arms around me and hang on." He could tell she didn't want to touch him. It didn't matter what she wanted. Eden was in for a hard ride.

Deacon took her horse and started out at a lope in the direction from which they'd just come. Sam rode at a hard angle off the trail. The last glimpse Sam had of Charlie Wolf, he was crouched low like an Indian warrior, following the tracks at a controlled trot and scanning the ground as he traveled, leaving no hoof marks behind.

Eden tried to grip Sam's sides to hold on, but he reached around and pulled her arms roughly until she just wrapped them around his waist. Then he slapped their mount into a dead run. He was pleased that, want to or not, Eden had to lean against his back as they raced across the treacherous ground.

Sam knew nothing good could come from the men who were tracking them. If they were after the McCallisters, then Eden was in the path of a gun battle and that wasn't to be allowed. If they were after Eden, then Sam aimed to make sure he had that covered too.

Charlie Wolf would know soon who trailed them. Deacon was going to Clover to find out exactly what had happened to Eden and Daniel Pace. Sam believed every word Eden had spoken. But there was more to her story that he needed to understand.

Meanwhile he had a woman to keep safe and while he did, he intended to get to know her better.

After their initial sprint to put distance between them and danger, Sam settled into a steady lope. He stopped to give Horse a breather and a drink from his canteen.

"Slide down and I'll catch you." He waited to see what Eden would do. Her face was streaked with dirt and dust, as was his, he could tell. She didn't put up any resistance and eased backward into his arms, sliding against his big frame on the way down. When her buttocks brushed his groin, she brought him to full arousal.

"Another time, pretty lady, and that fine ass you're teasing me with would be mine." He leaned into her and nipped her ear. "Ever had it that way?" He slid his hand across her rump, squeezing the rounded globes deliberately to drive home his point.

Then he swatted her behind. "Behave, Eden. We're not beyond trouble yet. Save your strategy for later." He probably should have kept his mouth shut and enjoyed the fun. Eden's weapon of choice in her bid for control suited Sam just fine. But having fucking on the mind didn't bode well for sensing danger. He needed to stay on full alert because their followers were not far behind.

He tipped water in his hat and Horse drank what Sam allowed. "Can't give 'em too much too fast, Eden, remember that when you ride." She listened and then took her own handkerchief, wet it and rubbed the animal's face, washing it free of dirt.

"Better save some of that water for yourself." Sam didn't bother cleaning his face. Dirt was a good disguise when tracking prey.

"Get those pads out of my saddlebags, sweetheart." He slid the endearment in because he enjoyed her discomfort. She wrinkled her nose, the only sign of her displeasure, but he thought knew her true feelings just the same. Eden handed him the hoof covers and watched him buckle them on Horse's feet.

She didn't ask but he told her anyway, "Horse won't leave tracks. It makes it a lot harder to follow a man."

"So there are men coming behind us?" Her question was without artifice and her sharp stare ready for truth.

"Close behind us, Eden. I'm going to need you to follow directions without argument or question. You understand?" Her quick nod accompanied the boost he gave her up into the saddle. He hung his canteen next to hers and told her, "There's a carbine in the saddle boot. Use it if you have to. Horse'll get you to a waterhole. Trust him. There's food in the saddle bags."

"But what are you doing? We're in the middle of nowhere. You didn't keep a canteen for yourself."

"I'm doing what I do best, Eden. I'm hunting. Now get moving. I'll catch up to you later." So much for docility. She looked all set to protest. He swatted Horse on the rump and gave his order, "Git," and the animal took off in a lope putting distance between them.



Sam looked around at the place Eden called nowhere. He didn't need to carry water. Living off the desert for days had earned him his name, Snake McCallister. He dug in and got comfortable.

Burrowed in the dirt next to a cactus, Sam waited, hidden from the five riders who followed the trail past him. When the trail ended, the tracker pulled up and circled back around. "Hell, the tracks stopped. You figure one of 'em's holed up around here someplace?" His question brought nervous circling of the horses.

"I hate those goddamned McCallisters. Ansell says he wants 'em dead. But I don't see him out here killin' 'em."

Sam had just about decided that Ansell's issue with the McCallisters was separate from Eden's mess when another rider chimed in. "They high-tailed it out of town with the Pace woman. She's supposed to belong to Snake McCallister now, which ain't good. There's a no-kill on her. Ansell wants her alive."

Sam recognized all of them, including Alexander Pettigrew. They were the dregs of society. He could collect a tidy sum in bounty for their sorry hides.

"You better make sure you find her and fast, Pettigrew, or you better find a hole to hide in. The boss is upset at the mess you made in Clover. If you don't find her, you're a dead man."

Sam didn't need confirmation of Eden's story but there it was anyway.

Pettigrew ignored the warning, belligerently snarling at the man who had dismounted and now knelt checking the ground. "Well, what the hell now? You're the tracker. You said we were following one horse packin' two."

Sam figured it was time to start the party. He had one knife in hand, the other gripped in his teeth. His six-gun was already drawn, ready for action. It was real convenient being able to use both hands sometimes. Now was one of 'em.

Sam's lucky knife took down the first outlaw soundlessly. It was the slide from his horse that announced the criminal's demise. The second knife lodged in Shorty Long's throat and he fell too. Sam uncoiled and shot the third badass while the last two, Pettigrew and Bob Norman, jerked their horses in a frenzy looking for a target.

He'd just settled his sights on Norman when Eden came charging back toward the duo, firing his carbine as she rode. "Jesus Christ," was the last thing Norman moaned when Sam's bullet hit him in the chest.

Pettigrew pivoted his animal, looking for Sam at the same time he dodged Eden's bullets, which were flying wild. It was clear he wasn't looking to kill her, because she'd left herself open for an easy shot.

She was almost on top of Pettigrew and still he held his fire. Sam reckoned he aimed to wound her. Sam would have liked to let her have the kill, but practicalities asserted themselves and he aimed for the heart. Before he fired the shot meant to hit the man in the chest, Eden was even with Pettigrew and in the way.

"Goddamn it, woman, get shut of him." But his growled order couldn't be heard over Pettigrew's curses.

Eden took the rifle and swung it toward Alexander Pettigrew, connecting with his head. The man fell out of his saddle, gun aimed at her.

Pettigrew had murder in his eyes when Sam fired. If he was still alive when Eden got the right end of the rifle in her hands, Sam couldn't say. She got off her shot and Pettigrew was definitely dead when the second bullet joined the first one in his chest.

Horse was heaving and so was Eden. She sat looking at the dead man on the ground as though she wanted to kill him again. Sam suspected that she would if she could. "You all right?" he asked her as he brushed off his pants and beat the dust from his hat.

She nodded at him. "We did it. You did what you said you'd do. We did it." Her voice was unsteady as she parroted his question. "Are you okay?"

Sam reached up and lifted her from his lathered horse. "You sure you're okay?" He ignored her question and looked her over to confirm she was all in one piece.

Eden's lips quirked into a grin and she sighed, "Yes." She was still smiling when he grabbed hold of her by the neck, marched her to the nearest rock and hauled her over his lap.

"Tell me when you think you understand my words." He commenced paddling her ass, his smacks to her rump accompanied by his growled displeasure. "Sam McCallister owns my ass and gives the orders." He held her sprawled across his lap, skirts over her head while he waled on her fanny. "Say it, Eden. Say it."

Sam couldn't remember being so mad before. *Hell, the woman made herself a target, rode into a pack of wolves and defied me.* She didn't make it easy fannin' her behind either. She reached behind her and slapped his head, and when she couldn't get any power behind it she kicked up with her feet and finally pinched his leg so hard he'd have a bruise to remember the occasion by. It didn't matter. *I'll have those damn words out of her if we have to sit on this rock all night.* His hand was tired when she finally relented. He had to give credit where it was due. What Eden lacked in sense, she made up for in grit.

"All right, all right," she panted finally. "You give the orders."

"Who owns your ass, Eden?" He paused his hand, waiting to return to the spanking if she said the wrong thing.

"You do." It was a grudging concession.

Sam settled for grudging, suddenly more interested in feeling up the ass in question than beating on it any longer. He rubbed across her sweat-soaked drawers and pulled them down to look at his work. Her rump was fiery red. Satisfied that he'd made his point, he covered what he couldn't have at the moment, pulled her skirts back in place and stood her before him.

Then he took her mouth in a long, carnal kiss of ownership. Before he released her from his grip, her mouth softened under his and he grunted in satisfaction.

That was right before she bit his lower lip hard enough to bring a gush of blood. When he jerked his head back to glare at her she said, "Nobody owns me, Mr. McCallister. You remember that."

She was breathing hard, and so was he, Sam had to admit to a draw. The damn woman wouldn't quit. He licked the blood from his lower lip and said, "We got a ways to ride yet tonight, and there's bodies to take care of. Stay out of the way."

He removed the personal identifying items from the men, stacked their bodies in a shallow grave and pushed a rock on top of it to mark the spot. Then he stripped the gear from the horses and turned them loose. Sam tried not to look at Eden because he was still so shaken from seeing her ride hell-bent for leather at Pettigrew, he couldn't think straight.

She stood where he left her the entire time. He wasn't sure whether it was a sign of obedience or if her ass hurt too much to sit down. Either way suited Sam.

## Chapter Eight

Sam had time to think about her actions on the way to the cave. She leaned against him, her face resting against his back, arms tight around his waist. He figured the ride was a mite uncomfortable on her bruised butt and he rode at an easy pace. He could have mounted her on one of the other horses, but she was where he wanted her.

"You didn't know Pettigrew was with that bunch. Why'd you come back?" It was a puzzle he'd been turning over in his head for a while.

"You have all the answers. You figure it out, boss." Her jeer irritated him into silence, but he was still wondering when they made it to his canyon. They pulled up at nightfall. Sam swung his leg over the pommel and slid off, and this time, Eden slid down before he could reach for her. He shrugged and turned to the spent animal.

Sam liked the way she watched him tend Horse, rubbing him down, checking his legs and hooves and removing the hoof covers, before dropping the bit out of his mouth. When she swept the barren canyon with a questioning look he grinned to himself. To her, he supposed, it looked as if they were nowhere again. But Sam knew differently.

He loosened the saddle and quietly prepared to make camp, motioning her to follow as he led Horse carefully down a rocky path to the rubble-strewn canyon below. Stopping, he pointed at the remains of an ancient fire pit, weeds growing in the crevices indicating long disuse. "Once when I was a kid, Charlie, Deacon and I got pulled into an Indian powwow right here."

Sam lingered over the spot, reliving the moment. "We were nothing more than striplings trying to prove ourselves. Charlie Wolf rode with the Kiowa on and off the whole time he was growing up, and he knew the way here but we sure never expected to see half the Apache nation parlaying around the fire."

Eden's voice was mocking when she asked, "So you McCallisters were so mighty, even back then, you outsmarted the Indians?"

"Hell no, Lozen, the sister of the Apache chief was there, doing some kind of incantation. She figured out we were spying on her and sent braves circling around in back of us. We were caught and hauled down to the Indian campfire." Sam scratched his chin meditatively and added, "It was the damndest thing. The braves wanted to kill us, but she stopped them and made us drink a potion she'd concocted. Deak was all set to argue and get his neck slit, so I grabbed my bowl and drank it down, figuring he'd shut up and drink his too. It knocked me senseless before I'd even swallowed all of it."

Aware of Eden's growing weariness, Sam finished his story. "Woke up the next morning and the Apaches were gone and we were still alive. I don't know what was in

the drink, but I had a hell of a dream. We all did. Charlie said Lozen had sent us dream-walking to find the seeds of our future."

Sam snorted at the idea. "I don't know about gifting us with visions, but she left this knife, blade balanced right next to my neck, so if I'd rolled in my sleep, I'd have cut my own throat." He pulled out Lozen's knife and showed his prize to Eden. He wanted to share this moment in his life with her. "I've come back to this place on my own a lot, nosing around."

He could have taken Eden to the ranch. But the cave called to him, offering sanctuary, a place where Eden could find solace.

Sam left the spot and led Horse deeper into the canyon, toward the wall of the bluff above. Horse's hooves clicked against the stone and echoed eerily against the rock cliffs. Even that sound ended when Sam stopped in front of a cactus and a stand of sage brush. "The Indians put this here. The Apache protect what's important."

He handed her the reins and grasped the brown tangle of brush, lifting it away to reveal a man-high opening in the rock behind. The shadows darkened and played tricks with the last of the day's sun as though ancients watched the intruders. *Maybe they do.* Sometimes Sam felt as though he got a glimpse of someone...just a shadow. Other times he was sure he heard whispered words.

On more than one occasion he'd had dreams here that spooked him some even after he left. He figured the ancients claimed a little something for themselves when someone trespassed on sacred ground. Sam let his gaze sweep around the canyon one last time before passing through the entrance. It was a strange place, no doubt about that.

Eden followed Sam, apparently prepared to walk into pitch blackness. Sam appreciated her courage. Not many women would have lasted through the hard ride without a word of complaint. He was glad he had more to offer than a cold stone bed and darkness.

They stepped into a world of softly fading light that spilled from a hole in the ceiling. Sam struck a lucifer and lit a torch set in the rock wall near the entrance. Horse was used to this routine and followed him as he lit the other torches placed in rock. Eden stood in the center of the cave, outlined in the dying rays of the sun that filtered through the smoke hole in the rock roof.

Sam knew the moment the gentle splash of water caught her attention. She crossed rapidly to the mineral spring and stood staring at the bubbling pool. It was fed by a cascade of gurgling water that flowed down the silvery rock wall behind it.

He watched as Eden knelt beside the shimmering bubbles and tested the water expecting, he was sure, to find it frigid. Instead, he knew heat pulsed under her touch, water as warm as the bath she'd taken in Wichita Falls. "Are we in for the night?" she asked without taking her eyes off the pool.

"Yep." His one-word answer seemed to be enough this time.

"What do you plan to do with me?" Eden asked over her shoulder as she disrobed. Sam could see that she didn't intend to play shy around him. That was good, because if she was waiting for him to look away, she'd be an old woman when she gave up.

"Plenty." He worked the one word through lips almost as stiff as his cock. She was a sight to see and she knew it, standing there flaunting her wares at him.

"All right," she huffed. Her words were filled with irritation as she stepped out of dress and chemise in one fluid motion. "Is that what this is about?" She sounded genuinely surprised when she asked, "You're not interested in the bounty?"

Eden turned to face him as she gathered her long mane of hair, re-pinning it on top of her head. She stood naked on the rim of the rock pool, surrounded by torchlight.

*Jesus, the woman is trying to kill me.* Sam thought as her rounded breast followed the lift of her arm. He savored the creamy skin that covered her slender curves before he let his eyes center on the patch of dark curls at the V of her thighs. This time Sam licked his lips. "You were on the top of my wanted list as soon as I set eyes on you. Handbill or not, I'd have claimed you."

Eden walked around the hot spring and followed the ancient steps down into the pool. Her soft moan of pleasure echoed in the cave. "Ohhh, this is wonderful."

His voice sounded pretty rough to his own ears when he called over to her, "You plannin' on fuckin' me senseless again so you can escape?"

Her laughter bounced off the walls, followed by her answer. "Yes."

If there was one thing Sam enjoyed more than the chase, it was the challenge of keeping the prey once caught. "Give me a minute to get us settled for the night, pretty lady. Then you can commence your getaway attempt."

He dragged the fake wall closed, all the time aware of her every sound. Water splashed and the soft murmur of pleasure drifted to him as Eden played in the hot spring. He would have liked nothing more than to join her. The rough journey of the afternoon had jarred his body some too.

Sam suspected that Eden was more intent on soaking the ache from hers than seducing his. He let her relax in the soothing heat as he set up camp. His body responded to every splash and sound hers made as he tried to concentrate on getting a smokeless fire started.

When he walked to the pool and eased his pants down his hips, he was fully aroused and his engorged flesh sprang free. He heard her muffled groan and watched the light from the fire cast shadows on the walls and shimmer in the water around her.

"I own this place. I consider it temporary custody, though."

"Like the way you own me?" Eden's question was wry, drifting across to where he stood.

He ignored that jibe and continued. "I 'spect I've come back to this powwow camp at least a hundred times since the night Lozen dream-spoke me." Sam didn't know how

to explain the passion he felt for the Indian land so he didn't try. He likened it to his feelings for Eden. It just was.

"I figure I'm a guardian over the place. It offers me somewhere to rest and get straight in between jobs. In return, I keep it safe." He figured he owed Eden the same.

Sam told her, "The U.S. cavalry drove the Apache from this part of Texas and the land went up for grabs. I put in a claim and we pooled our money so I could pay cash the same day. I paid Deak and Charlie back from my bounty collecting. Now just me and the ancients own it.

"The McCallister spread, the MC3, borders the ten-square-mile section I bought. I don't build on it or run cattle on it. Figure I need to keep it open and wild like it was when the Apache lived here." Sam admitted to himself he guarded it from others with a fierce, protective devotion.

"Charlie Wolf says the Indians consider this sacred ground because the spirits of the ancients live here." As if to prove his words, the light in the cave shifted and a breeze rippled the water where Eden stood. Sam saw her shiver as she looked around.

Improbable, crazy or mystical, Sam couldn't say, but he reckoned he and Eden were supposed to meet. Sam pulled his thoughts from the past and filled his senses with the vision before him.

The seductive woman lit by torchlight taunted him with sham desire. Eden didn't like him much. But she'd found a weakness in him, a craving for her. She'd use it to gain power and sway over him if she could. But Sam knew that trail ran two ways. He planned on using Eden's passion to do a little persuading of his own.

It seemed Sam had found a part of her nature Eden couldn't control. He recognized the need burning in her body. It was the same starving want that blazed through him when he looked at her. Light touched the surface of the pool and her image wavered in the moonlight. He wanted that...that piece of her that was shimmering magic, so much more than flesh.

The ideal strategy would be to ignore the offer she presented as she teased him from the other side of the pool. His mind said to let her simmer awhile, wonder what he'd do, reveal her thoughts by the questions she asked him. But his body disagreed. Eden was the most sensual woman he'd ever been close to, and he didn't have it in him to pass up a gift so fine, even if it was given for all the wrong reasons.

Sam slid into the water and looked across to where she stood, her breasts teasing the edge of the surface. "It's your turn to deal, pretty lady. Let's play."

Eden smiled at him provocatively and Sam felt a kick of lust hit him in his groin as his already swollen member throbbed.

"I'm afraid I don't have a deck on me." She raised her arms and ran her hands down her hair and then lower, stopping to cup her breasts. Stroking the rounded flesh, she ended her exploration at the tips. "No, no cards here." Her fingers tugged on nipples that were distended, and she pinched them, letting Sam see her pleasure.

"Don't need a deck to play Truth," he told her. Nothing changed but the green of her eyes. As Sam watched, they crystallized into points of bright emerald as she concentrated on his next move.

He nodded at the rock formation that circled the pool. "See those bubbles coming out from the sides?" She followed his gaze around the circumference as intermittently the water rippled. Pressure from an underground spring forced jets upward.

She divided her attention between his words and the edge of the pool, marking the areas and looking for a pattern of emission before she asked, "What are the stakes? We have no clothes to lose." Eden used her body as a weapon in their game of truth.

Sam felt no guilt that the deck was stacked against her. He'd had years to learn the pattern of bubbles. "Use your imagination," he chided her. "You pick the next jet. If you choose the wrong spot, you lose and forfeit. I ask a question."

"And if I win?" She wasn't even trying to pretend indifference now. Her gaze scanned the perimeter of the pool, counting the ripples, looking for the rhythm. Sam felt the earth pulse under his feet as the spring burped out water. He told her, "Anything you want to know I can answer, I will."

She dropped her hands and just like that she shut down her come-on, letting the real Eden speak. "Unless we're playing for the horse and no obstruction across the door leading to freedom, I'm not interested."

Ducking underwater, she swam from one portal to the next, touching each spot. Ignoring him when she came up for air, she used that time to watch each jet of bubbles before she went under again.

"You wouldn't last half a day out there alone, Eden." He told her the truth when she emerged.

She offered him the same. "I'd rather die out there than stay in here with you. Besides, you said your horse can find water. I'll take my chances."

"Me or any man?" He ignored her bravado about survival.

Her response was swift. "You. I don't want to know you."

She needled his pride, but he said amiably, "You already know me. Hell, in case you've forgotten, you're carryin' my name."

"Not by choice," came her defiant answer. She submerged again, circling the perimeter of the rock pool, avoiding the spot where he stood.

When she came up, standing at the other end, as far from him as possible, she said, "As I've already stated, Mr. McCallister, there is nothing about you I want to know." Boldly she swam to where he stood and brushed past him as she climbed the ancient steps to the rim of the pool. Once out of the water, she stood naked and dripping before him, deliberately taunting him with what he wanted and wouldn't take.

"I assume we are sleeping here?" She swept the cave with a languid gaze before she gathered her soiled clothes and walked to where he'd laid out the blankets. "Good



night, Mr. McCallister." Her words mocked him as she lay down and pulled one of the covers over her.

Eden hid beneath the blanket, caught in a web of her own weaving. She had misjudged him from the start, underestimating his intelligence and simplifying his character to make him what she needed. She had looked at the bounty hunter and seen only a lusty tool to be used toward her goal. Now she was bound to a man who made up his own rules.

"Damn shame to waste a hard-on like this," he murmured in her ear when he lay down behind her. Sam tugged the tightly wrapped folds from around her, insisting on sharing the blanket.

He pressed his still-damp naked body against her bare skin, laying his arm across her shoulders. In spite of her self-loathing, heat coiled in her belly and her channel flexed hungrily. When she was sure he slept, Eden eased from under his arm, edging toward the pile of clothes she'd set close by.

He drawled softly, "Going someplace, pretty lady?"

Disgusted, she lay back down. He wrapped her hair around his arm and surrounded her in his embrace. Eden relaxed against him and pretended that she lay in Daniel's arms. When she woke much later, Sam still spooned behind her, his aroused manhood pressed against her rump while his hand cupped her breast.

Prickles of heat spread like fire across her skin and she forced back a moan of need. He rubbed his calloused palm against her flesh, stirring every nerve to life as she lay rigid in his arms. She almost whimpered as her body fought her mind for control.

He curled his fingers just the slightest bit, just a hinted squeeze. The jolt of excitement that shot through Eden loosed the groan she'd been holding back. He pulled her closer and she winced. Her flesh was tender from the earlier spanking. He massaged her rear, murmuring apologies.

"Damn it, Eden, I'm sorry I paddled your ass for you. You're a hardheaded woman and you nearly got yourself killed. Hell, Pettigrew had a bead on you the entire time you were ridin' him down." Sam's hand roved over her hips and then up her back, kneading the stiff tension from her shoulders. "I guess I was trying to pound some sense into you since you won't use the brains God put in your head."

Sam nuzzled her neck and Eden wanted to flip over and take him into her body. At the same time, she bitterly denounced her need. Daniel had teased that she'd seduced him the first time and every time after. They had been passionate lovers and her body missed him in ways that grief couldn't touch.

She told herself that bedding Sam was no more than scratching a mosquito bite that itched. But she felt in her heart that she betrayed Daniel with this uncontrollable desire she had for another man. Her plan to seduce Sam to her will seemed foolish now. She moved restlessly against him as he made every slide of his flesh against hers a calculated invitation.

"Havin' trouble gettin' to sleep, Eden?" He was infuriatingly smug as his hard-muscled body stoked fires of passion in her.

"Yes," she answered him as she lifted his hand away from her breast. "You snore." It took every ounce of her resolve to reject what he offered. But she did. Eden's reward was the feel of his chest rumbling with laughter.

Her sleep was fitful and in the morning she woke no more rested than when they'd arrived the night before. Sam was gone from the cave but the horse was still tied in the corner so she knew the bounty hunter was close by. The cavern entrance was invitingly open but she remained inside, unwilling to face the day or the man who held her future firmly in his grasp.

She pulled on a clean shift from the meager clothing she'd packed. Her trunk was stored at the Eclipse Hotel. The rest of her clothes she washed in water dipped from the mineral springs and then laid them out to dry. Sam was still absent so Eden slid into the pool, washed her hair and swam around the interior, checking the pulse of the spout holes.

Satisfied that there was no rhythm to learn, she came up in one fluid motion. Again she was across from him, but this time not as a seductress. He stood on the rim of the mineral pool. "Figure out the pattern yet?"

His question was spoken in an easy tone, as though he'd expected no less of her. Although Eden's shift covered her from shoulder to midthigh, she felt more vulnerable and exposed than when naked the night before. The thin, wet linen material accented the swell of breasts tipped by extended nipples.

She bent her knees, dropping lower in the water, although the clear depths covered her no better. "Is there a pattern?" she asked. She was acutely aware of his stare and the flush of arousal on his cheekbones. Eden turned her glance to the perimeter of the pool and focused on the soft burp of each water spout instead of the watching man.

"Would I bet on anything but a sure thing?" His voice echoed in the cave as he walked away.

Whirling in the water to face him, she saw Sam gather her clothes over his arm. Eden asked sharply, "Where are you taking my things?" *Surely he's not going to leave me naked all day.*

"They'll do better in the sun. I'll rig a drying pole and have them back to you in no time." She couldn't argue with that. Besides, she wanted him to leave. He wore no shirt at all today and she could see the muscles in his chest. When he turned, light filtered across his shoulders and traced an enticing pattern across his back.

"Yes, take them outside with you." Her husky assent was a plea for the big, shaggy-haired blond to remove himself from her sight.

"There's coffee and food by the fire. You didn't eat anything last night. Better get it while it's still warm." He turned and left.

Eden wanted her aloof indifference back but Sam had challenged her the night before, revealing her fragile hold on her insane, wild longing for him.

She was hungry, starved for food as if she'd not eaten in years. Physical needs she'd ignored suddenly claimed all of her attention. But she didn't want to walk to the campfire in her wet shift and lose the semi-protective cover of the pool. Absurd as it was given her previous uninhibited behavior, she dallied in the water, afraid he'd return to witness her exit.

Nothing made sense to Eden, especially not the cave. It was beautiful and eerie at the same time. Sounds echoed back from nothing as though unseen forces were stirred by her presence.

She lingered indecisively too long. Sam returned to the cave, picked up a blanket and carried it to her as though he knew she was stalling. Reluctantly she walked up the stone steps of the pool, wary of the hands brushing her shoulders as he wrapped her in the folds of the material. But she needn't have been. He stepped away and said, "I'm not a great cook, but it's better than nothing. Go eat breakfast, Eden." She was surprised at his gruff care.

He waited until she hugged her blanket around her and crossed to the food. Then he left her alone with the meal and her thoughts, saying as he returned to the outside, "Your clothes should be dry by the time you finish eating. It's already hot enough to fry eggs on a rock out there." His tone was impersonal but the way his glance caressed her body wasn't.

Sam had discovered carnal pleasure at an early age and never saw the reason to stop enjoying it. He'd been careful about leaving children behind, but never thought long about the women he used. Eden was different. He wanted her with an ache that didn't stop.

Evidently a new plan was in place, because this morning Eden wasn't flirtatious at all. He figured when she looked at him she tried to see the rough bounty hunter who was helping her get justice for her husband. Sam hoped she also saw a man who intended to own her body and soul—because he did. Probably that idea had Eden running scared.

Sam tasted his own fear and knew how she felt. He didn't want the bother of a woman to worry about. It wasn't in his plans to quit bounty hunting. He'd always figured on getting taken out young, but Eden needed him alive.

He'd not bothered to even try to sleep the night before. Her rest hadn't been much better. A couple of times during the night, he'd been almost sure that Eden would turn over and give them both ease. It seemed important to Sam that when they resumed what had been started in the hotel suite, Eden had to want it, need it and come to him for it. So he'd left them both in misery and enjoyed the unexpected pleasure of just holding her.

He carried her sun-dried clothes back into the cave, silently set them next to her and went back outside. No words passed between them and Sam smiled to himself as he exited. Eden's will was as strong as his. It was both part of her allure and a damn pain

in the ass. He didn't know much about handling women but he knew that he'd better get a handle on controlling her or their time together would be hell on both of them.

He prowled the rock-strewn canyon, deliberately moving away from the cave door until he was too far away to reach her when she emerged leading Horse. He wasn't so far, though, that he couldn't see her grim expression. At least in this she was predictable.

He leaned against a boulder and called out to her. "You figure on leaving me without a horse in this country?" He automatically reached for the chew in his back pocket and cut a piece, enjoying the sight of the woman abandoning him to the elements.

"You'll survive," she called back to him. "I'm sorry, Sam, but I have things that need finished and I can't stay here anymore." She mounted the animal and turned toward the open end of the canyon.

Sam was glad to see that she picked her way carefully through the rough terrain, careful with his horse. He let her get a pretty far piece before he lifted his fingers to his mouth and blew a shrill whistle. Eden's mount stopped dead in his tracks and waited for Sam's next command.

Eden surprised Sam again. When he walked the distance to horse and woman, she sat waiting until he came up beside both of them. "I thought you'd made it a little too easy for me. I just wanted to see if I was right."

Sam rubbed his horse's nose and scratched him between the ears before turning woman and animal back toward the cave. Eden rode silently until they reached the door. When Sam lifted her from the saddle, she said, "Give me your spare set of clothes and I'll wash them."

No recriminations or argument came from her. Instead she made an offer he didn't turn down. When he handed her the rank buckskins and his spare long johns and socks, he included a smile and a warning. "If you tear these up, you'll have to enjoy the smell of me a while longer."

Eden sniffed at the ripe odor of long-unwashed clothes and wrinkled her nose. "I'll be gentle."

Sam let her do what she would with his clothes and kept his animal outside, grooming him in the sun. Eden moved in and out of the cave, hanging the wet buckskins to dry on the pole he'd rigged earlier.

He worked through the morning, staying out of the cave because just thinking about Eden kept him hard. He was afraid he'd lose his control and pounce on her if he lingered near her. He didn't check up on her activities but she carried a paper in her hand when she returned to test the clothes for dryness. Satisfied that they were done, she slipped the paper in her pocket and folded his pants and shirt before handing the bundle to him. Then she turned her affection on his horse.

"What's your name?" She held the animal's muzzle and scratched him under the chin as though trying to coax an answer.

"Horse," Sam told her.

Her soft laughter was a reward. "You named your horse, Horse?"

"It's easy to remember. I'm a simple man, Eden. I'm not sure you'll take to my ways but I'll do what I can to give you what you want." Sam wondered if she knew he was talking about more than her freedom.

"Good," she agreed. "I want to leave here and find the mysterious Ansell Black." The almost goodwill between them was broken before it could blossom into something else.

"Can't happen right now, pretty lady," he drawled and kept on brushing Horse.

"Why can't it happen right now?" she parroted his words in a frustrated tone.

"Eden," Sam told her. "You've been kind of sparse with the details of what happened to you after Daniel's murder. Deacon's sorting that out right now. Charlie Wolf will find out how many followed us. Ansell Black controls half the outlaws in the Territory and it appears he's not real happy with you. Since your fight's ours now, we plan on getting our defenses in place before we walk into a battle."

"How long will we wait here?" She followed Sam down the length of the animal, petting Horse as she went. Sam coveted the touch, wishing it was his chest she rubbed and stroked, but Horse appreciated her pats, leaning into her hands with a grunt of pleasure.

"I expect that answer resides in you."

Eden frowned at him, but she remained outside, watching him perform his usual between-jobs tasks. Once Horse was groomed, Sam walked him into the shade of the overhanging cliff and left him tied there. Then he returned to the heat, unbuckled his gunbelt, removed the bullets, set them aside and sat in the sun, cleaning the dust and sweat from the leather.

## Chapter Nine

Eden didn't want to return to the cave. Without Horse as another living presence, it was too empty, leaving her with only thoughts for company. She supposed Sam's assurance that his partners were taking care of business was supposed to calm her impatience, and she should let this be a respite, a time to rest before she reached her goal. She was exhausted and had been tired for too long. But though her body craved sleep, her mind refused the temptation of oblivion.

So she stayed outside with Sam and cleaned the stone and pebbles from a shaded area in front of a boulder. When her skirts were spread under her for comfort and her back leaned against the rock behind, she realized she'd situated herself directly across from him. She could either look at Sam or find something else to do, so she pulled her letter from her pocket, but the words blurred as she tried to read. Her eyes drifted shut for a minute as her body relaxed in the heat of the day.

When she woke up, a blanket cushioned her head and she lay stretched out on the ground next to Sam. She looked around sleepily.

"Didn't want to wake you before," he said gruffly, lifting her, ready to carry her into the cave. Eden stopped him.

"I've been cold a long time," she told him drowsily. "The heat feels good. I'd rather stay out here with you." And then she turned her face into the warmth radiating from his chest and returned to the stupor of exhaustion.

This time when she woke, her head was pillowed on his thigh. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep. His belt lay next to them, the gun on the ground near his left hip. She could smell oil, leather and sage mixing with the scent of him. Instead of reaching for the gun, she turned her head and rubbed her cheek against the ridge of his arousal.

He brushed his hand against the back of her head and growled with desire. He gave no warning, though, when the other hand lifted her skirts and went directly to the V of her thighs, pressing her open, teasing her flesh through the thin drawers she wore.

Eden fumbled at the ties closing his pants. No words passed between them as she pulled his hard length free of its confinement and he shoved her undergarment out of his way.

She was more than ready for the finger he plunged into her. Eden closed her lips over the end of his shaft and matched the draw of her mouth to the thrust of his strokes. Her hips surged to meet each of his deep penetrations and her cunny tightened, sucking on his finger with the walls of her channel at the same time she tongued and tasted his arousal.

She lifted her head until just the ruby tip remained between her lips and caught Sam's gaze. When she explored the slit with her tongue, he grunted and juttied his hips upward, inviting more.

"Suck on it." His guttural order was accompanied by a second finger, stretching the slippery walls of her channel. Both her cunny and her mouth obeyed.

Honey flooded from her as she strained to get more of him. Sam pressed his hand against the back of her head, stroking her hair. When his fingers clenched convulsively, she knew his release was on him. Her throat closed around his length as her lungs struggled for air. He feathered a thumbstroke across the nub of nerves at her apex and her orgasm began. Her throat opened and Eden greedily drank his spill, riding her first climax into another.

He withdrew his fingers at some point. Eden came back to herself, still nuzzling his half-aroused cock hungrily as its owner petted her slippery folds through the continued aftershocks of her release.

Embarrassed, she hid her face against his thigh. His rough chuckle gave her back her dignity. "Damn, Eden. I think this round was a draw."

Eden decided that she'd had enough sun and more than enough time with Sam. But her body disagreed. She remained where she lay, letting him stroke her folds, enjoying his touch as the heat inside her flamed bright again. Finally, fighting her body's craving for more, Eden groaned out loud, "Enough." She lifted his hand and rolled away.

"I'm a mess," Eden shook out her skirts and looked for something to gaze at besides Sam. She crossed to where she'd sat earlier and stooped to pick up the letter lying in the dust.

"What kind of paper ya have there, Eden?" Sam asked.

Her answer, "A letter," brought another query.

"You got a letter you need to send?" Sam drawled his question but he watched her sharply.

Exasperated, Eden read the first sentence aloud. "Dear Mr. Black, I am aware of the illegal activities you have arranged in Clover, Texas." She broke off and handed it to him.

"Here, read it yourself. It's a copy of the one I sent to the Clover sheriff. After Fort Worth, I knew I'd finally gotten Ansell Black's attention."

Sam took the paper she dropped in his lap and looked at it passively before he handed it back. "You feel the need to remind yourself of what it says?"

Eden folded the paper gently and slipped it back into her pocket. "Sometimes I forget why I hate him so much. Then I read this," she told him. But her thoughts mocked her with the truth. *I feel the need to remind myself that I have justice to deliver because when I'm with you, you make me forget everything but you.*

She left Sam staring after her and returned to the cave and the mineral spring. The warmth of the water soothed her as she scrubbed her skin, inspecting her body for the

first time in months. She'd lost weight of course. She rubbed at the faint silver pattern on her hips that marked where her skin had stretched to make room for Daniel's baby. Eden sighed, reminded of her many losses.

When she climbed out of the pool, Sam wrapped her in a blanket and guided her to another. "Lie down and rest some more. You're ridin' a played-out horse, Eden. It's time to let me do my job. I'll watch your back, pretty lady. Go to sleep."

Eden curled up on the hard, blanketed surface and closed her eyes. She didn't wake again until the following morning, and then it was to find that she was alone in the cave. Both Horse and Sam were gone and for a moment panic filled her before she considered the open door and the scent of coffee drifting her way.

She dressed quickly and wrinkled her nose at the black coffee, but savored the kick that the strong brew offered as she sipped.

As if he'd been waiting to hear her moving around, Sam led Horse into the cave and to the corner. The animal whickered appreciation and snuffled up oats when Sam put the feedbag over his nose.

The animal seemed a safe enough topic to talk about, so Eden carried her coffee closer, giving her attention to the horse and not the man. "I've never seen another horse the color of yours. What kind is he?"

The big stallion stood with eyes closed, swaying as he munched his meal. He was gunmetal gray all over except for the splash of white and black markings across flanks and rump. Instead of a long, flowing mane, Horse had a thick brush of hair that stood upright.

"I got him from Dan Hawks when Horse was just a colt. Dan calls 'em Palouse horses. The Nez Perce Indians used to raise 'em. Army wiped out most of the breed when they went to war with the tribe around 1877. Damn fool cavalry herded most of the animals into a pen and shot 'em." Sam's voice was thick with disgust.

"Why would anyone shoot these beautiful creatures?"

Sam responded grimly, "Because these horses are smart, fast and agile and the Indians were a power to be reckoned with when they were mounted on 'em."

"So they killed the horses?" Eden felt sick at the image evoked in her mind. To win a battle at the expense of such beauty, to exterminate a whole breed to win a war, seemed so wrong.

"Yep," Sam answered, repeating her words, "So they killed the horses."

Sam was glad Eden had chosen the topic of his odd-colored stallion as her opener. She looked relaxed and a little more rested. She was too thin, too fragile for his comfort. He'd already decided he'd get some food down her to fix that. He'd had almost twenty-four hours to keep his promise, watching over her as she slept, time enough to be curious about how she'd handle their explosive encounter. He smiled inside at her method.



Horse was a subject he could talk on all day. "I had to promise Dan Hawks first get from him before he would part with the colt. I ride over to the Hawks Nest every once in a while and let Horse have his way with the broodmares there. So far, he's been satisfied to leave with me, but I think he's getting a hankering for a herd of his own."

"He is, or you are?" she asked him.

It was a good question he didn't have an answer to, so he shrugged and wandered over to the wall. He was surprised when Eden followed.

She touched the pictures, faded remnants of Indian paint still marking the figures there. "It's like a child's book, all pictures, but the story it tells is so powerful."

Sam noticed how she traced them, studying the children as if she memorized their time at play. She also ignored the gold vein that threaded through the rock.

"This is the first book I ever read, Eden." It was a subject he never spoke about. But Eden had a letter he needed to understand and there was no one here but them. He waited. For the life of him, he couldn't think of a way around telling her so he forged ahead. "I'm illiterate. Or damn near anyway. I can do sums in my head and sign my name if I have to. Other than that, I can't read a lick." Sam figured it was time the woman knew what kind of man he was. His gut twisted in old shame, expecting her disgust.

Her startled glance and raised brow invited more. "And?" When he didn't answer immediately she went back to tracing the pictures, as though paying no attention to his topic. But Sam knew she listened.

"Just thought you should know," he muttered, already regretting giving her the information. Nevertheless, he followed her as she read the picture story on the wall. When she reached the one where stick-figure warriors chased buffalo across the land, she paused.

"Did you try to learn?"

Sam reluctantly admitted, "Had lessons every day for damn near six years, 'til I got tired of the beatings for not being smart."

Eden pulled the letter from her pocket, opened it and handed it over. "What do you see when you look at that page?" Her voice was curious, interested. Charlie's wife Naomi had tried the same thing. Her being a teacher, she'd been sure that she could change what wasn't to be.

"Does it make a difference if it's printed or in script?" Eden asked.

"I see marks and squiggles that all look the same, Eden. Either way, I see things that don't mean shit." His answer was surly, gruff to his own ears. He cleared his throat, ready to change the topic again.

"Word blindness," she nodded, as if she knew exactly what was wrong with him. "They call it word blindness when a perfectly intelligent person can't decipher letters. Daniel studied it when he was in school."

Sam looked for signs of ridicule or mockery, but found none. *Word blindness... A perfectly intelligent person.* Eden didn't seem to think it was much of a defect.

Then she changed the topic, clearly tired of talking about him. "Why did that happen to the Nez Perce, Sam? This country is so big. Why must men kill each other over what there is so much of to share?"

"Nez Perce lost their land when the white settlers found gold there."

He didn't say more, but Eden nodded in understanding, at last acknowledging the gold vein that ran so thickly through the darker rock. "I won't tell anyone about this place."

He didn't question his need to share it with her and trusted her promise of silence. Considering that she was a prisoner and a temporary bride, it was a fool's gamble and he knew it.

Eden wrinkled her nose, interrupting the interlude with a teasing remark. "I believe I washed your clothes for you, Mr. McCallister. I will say it again. You reek."

"Hated to sweat in 'em and foul 'em so soon," he said apologetically.

"Leave the dirty ones by the pool when you bathe. I'll wash them tonight and they should be dry by morning. Then you'll have two sets to work in and I can keep one washed ahead."

It was such a domestic comment Sam looked at her sharply to see if she was serious. He wanted to kiss Eden so bad his body hurt from holding himself back. There was no way that he'd be able to stop at a kiss though. Instead, he moved away to cook his version of a meal for their supper and Eden groaned aloud. "Burned meat and strong coffee, you are not much for variety."

Sam's teeth flashed in a grin as he acknowledged his limitations. "Woman's work," he goaded her but she let that pass and suffered the meal he prepared.

Afterward, Eden cleaned the plates and cutlery, aware of Sam's big frame moving restlessly by the bubbling spring.

"Figure I'd better get the stink off of me before you put me out," he said finally, reluctant, it seemed, to disrobe and slide into the pool.

She didn't watch, but her imagination filled in the gaps when she heard the splash of his body easing into the warm water. She told herself that she needed to gather his soiled clothes. It was a weak excuse for venturing to the edge of the pool, but it propelled her to where she wanted to be.

Instead of gathering up the laundry and leaving, Eden gazed at the body that glistened with water droplets as Sam scrubbed his hair and used a sliver of soap to wash himself. She wanted to play, to slide into the water with him and...

Sam didn't pretend disinterest. His eyes burned fierce desire and the clear water didn't hide his fully aroused cock. "Let's play Truth or Dare," he said.

Loyalty to Daniel warred with desire for Sam. Her body pulsed and burned, rejecting commitment to a man who could no longer appease her needs. And the man she thought to seduce to her bidding was still asking questions, holding on to his control and never letting her gain power.

"Truth." She heard herself say. "What kind of game is that? It seems like a silly name to me." She stood indecisively, waiting to see what he said.

"We bet on the next spout to release water. You tell me truth when you lose and you dare me to do anything you want if I do." He continued to rub the sliver of soap up and down his chest as he talked. Eden didn't miss his taunting "when" and "if" as he challenged her ability to hide her secrets before she could break his control.

She discarded her clothes slowly, laying each piece on the bundle of Sam's laundry. When she stood naked before him, she smiled. His cheeks were flushed and his lips a grim line as he watched.

Eden walked down the stone steps into the pool. The warm water lapped at her sensuously, heightening her already aroused state.

"Hmmm, Truth or Dare," she said. "Let's play."

"All right," Sam said, facing her across the bubbling water. He flipped the soap to the rock edge and then leaned against the perimeter of the spring, waiting.

"You go first." Eden stretched sinuously in the water, enjoying her effect on the taut body across from her. He watched the place along the edge as gentle bursts of bubbles appeared randomly.

He guessed wrong, languidly pointing at the spot two down from where the next bubbles appeared. "Forfeit." From his smile, Eden surmised that he anticipated her order.

"Come for me," she demanded, ready to seize power.

"Oh no, pretty lady, that's a lot of forfeits down the line. We play this one hand at a time." If Sam was honest, one stroke of his hand on his throbbing dick and she'd win this hand if not the whole game. But he bluffed, staring hard into her eyes, daring her to dispute the rules. "The winner gets one action or one answer at a time."

Sam hoped she'd argue a little. He burned with the need to bury himself in her heat, but this was a game of wills. Eden wanted his body. He wanted her commitment to his authority over her. To own Eden, he had to master his control and her desire. The woman wrapped herself in loyalty to a dead lover at the same time she was filled with wanton need. Sam aimed to end the first by using the second.

She wasted no time arguing to give him cool-down time. Her immediate challenge called his bluff as she enunciated clearly, "Grip your cock and pump it once."

Sam smiled at Eden, wrapped his hand around his shaft and stroked, ending the motion at his groin where he squeezed. His toes clenched and he focused on the earth pulsing under his feet to hold back the demanding surge of his own spill. It was

enough. He relaxed his grip and returned his arms to the wall where he leaned back and let her inspect the clear water that surrounded his bobbing, unspent cock. "Your turn," he told her.

She floated on top of the water, revealing the V of her legs and the dark curls that topped her mound. "Why do you fight it so much, Eden?"

"Fight what?" She taunted him with her display and Sam figured this was Eden's version of war. She'd use any weapon at hand, including her own body, to fight her way out of this mess. It was just a damned shame she saw him as part of the problem instead of the solution.

"Fight the want that's clawing inside of you right now. I know it's there. Hell, I can see your nipples pointing at the cave roof from here. You want me real bad. Why do you fight it?"

She ducked under the water and swam away. When she came up she answered, "It's not your turn, Mr. McCallister. Your question has earned no answer."

Eden relaxed in the water and let the ripples tickle her senses. For some reason, in their battle of wills, it was important to make him break first. He withheld comfort to both of them while he asked his questions, his control seeming limitless.

Cupping her breast, she lifted it to show him as she laughed huskily. "I've only been in the water a short time, but I'm already beginning to pucker. See?" His expression didn't change even when she pinched the hardened nipple.

"Your turn," he reminded her.

"That one," she pointed to the spot even with his right hip. It pulsed at that moment and some of the tension in her body relaxed. Her feet rubbed against the bottom of the pool.

They played. Each loss of his she bombarded him with sexual demands but after her first loss, she learned his purpose for the game.

"Did you kill Aaron Richards?"

"Yes." That answer was easy. She'd exterminated him like a foul bug on the floor.

Sam accepted her answer with no comment and they played on. He lost.

"Press your finger against your right nipple and rub it. Make it hard for me." She breathed the words at him and watched his eyes become slits of molten desire.

He rubbed it sensuously, pulling an unwelcome response from her. Her sex clenched in answer to the erotic movement of his hand. She lost again.

"Did he earn his death?"

*Did the bank president deserve to die?* That answer was easy too. "Yes." Eden wished she could do it again and watch the surprise blossom on Aaron Richards' face as she extinguished his life force.

Eden was outmatched by Sam. When she ordered him to stroke the line from his right hip to his groin, burning heat traveled the same path in her body until her womb contracted and the walls of her channel flexed.

The pulse of her body distracted her from the tremor under her feet. It was a ripple almost caught but not sensed in time to stop the questions that came faster and faster as his wins outnumbered hers.

"What's in the letter that has Ansell Black hunting you?"

"I taunted him, daring him to shut me up." Her words were swift and satisfied.

"That why he sent you a message in Fort Worth?"

"No. He just tried to scare me quiet there." Her hate focused on the shadow criminal who had organized Clover and invited Daniel to his death. "He can't afford to have me killed now. After Fort Worth, I sent a letter to the Clover sheriff and sent copies elsewhere to be opened upon my death."

"You threatened to bring down the Clover operation? What was the point, Eden? Ansell Black will just set up somewhere else, even if you manage to shut down Clover. You didn't think maybe the law could handle this thing better?"

She hedged. "I tried going to the law once. It was clear I was better off trusting no one."

Sam watched her closely, seeming to ponder her words. His next question signaled an abrupt switch in the game. "Who taught you to use your mouth on a man that way?"

She'd hated the questions that made her remember. But this question she could use. Eden cupped her breasts with her hands and squeezed, showing him her enjoyment in the touch.

"My husband encouraged me to explore the limits of the flesh." She licked her lips, reminding him of her talent and tugged on her nipples, letting him hear her groan of arousal. His arms were still draped across the back of the pool, but the big hands were knuckle-white where they gripped the edge.

"You execute the bank president?"

His question confused her. She'd already admitted that she'd killed Aaron Richards and she told him so.

"There's killing and then there's execution," he clarified. "Did you track him down and shoot the bastard?"

"No, he came to me." The irony of Richards' visit tinged her voice.

His next question was growled. "Did he hurt you? Did that bastard you killed hurt you?"

What did it matter? The truth of the events of that day wasn't important enough to hide from Sam McCallister. "I accused Aaron Richards." Left alone in the jail cell, injured and presumably dying, she'd listened to the conversations in the outer office. There had been no doubt who had initiated the night of horror. "He came to visit me."

Eden's passion cooled as she remembered the banker leaning over her. "He decided my silence was necessary."

Her throat tightened as she remembered the thumbs that he had pressed against her windpipe, shutting off her air. Part of her had almost succumbed, welcoming release from grief. But her will to kill him had exceeded the strength of death's grip. She'd shot him with the gun that hadn't left her pocket since she'd put it there the night of their attack, too late to help Daniel but handy to kill one of the monsters.

"I want to quit this game," she said petulantly, tired of the endless questions and his steely control. They both knew the outcome. His cock was so rigid it no longer bobbed in the water and her inner flesh demanded his attention.

"One more round." He denied her attempt to quit, forcing her to continue the game. She lost as she knew she would. He knew the timing of every release and disturbance in the water. He drawled, "Your turn pretty lady."

She guessed and pointed at a spot down two spots from the spouting jet of water. "Forfeit," Sam called across the pool. His eyes held her gaze when he asked his next question.

"Why did you choose me instead of Robert?" He used the name Daniel had used, deliberately acknowledging the connection she'd made with his brother.

Robert was justice, too close in spirit to Daniel Pace. Sam was the Executioner...a killer without remorse. She could tell him one truth—she'd known he'd be easier to use toward her goal, or the second pulsing through her right now. She chose the latter. "I liked the taste of—"

His control broke at last. He crossed the pool and took her mouth, swallowing the final "you" as he unleashed the inferno that blazed between them.

Sam couldn't get enough of her. He lifted her high and she wrapped her legs around his loins, fitting her cleft against his hardened length. Her flesh parted, surrounding him as the lips of her sex squeezed and flexed. He groaned as his cock slid through the wet path of heat to her entrance.

Eden's whimper of need roused the savage in him. He wanted nothing more than to notch his cock deep in her womb and plant his seed in her core. But he exercised iron restraint. As he carried her from the pool she rode his hips, her velvet heat flexing around his shaft, begging him to plunge deep. Sam dropped to his knees on the blanket he'd laid out earlier and eased out of the velvet folds milking his length.

Her plea, "No, not yet," was desperate. He lowered his head between her sprawled thighs and set his mouth on the center of her, tasting mineral water mixed with her desire. Eden bucked under him and she reached her hands to press the back of his head. "Yes, please, don't stop," Eden commanded him as she arched her back for more.

Sam slid two fingers in and out of the wet heat of her pussy and she clenched her cunny hard. "Give me your honey, Eden. Give it to me." He curled his fingers, reaching for that sweet spot inside that called for his attention.

## **Chapter Ten**

Eden gasped, "Oh God, Sam, I need, I need..." He took her pearl in his mouth, working it between his lips, suckling with strong pulls that brought on her first orgasm. She wrapped her thighs around his head as he stroked his magic fingers in and out and he devoured her. His carnal grunts added to the pleasure as he lapped at her flesh.

"Again," he demanded her surrender and Eden obeyed. He didn't give her reprieve from fingers that stroked inside her and tongue that tasted and teased her sensitive folds. He settled his lips around her pearl to send another orgasm pulsing through her. "God, you taste good. Like sweet, sweet cream." Sam stared up at her as he nuzzled and licked her folds.

Eden's breath was a rough pant. "I need it inside of me. Please. I need it inside of me now." His grin was almost feral. Her body arched, following his movement as he nipped his way up her thigh to her belly. Eden's body, taut as a stretched wire, vibrated as every nerve ending reached for release. Sam licked sweat from her bellybutton, suckled her hip, drawing hard enough to mark her there, then moved up her ribs to capture a nipple at a time in his mouth.

She writhed under him, pressing her tender rump on the blanket. That ache segued into pleasure as Sam kissed the tips of her nipples before biting them. He switched from breast to breast, blowing on each before recapturing them for more erotic torture. "Come for me again, Eden," he ordered her as he worked his fingers in and out of flesh that clasped his digits, trying to get more.

She lifted into his thrusts, swiveling her hips to find the best spot, the pleasure point. Eden couldn't stop her cries of encouragement. "Please don't stop, I need this."

"This?" he asked as he stroked his fingers inside her, "or me?"

She needed... Eden shook her head in denial. "This." She couldn't give him what he asked. She denied him that, but offered him her body. Sweat fell off him and splashed on her breasts in a sensory slide. His face was a grimace of determination before he dropped his head and suckled her like a babe.

"Yes, that's it, please me. Make me forget." Eden fought her desire to submit to Sam at the same time she used him to blot out memories of horror.

She rode his fingers, milking them with a pulsating internal rhythm. As she spread her thighs to take more of him, her head thrashed back and forth in the agony of her passion and she grasped what he gave her, begging for more. "Please, Sam. Please let me have all of you."

Sam's eyes were deep blue and his voice a guttural question. "You want me buried inside of you?" He took his fingers out of her and she couldn't stop her sob.

"Don't leave me, Sam. Please, don't stop." Eden's words escaped her—pleas for relief, pleasure, finally...him. She begged Sam "I need you in me. Please, let me have all of you."

As soon as she said the words, he lifted her hips high and thrust deep 'til he touched her core. Then he sprawled on top of her, pinning her to the blanket so that his body dominated her smaller size as he nudged against a place inside never touched before. "This what you want, Eden? My cock shovin' so deep inside, you'll never get the taste of me out of you? Eden, is this what you want?"

"Yes," she moaned her surrender. "Yes, I need you." Eden arched under him, her body clasp his shaft, milking his length. Sam loosened his control and pistoned in and out of her in deep thrusts. Prickles of heat brushed over her shoulders and back, pleasure beyond any level she ever thought possible washed over her and she came in a rush of ecstasy as she screamed his name. "Sam..."

Sam's back tightened, arching his body into a taut bow seconds before his release. *No babies*. Goddamned if the woman didn't make him almost forget his own rules. He pulled out, gasping as he spilled his seed on her belly. His hips bucked spasmodically as the white liquid shot out of him. As it spurted through the air, Eden moved, catching his spill on her breasts, smoothing the white cream round and round before licking a drop of it from her finger. Sam thought he was drained, but his testicles drew tight again, ready for more of Eden.

He shifted her, lifting her legs over his shoulders and plowing into her with hard strokes that moved them across the floor. "I can't get enough of you, sweetheart." He wanted to hear her scream his name again. Not *Daniel*, Sam. He wanted that name in her head and printed in fingermarks of possession all over her body. The thrust of her pelvis back at him and her demands for more kept him pumping until her screams of "Sam" echoed in the cavern, surrounding them with his name.

Another release roared through Sam. He pulled out and watched his ejaculate spurt over her thighs and belly in a haze of passion. Then he collapsed on top of Eden. His skin pressed against the white seed he'd just spent, mingling with his sweat on her body. After he collect his wits, he groaned and made as if to move.

She murmured, "Not yet," and slung a leg over his thigh, hugging him to her.

"I'm too heavy for you, sweetheart." Sam eased to her side, pulling her into his arms for a minute while they both lay exhausted and out of breath.

For once he was sure that Eden was in no better shape than he was. When he could, Sam staggered over to the pool and wet a towel. After he cleaned them both, he lay back down and pulled her head against his chest, relaxed, closed his eyes and savored the incredible passion that had blazed between them.



It was her gasping sobs that brought him back to himself. She pressed her face against him, trying to stifle her distress, but Sam could hear the rending grief as it tore through her.

"It's all right, pretty lady. I've got you now." He rocked her body in his arms, whispering comfort to soothe her despair as he tucked her closer, letting her tears run their course. When she was silent but for a hiccupped sob now and again, he spoke. "When a woman loves a man the way you did your Daniel, I figure it's a shock to let another man take his place."

"You'll never take his place." She whispered the denial into his chest.

"Eden, sweetheart," he said as he kissed her temple, the only part of her face he could reach, "I already have."

The shake of her head was his only answer. He held her and listened until her breathing changed from frantic to the slumber of exhaustion. Then, before he allowed sleep to take him too, he murmured his claim aloud to the cave and to the ancient spirits who resided there, "Mine 'til hell freezes over."

Eden fought the burst of crying that was unexpected and uncontrollable. She lay pressed against his body and mentally repeated his words meant to comfort. "*I figure it's a shock to let another man take his place.*" *You'll never take his place.* She chanted the words in her mind until she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was awake and gone from the cave before she opened her eyes in the morning. Eden bathed in the warm pool, groaning as the water soothed her aches. She'd goaded him to lose his control and instead, discovered an animal inside herself.

Eden inspected the cherry-colored marks of passion on her hips, bruises on her thighs and teeth marks on her breasts. She tried to think about her mission of justice instead of their brutal coupling. But it was Sam's question about her pursuit of Ansell Black that surfaced. *What was the point?* Those words repeated themselves, becoming Daniel's question instead. *What's the point, Eden? What's the point?*

The warm mineral water caressed her skin, taking away the ache and reminding her of the pleasure she'd found the night before. Daniel had trained her well—too well. In the midst of horror and grief, her body betrayed her. *Take his place...* The thought whispered in the air around her.

She clenched her teeth against another sob. *I hate, I hate, I hate Sam McCallister.* But she recognized that for the lie it was. She hated that he made her feel alive. She despised herself for betraying her loyalty to Daniel. *I will revenge my husband's murder. It is unthinkable that I abandon my plan, to dally here with a man who will soon be gone.* Eden shivered and rejected her own thought. "Dallying" didn't begin to describe what was happening between them.

Wind whistled through the opening at the top of the cave and then quieted as though listening to her thoughts. Even in the warm water, Eden shivered. She scrambled out of the pool, dressed and hurried to the entrance of the cave, unwilling to be in the eerie place any longer. He was kneeling by the area around the Indian fire pit pulling weeds. "Are you planning on doing this whole canyon?" she asked, ready to ignore what had happened between them. But it wasn't to be.

He motioned her nearer and she crossed to where he worked in the remnants of ash and half-burned wood. He looked up at her and apologized wryly. "I saw the marks I left on you last night, Eden. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I lost my head but that's no excuse."

It surprised her. He knelt before her and it was impossible to question his sincerity.

He waited for a response, watching her expression as much as listening for her words. She answered dryly, "I seduced you. Remember? But your apology is noted and accepted."

She directed his attention back to the fire pit. "Why do you keep this area cleared?" It was the right question.

Sam went back to his weed-pulling and told her the story of three half-grown boys who ended up by the Indian fire one night. She got tired of following his progress and pulled the weeds too. He protested. "You'll get splinters in your hands. Take my gloves." She ignored his gruff order but when the thistles punctured her fingers, she admitted defeat and took the gloves he held out wryly.

She enjoyed the time in the sun. When one story finished, Sam launched into another about his cousin and his wife, Naomi. "She was another reluctant bride. But Charlie Wolf brought her around." He finished the story with a sly grin, making her wonder what tactics the half-Kiowa cousin had used to claim a schoolteacher for his wife.

She decided she didn't want to hear about Charlie Wolf McCallister and his courting either. Not when it brought that look of speculation to Sam's face. So she repeated her first question of the morning. "Why do you keep this spot clear of weeds?"

"It's a sacred place. Feel it, Eden." He stood and brushed off the red dust as he looked around. She followed his gaze. She didn't think she saw what he did.

"I see rocks and crags and boulders, Sam. What do you see?" She also saw the man bathed in sun, blond hair glinting gold, crowning a face as beautiful as a god. He could have been a statue as he scanned the walls of the canyon and then the sky above. His gaze was so intent it made her shiver.

His voice, when it came, surprised her. It was meditative, thoughtful. "I see a time when this place was holy ground. The Apache came here to talk. It was neutral territory for the tribes, a place of sanctuary for all of them when they needed to disappear."

"Why does it mean so much to you?" His shirt was open, letting the sun touch his skin, and the light hairs on his chest accented the muscle there. She looked up hastily to find his attention on her.

Fine lines around his eyes crinkled in amusement at her assessment of his body. Shadows and light shifted oddly around Sam, creating an aura of angelic perfection. Eden looked away from temptation and reminded herself, Sam McCallister is—no, Snake McCallister—is a killer. But his smile made her think of the three boys who had come into Apache Territory alone.

“Your family, your mother must have been terrified while you were gone and furious once she knew where you’d been.” It was a reasonable observation but the mellow warmth disappeared from Sam’s face as he continued his story, leaving her remark unanswered.

“Lozen, the Apache’s witch seer, showed me this place in my dream. I knew what I’d seen was here, but it was different. I came here and poked around a lot trying to puzzle it out. After I found that cavern, I figured I was supposed to. I don’t know why the ancients showed it to me, but, it’s come in handy when I need a place to hole up from time to time.” He ended that conversation abruptly.

Eden wondered if the boy Sam McCallister had needed sanctuary. His earlier words drifted through her mind, *I had lessons every day for damn near six years until I got tired of the beatings for not being smart.*

Eden didn’t want to think about the boy who’d struggled to please others. He’d changed since then, that was indisputable. It didn’t seem likely the grown bounty hunter needed a hiding place, either. Sam McCallister didn’t hide from anything. Eden realized they were here because of her. The picture of him standing alone and unafraid against the band of outlaws would always remain in her mind.

“When will we join the others?” She wanted to discuss their mission. But instead he told stories to lull her senses before he slipped in a question.

“How old are you? Deacon said Daniel was a man to his boy, but Deacon’s older than me, and you’re no way as old as I am.”

When she didn’t ask his age, he volunteered it wryly. “I’m thirty-one, getting long in the tooth.”

It was clever the way he wove Daniel’s name again and again into the conversation and then dropped information about himself right beside it. She got tired of telling him to mind his own business, or she wasn’t interested and answered, “I was seventeen when I met Daniel. He was my father’s student. My father was also a doctor.”

Sam nodded as though not surprised. “How long were you married?” He squatted on the ground polishing the stones around the campfire as he pretended innocent interest. Whatever his reasons for wanting to know, Eden gave up evasion and remembered.

“We married after Daniel finished his training. I was eighteen, Daniel was fifteen years older.” To stave off the inevitable prod, she added, “We were together seven years, three of them in Clover.”

“So you’re twenty-six or seven?” His eyebrow went up in query.

"Twenty-five," she corrected him automatically. "We were together from the day we met." Eden said fiercely.

Sam nodded as if he understood. "Figured as much. Didn't see how a man could leave a woman like you alone for a year."

The sun rose high in the sky and Sam talked and talked and told her nothing but wanted to know everything about her. "Who taught you to play cards?" The questions of the night before were intensified, as though the game hadn't ended. Now that her passion was temporarily extinguished she once again saw Sam as an obstacle to her goal. Answering his questions irritated her.

"My grandfather lived with us. My mother died when I was eight. Her father liked a game of chance now and then. I learned at his knee."

"You have family back where you came from?"

"None." Her bleak answer was true. Her grandfather was long gone, her father the same. Daniel had been the last person connecting her to the world. Now that he was gone, nothing held her but a deed yet unaccomplished.

They went back inside. He fixed venison over the fire and she traced the pictures on the wall, waiting impatiently for the coffee to be finished. She closed her eyes and inhaled, remembering other mornings when she waited for the first cup.

"Why didn't you and Daniel have a family?"

"Your questions are rude. My life with Daniel is over. I don't want to talk about it."

"Doesn't seem like it's over yet, Eden. You haven't let him go. You must regret not having his young'un."

He wouldn't stop pestering her about it until she turned on him and told him sharply. "My family ended the night Daniel died. I only regret our time was cut short. I cherish every moment."

Shame swept over her as she remembered her passionate screams of the night before. She'd betrayed Daniel with every cry of Sam's name. Eden's hands became fists but she struck at Sam with her words. "Daniel was not like you. You are a whoremonger. I heard you negotiating with the saloon woman in Eclipse. You have probably left poor women to raise bastard children alone all over Texas."

Sam said gruffly, "I don't leave any packages behind." His expression left her with no doubt he meant his words. "I don't plan on having any kids now or later. I just want you to know that."

So his probing had been to convince her he'd keep his word about babies. Eden calmed herself enough to respond. "Make certain of that. My maternal instincts are underdeveloped."

Sam didn't lie to himself. He'd managed to grab hold of a woman who didn't want to be his. He knew that ninety percent of the information he drew out of Eden was of

little value in finding the man she pursued. But he prodded her anyway, gathering every nugget that she revealed to study later.

He didn't investigate his motives but he knew it was important to get the hidden thoughts out in the open. By the end of his gardening session, Daniel wasn't a taboo subject any longer. He knew how smart her husband was. Her expression filled with pride when she talked about his studies and helping him set up his makeshift clinic. Sam didn't want to hear the longing in her voice for another man. But he figured it was better released than buried in her heart.

He knew she had always been a sensuous woman. Her fierce "we were together from the day we met" let him know that Daniel had satisfied her needs. And Sam had already discovered the depths of Eden's passion.

"You fuck many men on your trip around Texas?" In spite of the fact that she had the skills of a whore in bed – better – and he'd have bet his share of the MC3 that he was the first man to have her since her husband and the second in her life. But he waited for her answer anyway.

Her shocked, "Of course not," satisfied something inside him. As far as he was concerned, Eden was his woman. Sam wasn't quite sure what that meant yet, but he knew he'd claimed her forever.

That made the damage he'd done to her body even more disgusting. "I'll be more careful with you the next time," he repeated. There *would* be a next time. He made his apology but stated his intent at the same time.

She accepted his apology and brushed aside the rest. Even though he wanted her again, he wouldn't touch her until her body recovered from his crazed lust.

He lounged against the wall of the cave, watching her pretend last night hadn't been. Sam stood next to the spot where her cries of passion had resounded against the walls. "It will happen again, Eden. Quit fighting it. Quit fighting me."

Sam refused to let the subject go. He wanted to dominate her, make her submit to him. He'd never felt like that about another person in his life. "Come here." She stood across from him, the red of her blush screaming her embarrassment. "Eden, come over here."

She minded his order, crossing slowly to stand before him. She stared at a spot of bare chest instead of meeting his gaze. He tipped her chin up and told her, "It's okay for now, you not wanting me, Sam McCallister. Use my body to get the relief you crave. There's no shame in this, Eden. There's no shame in taking what you need."

He thought for a moment the tears that made her eyes so much brighter green might brim over. But they remained unshed, her gaze steady and sure when she answered, "I am weak in matters of the flesh. I know you've discovered that truth. But I remain Daniel's wife in my heart."

Sam dropped his hand and let her walk away, a curl of hunger in his belly for the loyalty she gave another man. "You're a widow. Daniel Pace is dead and gone and you have years ahead to fill." It didn't seem likely that she'd willingly spend them with him.

"I have one thing yet to do. Any time after that is meaningless." Eden had erected her barriers. She moved to the other side of the cave and ignored him after that exchange.

He regretted pushing her about the family she'd not had a chance to start with Daniel. She'd rounded on him fast on that one. "A whoremonger," she called him. Her words hit harder than she knew. Sam had been fourteen when he'd fucked his first woman. He'd been discovered and Jonas McCallister had called him the Weak-minded Whoremonger thereafter.

Eden's calm denial of her maternal instincts hadn't rung true. Sam remembered the baby in the coach and the way she'd played games with the youngster and protected him from the boot of the rancher. *Funny, I would have thought different about her.* She'd been glad to get his assurance that no children would be produced from their coupling. Disquiet nagged him as if he was missing something in the puzzle that made up Eden McCallister.

Stubbornly, he changed her name in his mind, determined to change it in hers too. She was no longer Eden Pace. She never would be again. He'd told her the truth the night before. He already owned her body. She followed him with her eyes and it wasn't fear in her gaze. He wanted more than her body's hunger. Sam wanted her mind, her heart and, looking around the cave he admitted to himself, maybe her soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

After an uncomfortable night of half-sleep again spent in Sam's arms, Eden was out of patience with him and determined to get their mission back on course. She'd slept in her clothes, Sam in his pants. But clothing didn't diminish the feel of his hard length against her rump. Her convictions warred with desire all night long, and the morning didn't improve her mood.

"For heaven's sake, Sam, let me do that." After several meals of burned venison, Eden had eaten enough of Sam's cooking. She brushed aside the look of surprise he gave her from where he squatted by the fire as she moved the skillet out of the flames.

"What are we waiting for? If Robert is gathering information, how will we know when to join him?" She tried to keep a civil tongue in her head but Sam's constant presence was disturbing. He was never more than a cave-length away from her and his eyes followed her movements even then.

"You need to be someplace immediately, Eden, you tell me and tell me why. Meanwhile, you need to rest up while we do all of our waiting."

It was all he would say about their plans. She paced the length of the cave, rapidly at first, but gradually she slowed to look at the pictographic history displayed. Sometimes she found herself standing in the same spot, staring at the wall as her mind roiled in turmoil trying to figure what to do.

They didn't leave for Wichita Falls, join the other two bounty hunters or discuss strategy for catching Ansell Black. Instead, Sam McCallister settled into this place as though he'd brought Eden home.

They had but one horse between them and if Sam was able to call out, Horse would not carry her anyway. Eden wasn't sure she could find her way out of the canyon and back to civilization, in spite of her earlier bravado. She didn't volunteer conversation but he made it impossible to ignore his.

"Seems like you've got a lot on your mind, Eden. Why don't you let me in on what's got you so edgy?"

"You," she snapped at him after the third or fourth tour of the cave. "We're supposed to be hunting the most wanted outlaw in Texas, not hiding in this cavern." She let her gaze sweep over the interior and shuddered involuntarily. She hated this place now. It filled her with unease and roused the hidden sorrow she'd so carefully tucked away.

Nothing here was familiar nor should it have unleashed the flood of memories it did. Yet even the smell of coffee teased her with thoughts of Daniel on their last day.

*"Eden, you make the best coffee in the world." They stood in the kitchen that became a clinic as soon as a sick soul came to the door. Daniel wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. "It's good to be alive on a day such as this. You smell like apple pie, sweetheart. I could eat you up right now." He brushed his lips across her neck and whispered, "I'll always love you, Eden."*

Eden's attention snapped back to the cave. She shivered as she heard the whisper as clearly as if Daniel stood beside her. For months she'd relied on the companion in her head, seeking guidance and finding it. For a time in the cave, Daniel had disappeared. Now he was back in full force. She didn't understand, and she wondered if she might finally have slipped into insanity.

She stood in front of the pictures drawn on the wall that reminded her of her own life's journey, forever changed. *"I'll always love you, Eden."*

Eden whirled around, agitated and seeking, but no one occupied the room except her and the bounty hunter. Wind whistled down through the smoke hole at the top of the cave, echoing eerily in the cavern before it scattered ashes from the morning cookfire.

"I don't like this place. I want to leave." She walked toward Sam to deliver her request, though it came out more like a demand.

"Be easy, Eden, and rest up. We've got some waiting to do for a spell." He sat on the cavern floor, lounging against a rock formation as he cleaned his gun. "Why don't you tell me about yourself before you met Daniel? I bet you were a hellcat coming up."

"I don't want to talk about me or anything else. I want to leave." She turned away from him and strode toward the barrier across the door. "Shoot me if you want to, but I'll walk out of this devil place if I have to." When she reached the heavy moveable wall she struggled with it, but she couldn't lift the weight.

He was behind her without her hearing even a whisper of his approach, and easily lifted the barrier aside to release her to the outdoors. "This place has spirits floating around for sure," Sam said, "but not devil spirits."

Nevertheless, as soon as she stepped into the sunshine outside, her depression lifted and she regained her control. Memories besieged her inside, outside she looked at the predatory male who shared this space and she once again focused on escaping from him and returning to her pursuit of Ansell Black.

Eden assessed the barren canyon surrounded by steep cliffs and knew that on foot she'd last no more than half a day under the burning sun. She started walking. When his shadow joined hers, she refused to look at her captor and focused on the rubble-strewn path.

"Ever see a person who's been scorched by the sun?"

Eden kept her gaze directed away from her companion. "I'm not interested in company. Please leave me alone. I presume you'll have no problem turning in my 'scorched' carcass since the poster said dead or alive."

She knew it was a pointless trek that he accompanied silently. He let her get to the mouth of the canyon before scooping her into his arms and turning back. "Not interested in seeing you dead, pretty lady. I'm afraid I have too many plans for you to let that happen."

That did bring a response from her, but delivered up at him from her position in his arms, Eden felt it lacked conviction. "I'll get away, you know. You might as well kill me or set me free, because I won't stop until I see that man dead."

He shifted her in his arms and before she knew his intent, his mouth claimed hers. In spite of the heat of the day and her anger and frustration, her body softened against his and he brought her back to carnal need.

How long he stood with her under the sun, exploring her mouth with his, tasting her essence, she could not have said afterward. But when he lifted his head, his voice was gravelly rough with his own need and he said, "I'll have to work harder at making you want to stay."

When they reached the cavern again and he set her on her feet, she trembled from the shock of her response. "I don't want this." She swept aside his arm and walked rapidly to the other end of the cave.

The solution came to her when her eyes caught sight of her knapsack. She relaxed, ready for the last game she intended to play with Sam. She refused to acknowledge her body's response to the primitive cravings he drew from her.

She spent the rest of the afternoon looking again at the pictured wall, but this time as she studied the hieroglyphics etched there, she planned. It seemed best to lull him into believing she'd given up. "Of course you're right. I would have come back. There's no way I could find civilization from here." Since the last part was truth, her voice carried conviction.



He didn't answer her and continued his own work. This time he rubbed his saddle, cleaning dust and sweat from the brown leather, apparently indifferent to her actions. She knew better.

"What are your plans for me?" She walked toward him, letting her hips sway just enough to suggest the sensuality that he'd already discovered. But his answer was not what she expected.

"I figure to keep you and me both alive, sort this mess out, then spend some time with you, pretty lady." He met her glance with his own intent stare and she wished that she'd not asked.

"And what if I don't want to 'spend time with you?'"

He shrugged and answered, "Guess I'll have to persuade you to feel different." Then he went back to cleaning his saddle, seemingly disinterested in conversation now that she wanted to talk.

After wandering around the cave three more times, she sat across from him, seated next to her knapsack. He watched her pull out her hairbrush and comb and continued to gaze at her while she unbound her hair and let it fall to her hips. His cheekbones were stained red, proving he was not as indifferent to her ploys as he pretended.

Sam watched her comb and braid her hair into a long plaited rope, but still he made no comment. She lifted her eyebrow at him, congratulating him silently for resisting her attempt to seduce his sense from him.

Fumbling with the knapsack, Eden put away her comb and brush. As she withdrew her hand, she palmed the tube of liquid holding the means to her freedom. She bided her time until the sun slanted through the smoke hole at dusk. "What do you have to eat? I'm hungry. I've already tasted your cooking and as long as you intend to keep me alive, I think it best that I take over that job."

He pointed to the pouch of food he'd carried with him to the cave, and Eden sorted through it for coffee makings and beans. The venison hung from a rack in the back of the cave where the air remained frigid for some unknown reason.

When the venison was fried to done but not burned, she borrowed Sam's knife to cut up hunks for the beans. "I trust you clean this between your killings?" No sense in pretending that his profession didn't repulse her.

He smiled at her and nodded, unruffled by her implied criticism. "That's the knife Lozen gave me when I was a boy of fourteen. I show it due respect."

They sat beside the fire and ate. When finished, she poured coffee into the two tin mugs he'd produced earlier. She hid her activity from his gaze and measured the liquid into the bottom of his cup, hesitating over the amount. He was a big man. The medicine had to be strong enough to knock him out. They had been seated side-by-side but she handed him his cup and moved farther away from him.

Sam squinted at her over the fire and asked, "Nervous about something, Eden?"

She sipped her coffee, watching him lift his cup to his lips and pause. And then fear that she'd overdosed him stopped her and she said, "I have the wrong cup, Sam. I put sugar in mine. Let me have that mug."

Eden tried to keep her hand steady when she traded with him, but the trembling sloshed the coffee over the rim, burning her hand. "Be careful, Eden, I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

How he knew that she'd put the laudanum in his cup, she didn't understand. But he did. He waited to see what she would do. His eyes were again the flat cold stare of the bounty hunter. She lifted the cup and swallowed, hot coffee burning its way down her throat.

She heard him curse, but had downed half the contents in gulps before he could reach her. He slapped the cup out of her hand and the last words she heard from Sam McCallister were, "I sure as hell hope you didn't plan on killing me, Eden..."

Eden was slumped to the ground and out cold before Sam finished his sentence. "Because you may have gotten your own death wish." Anger burned so hot in his belly that the food he'd watched her fix roiled in his stomach and threatened to return.

She'd done it again. He'd kept his eyes on her all afternoon, sure that she was up to something. The seduction was obviously intended to distract him, but he hadn't seen the laudanum coming. He'd handed over his knife obligingly, not sure that she wouldn't try to use it.

Had he not been so familiar with the peculiar odor of the drug, he might have fallen victim to her maneuvers. *Laudanum, Christ almighty*, the words screaming in his head was filled with disgust and anger. Then she'd changed her mind for some reason and taken the doctored coffee for herself. He'd expected her to dump it. Instead, she'd downed the contents before he could stop her. He waited stoically for the outcome.

"Drink and know your dreams, Eden." As he murmured the words Lozen had given him when he was a boy, the wind whistled around, picking them up to echo through the cave. *Know your dreams, know your dreams, know your dreams...*

And she did dream. As he watched, her face softened into tenderness and a smile curved her lips. He knew that she dreamed of Daniel and that knowledge was as bitter to him as the drug she'd tried to feed him.

*Drink and know your dreams...*

Eden stood in her kitchen, leaning over the cookstove to get the pot of coffee boiling there. "I love the smell of coffee," she murmured and inhaled deeply.

"I love the smell of you, Eden." Daniel wrapped his arms around her and hugged her in an affectionate good-morning embrace. She smiled over her shoulder at him.

*"I love you, Daniel Pace. But I won't say that you smell good too." She teased him because the scent of the medicines he mixed always clung to his clothes. Eden wrinkled her nose as he turned her around in his arms.*

*"The coffee will boil over." She didn't care if the coffee burned dry and he knew it. When the morning embrace turned into continued passion from the night before, it was Daniel who stepped away and regained control first.*

*"You go to my head, Daniel, like one of those elixirs you mix." She stroked his face with the back of her hand, loving the feel of his skin under hers. "But you do smell like that noxious laudanum that you prepared last night."*

*A ripple of unease filled her and she looked at her husband almost desperately. "Daniel?" He was still there and she relaxed once more, basking in the love that shone from his eyes.*

*"I will always love you, Eden," he said and she smiled secure in that knowledge. "But it's time for me to go."*

*"Don't be silly." But she could feel the wrongness of the moment now. They weren't in their kitchen any longer. Daniel stood before her in the cave. She reached for him. "Daniel?"*

*"Let me go, Eden. It's time. Let me go, dear heart." Daniel stepped toward her again and she wrapped her arms around him, securing herself to his body so that he couldn't leave. He smiled down at her. "Remember me, Eden. But let me go now. It's time." And he kissed her a chaste kiss on the forehead and melted away.*

## Chapter Eleven

If he lived to be a hundred, Sam hoped he'd never hear a woman scream in such torment again. Eden's happiness disappeared in a flash as her dreamtime ended. Her eyes brimmed with tears and were strangely vacant, as though she was still inside her head looking for the magic that she'd found there. Sam remembered that look well. His mother had worn it every day of her life. He said nothing. When Eden finally spoke, her words surprised him.

"How do you know the scent of laudanum?" Her question was whispered despair.

He ignored her question and asked his own. "Why are you carrying that poison around with you, Eden? Do you stop every once in a while from card-playing to do a little dream-walking?" He didn't bother to hide his disgust.

"My husband." Her lips trembled over the word and her eyes got that faraway look again, as though she was searching for something inside her. "My husband was a doctor. I just have it." She shrugged helplessly.

An unfamiliar sensation tugged at Sam's heart but it didn't keep back his harsh words. "My mama just had it all the time too." He knew his voice was scathing but when he remembered the vacant stare his mother had worn most of her time in his childhood, he couldn't shrug off use of the opiate. "She spent a good part of her time on earth dream-walking, until she decided to just go somewhere else permanently.

"Why do you have it, Eden?" He couldn't keep the anger from his voice, although he tried to control it.

She answered resignedly. "Daniel carved a wooden vessel to slide the glass bottle in. He carried it in his kit of medicines to keep it from breaking."

She stood weakly, but he left her alone. He didn't want to touch her and wasn't sure he ever would again. Sam watched her walk to the spot at the end of the cave that was close by the mineral pool. Eden stopped there and turned around, scanning the walls as if looking for something or someone. Evidently whatever she sought had disappeared, because her shoulders slumped, all fight gone from her.

When she walked back to him, she was different. If Sam could have described it, he would have said she looked empty. Tears trickled down her cheeks but either she didn't notice or she didn't care.

"I want to leave this place." This time the request was a plea. "Please, Sam, take me away from this place."

But he turned her request away with another shrug. "We've got waiting to do yet. Better get some sleep, you look like hell." He walked to her knapsack and dumped the contents on the stone slab where it rested. The wooden container was there, just as

she'd described it. He didn't bother looking inside. He didn't need to. He could smell the bitter scent without seeing the contents.

After he pocketed the wooden vessel, he asked, "Got any more surprises in here?" He rummaged carelessly through her belongings, but nothing else deadly was there. He looked again, this time more carefully, knowing that Eden was wont to spring a surprise or two on a man. But it was just her clothes, her letter, some soap, a woman's wrap and a scrap of half-knitted yarn.

"Get some sleep," he ordered her. He didn't want to bed down next to her but the knowledge that Eden was capable of pretty much any action made him lay out the blankets and motion her down on them. When he lay down beside her, he wrapped her hair around his arm again. This time he didn't savor the feel of the silk or feel a surge of lust as before. "Get some sleep," he repeated and closed his eyes to her torment to face his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Sam woke up early and saddled Horse. Eden lay watching him from the blanket but showed no interest in his movements until they walked toward the door.

"We're leaving. Get your things and come on." He was gruff, distancing himself from the woman before him with words if not space.

She nodded, standing in her wrinkled clothes before moving somberly to the spot in the cave she'd stood the night before. Sam watched as she cocked her head sideways as though listening and then looked around at the bare walls. Any twinge of guilt Sam might have felt for treating her so harshly was lost when he reminded himself of the laudanum. Evidently satisfied that whatever she sought was long gone, Eden left the shadows and walked to where he waited.

When she handed him her knapsack, he tied it onto the back of the saddle then led Horse to the door. He moved the barrier, revealing a day already hot though it was just past dawn. Without a word, he let her pass into the open then shut the fake wall, again hiding the secret entrance before he lifted her into the saddle. Then he mounted behind her and wrapped his arms around her to guide his horse.

She seemed impervious to his touch and disinterested in their destination. Sam wanted to shake her and yell, "You little fool. Don't you know *that shit* will eat your soul?" But he didn't. They rode toward the MC3, the McCallister spread, where Charlie Wolf and Deacon should be by now. The first half of the morning, the miles were covered in silence.

It was a day's ride to the ranch house, giving Sam plenty of time to think. Eden sat stiffly before him on the horse, keeping her back rigidly erect. By midmorning, Sam was sick of looking at the stubborn set of her shoulders and the posture that made both of them uncomfortable. He pulled her back against his chest. "Relax, Eden. You're making extra work for Horse."

When she leaned into him, matching the sway of the animal, her body molded to his and he couldn't ignore it. It was hard to keep the fires of his rage stoked high as he looked at the silken hair that hung down her back in a long braid, and felt the movement of her rump against his groin.

Without reason, acting on instinct, he tightened his hold and pulled her closer. He felt the sigh that escaped her as she temporarily relinquished her will to his and leaned into his strength. Eden's body trembled against his and he breathed her scent, drawing in the noxious odor of the laudanum that clung to her. It troubled Sam. The smell brought back hard memories he'd rather forget, and contradicted everything he knew about Eden.

Eden rode the horse stoically, re-exploring the dream from the night before. Daniel had been so real, the dream had been so real, she wanted to swallow the drug again and revisit it. But she knew better. Daniel had been very clear about laudanum's effects and dangers. Before they had moved to Clover, he had treated many society ladies who were dependent on the opiate.

She carried the bottle of laudanum because Daniel carved the case that held it. But she hadn't hesitated to use the tincture inside either. She could feel the anger in the man who rode behind. But furious with her or not, he held his body snuggled up against hers. She savored his embrace dispelling the chill of Daniel's departure.

She thought Sam's contained rage was more than a response to her escape attempt. The method of her plan, the use of laudanum itself seemed the focus of his fury. She leaned against his warm chest, cold from either the drug's aftereffects or from a chill that came from within. For whatever reason, she settled into his arms and used his strength to face the future.

"I did not try to kill you." They had ridden silently so long, the words startled even her. She felt the vibration of his chest behind her, but only a muffled grunt emerged. "Where are we going?"

Reluctantly, it seemed, he answered, "I'm taking you to the ranch, the MC3." His voice was stern so Eden offered no more conversation.

"This ranch covers fifteen thousand acres of grassland with water rights owned and managed by the McCallisters." Sam's laughter rumbled against her back but his words were not amused. "My grandfather, Jonas McCallister," he paused to lean downwind and spit a stream of tobacco before completing his thought, "was a crazy sonofabitch."

Eden refrained from commenting on the stream of brown spittle that hit the ground but she leaned in the opposite direction anyway. His voice was satisfied when he continued and Eden thought again how childish men could be.

"Why don't you switch to cigars? That's a filthy habit." Her remark was exasperated but that seemed to please him too.

"I guess it's my habit of choice." She'd given him a chance to dig at her and she let him enjoy showing his displeasure. Daniel had been much the same when irritated with her. Sam's next words drew her attention back to more important issues.

"I own a third of this spread, Eden." He had Eden's full attention and unconsciously she straightened her spine, ear tuned for his next words.

When he said nothing, she asked, "Why, Mr. McCallister, are you proposing we live here in marital bliss?" She couldn't keep the irony from her voice and it didn't escape him, because he squeezed her middle sharply in quick reprimand.

"I won't lie and say you don't please me in the way a man wants to be pleased. I'm even willing to wait on you to get over losing Daniel. But I won't tie myself to a woman who walks in dreams instead of real time. I won't, Eden. Either you give up the laudanum use, or..."

Eden stilled, holding back the smile that tried to escape. "So you're offering me yourself, and a home on this ranch, all the nights and days of pleasure I can ever ask for." She paused, letting her rump tease his cock as she spoke. "And all I have to do is quit using laudanum?"

"Why do you carry that laudanum with you, Eden?"

Eden turned her back again, listening as he left a door wide open for her to lie and give him any reason other than use. "Because I need it," she answered. "I carry Daniel's wood carving with me always, and when I dream-walked..." She licked her lips, remembering, and her words held truth. "I met Daniel. I'm afraid I'll have to decline your proposal, Sam, generous as it is."

"So what will you do?" His question was gruff.

"What will you do? I'm a wanted woman. Will you take me to jail? If I am free to make my own decision, then I prefer to take my chances and go."

The arms that had been comforting a moment before became rigid bands of iron. But all he said was, "I'll tell Deacon. I expect he'll be back by now. You'll be free to go, one way or another, I'll see to that."

Eden didn't doubt that he would or could. The McCallisters were either very respected or very feared, and once again she thanked divine providence for sending her into Sam's path.

"My emerald ring, may I have it returned? It's a family heirloom, you know."

His growled "yes" was the last word spoken until they rode up to the MC3 ranch house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden stared out the back window of the ranch kitchen. It was a bleak landscape but preferable to passing time with the women who inhabited the kitchen behind her.

Rachel McCallister was dressed in a buckskin skirt and fringed top—it was obvious from the play of the material across the woman's chest that she wore no women's undergarments.

Sam had handed Eden over like a parcel of dirty laundry and said, "Here, Aunt Rachel," and left the house as soon as they arrived. That made the white woman dressed in Indian garb the mother of his half-Kiowa cousin, Charlie Wolf.

The other woman had introduced herself as Naomi, Charlie Wolf's wife. Since Eden volunteered no information, they resumed the discussion her arrival had interrupted.

Eden remained aloof, having no interest in the topic of childbearing. She congratulated Naomi on her newly discovered state of pregnancy but looked around the kitchen for something to do.

The table and a stove offered a temporary feeling of security. The two women watched her as she cooked. Rachel was silent and Naomi chattered non-stop.

Rachel McCallister handed Eden a cup of dark brew, uninviting in both smell and appearance, then wandered across the kitchen where she stared at what appeared to be a lump of raw dough laying on the wooden counter. "It's not rising yet, Naomi, I think we did something wrong again."

Naomi lost interest in her other topic and switched her attention to the non-performing lump. Curious, Eden looked too. "What was it meant to be?"

"Bread," the two women said in unison.

To calm her nerves and fix food that might not kill her, Eden tied on an apron she'd found hanging on a hook behind the kitchen door and took charge. Ruthlessly she familiarized herself with the room, laying a picture in her mind to remember instead of the one in her dreams.

She'd found an unexpectedly full pantry belonging to two women who couldn't cook. "Comfort's Mercantile keeps a plentiful assortment of dry goods," Naomi told her proudly.

When Eden didn't get the reference, Naomi explained further. "Comfort Quince is my sister. She owns the boarding house and the General Store in Eclipse."

"She runs the businesses for her husband?" Eden admired a woman who had such freedom.

"No. Hamilton, Comfort's husband, owns the Double-Q ranch with his brother, Ambrose. Comfort owned the boarding house and store before she married Hamilton."

Eden found the subject of Eclipse interesting and asked enough questions to be polite while she worked.

Rachel set the platters on the table.

Naomi left to call the men into supper. "I'll tell them that the meal is ready." She looked apologetically at Eden and then said, "I appreciate your hard work. I wouldn't want it to get cold. The men don't rush in to eat our meals." Naomi cast a wry look at Rachel who smiled in agreement.



For a minute, Eden was saddened that she would never know such camaraderie. She could have liked these women as friends. "My late husband, Daniel, said cooking is a skill greatly overrated." She smiled and repeated his words for them. "Eden, a man needs only a piece of meat and a handful of greens to make him strong. Anything else is wasted time and excess."

"Of course," she added, "Daniel liked his apple pie."

Naomi left smiling and Eden realized that she was too. She wondered if Sam would expect her to poison all of them and warn the others before they ate, but when the McCallister men filed in, he took his place at the table silently. She sat in the space on the bench next to him. He ate without conversation except to nod at Deacon who came in late.

"Eden," Robert McCallister spoke as he sat down. "Does all go well with you?" He gazed quickly at Sam. Eden didn't follow his gaze. Sam was as distant from her as his secret valley.

She toyed with the food on her plate, saddened. She already missed matching wits with him. But her answer was firm. "Very well, Robert. Your brother has been a most courteous host." That seemed to answer whatever doubt was left that she had not accepted Sam in any way other than as a temporary protector.

"We'll talk later, Sam." Then the red-haired bounty hunter switched his attention to the food on the table and the rest of the meal was eaten in silence.

After the meal, the two other women cleared the table. Rachel said mildly to Sam, "I prepared the guest bedroom for Eden since you two won't be sleeping together tonight. It faces the mountains so the moon will shine through her window."

Eden was embarrassed at the presumption of all present that Sam had been her lover. But it was true, and she accepted any censure they might display toward her because of it. That none was forthcoming made her like the family even more. "I'd appreciate the return of my property, Sam. I'll be leaving in the morning." He headed toward the door and she spoke to his back. He shrugged his shoulders letting her know he'd heard her.

Eden followed Rachel up the stairs to the bedroom after Sam left. The room she was given was ample in size, the only furniture inside a big bed and a rocking chair. Before Rachel closed the door she said softly, "Rest up a bit before you start out, Eden. My horse will be ready when you are."

The room looked comfortable and Eden would have liked nothing more than to stretch out on the bed and go to sleep. Instead, she thanked Rachel, closing the door behind the other woman as she left. Eden opened the knapsack Charlie Wolf had returned to her and fumbled out a clean shift.

Everything, including her ring and derringer, rested inside. The wad of money had been removed as she expected. Glad to get the laudanum scent off, she removed the foul-smelling dress and used the washbasin and towel provided to clean up. Then she

shook out the dress and cleaned it with the damp towel before removing the fifty-dollar gold piece from the hem.

Laundry done, she sat in the rocker wrapped in a blanket as she looked more closely at the room. The door had no latch or lock and didn't shut solidly, but Eden felt more secure here than in all the months since her nightmare began.

She tried to think about Daniel and vengeance, but her mind was on the big man she'd refused. His gruff offer of marriage had been a surprise. Eden's thoughts were on Sam as she sat in the rocking chair and rested. When the house settled into quiet, she rose from the chair and donned her clothes. She had miles to travel tonight and it seemed providential that the moon shone brightly in the sky, marking the trail for her.

Sam lay on a cot in the tack room staring out the window. The landscape was almost as bright as day.

"It's a full red moon tonight, cousin. Good time to find a trail." Charlie leaned against the door and watched Sam.

"You track the followers and find anything?" Sam directed the talk away from moons and on to business.

"It's interesting that they're members of the Ansell Black gang, but more interesting that part of 'em traveled to Clover when they lost our tracks." Deacon took up the story as he stood behind Charlie in the doorway.

Sam swung his feet to the floor and sat up. "We dealt with Alexander Pettigrew and four others. They followed us until we stopped to visit with 'em. Eden got her chance and took the bastard out."

Charlie Wolf's grunt of approval was his only response.

Deacon loitered in the door until Sam said, "Come in and fill me in on the details. We've got five bodies to claim if the law won't take personals to vouch for the dead. I buried them shallow and stacked rocks on the place to mark it." He'd never forget that spot for a lot of reasons, most he'd not be sharing with his partners.

Deacon accepted the invitation and pulled up a stool. "The more this story unfolds, the more it seems that Eden and Daniel fell into the serpent's lair."

As Deacon explained and Charlie added his information, Sam assessed the situation. "So the sheriff of Clover used to ride with the Ansell Black gang. And the bank president, who Eden killed, was a former embezzler presumed dead. I guess the bank in Clover was sure safe from thieves."

Sam let his mind play over the magnitude of what Eden and Daniel Pace had been pulled into. "Figure a doctor must have been real handy to fix up the wounded. Hell, if the people living in the town are all owned by Ansell, Eden never had a chance of getting any help. If there's anyone who knows what Ansell Black looks like, they're sure as hell not talking."

"Yep, that's about right." Deacon pulled the spittoon close and spat, pulling out his knife to cut another chew. Then he squinted at Sam and added, "Except Eden. Your woman knows something about him that puts her in a pretty tight spot."

Deacon looked uncomfortable for a minute and then went on. "Since this happened eleven months ago, I wondered why the posters were dated so new, but I nosed around. The sheriff tried to say she was crazy and killed both Daniel and then later the banker. Said he locked her up for murdering her husband. When I asked if there was double bounty then, since a doctor seems more of a loss to the community than the banker, Lubbock didn't have an answer. And then, when I asked how she managed both killings, he couldn't tell me that either. I didn't let on that I doubted him or recognized his sorry ass from wanted posters. He had a tough time sorting out how she disappeared from Clover too."

Deacon's hands flexed as though the memory of the man called forth violence still unleashed. "He claimed to know nothing about any green ring. From the looks of what I found, it appears that the banker decided to finish erasing the Pace family. Sick as she was, Eden must have been prepared for an attack, given that she's a smart woman."

Sam focused on the information that Eden had been real sick. "Sick from what? Was she messed with?" He'd wondered about that before, but he'd refused to broach that subject with Eden. "Was she out of her head, dream-walking to forget?"

Charlie straightened, startled by the question. But it was Deacon who answered.

"What in hell would make you think that? Hell no, she wasn't dream-walking. Guess you two didn't exchange much information while you had her alone." Deacon spat and hit the edge of the can. "She was carryin' — pretty far along by the night of the robbery. She lost the baby. From the look of things at the cabin, I'd say she damn near died too."

Shock waves hit Sam in the stomach. He remembered the forehead rolling against his chest in an agony of memories. "Jesus God." His words were said on a gust of pain.

Charlie Wolf ignored Sam's remorse and pragmatically asked the right questions. "Why the wait between her shooting the bank president and them putting out a wanted poster?"

"Hell, as soon as she was gone, she was forgotten. Why would Ansell want to disrupt a good thing he's built for himself? I expect Eden was safe from harm after she ran. Nobody gave a shit that the damned fool banker got himself killed. All she had to do was keep her mouth shut, move somewhere else and start over."

Sam thought of the lady gambler who mesmerized her opponents and wore an emerald ring that matched her eyes. "I don't think it was Eden's plan to lay low," he acknowledged with a smile of admiration. "Ansell's sheriff put the wanted poster out after she started flashing her ring all over Texas. He sent her a message in Fort Worth and the smart lady sent a reply to Clover. She wrote a letter with the account of what happened and how she surmised that Clover was a front for Ansell Black and his gang. Black's setup was about to be ruined if he didn't shut her up."

Sam paused, thinking about the way she always kept her wits about her. "Ansell can't kill her. She's made copies of a letter to be read in case of her death and stashed them all over Texas." Sam finally understood Eden's ruthless need to find the men who'd wiped out her family. "So what's to be done?"

Deacon answered, "Sheriff Potter was mighty interested in the story. He took it to Federal Judge Alan Riker. Hiram swears Riker's a straight shooter who can be trusted." The men all exchanged glances at that. The sheriff had been accepted as dependable. Riker was an unknown. "Hiram will ride out to the ranch with what happens next. Meanwhile, there's wanted posters floating around that have Eden's face on them.

Sam sat on the edge of the cot mulling over his own words. Eden always kept her wits about her. He thought about her intelligent mind, sharp eyes and calm logic. Then he shrugged, decision made.

"Deak, you remember the way Mama smelled when we were young?" Sam changed the subject, testing his brother's memory, but he already knew he was right.

"She smelled like that poison she sipped all day. I stayed away." It was a fact that Robert had distanced himself from their mother early on.

Sam ran her earlier words through his mind. *"I carry Daniel's wood carving with me always and when I dream-walked I met Daniel."*

Her words had nagged at him all day. Eden was clear-minded and sharp of wit, even and especially when in a corner. What he had already discovered about her didn't fit his mother's image at all. And Eden smelled like a woman, rich and sultry and ripe.

"Damn, she's good." He grinned at Deacon and Charlie. He left the cot and the men parted to let him through the door. "Deacon, that woman's mine and it's time she admits to it."

Deacon stopped him on his way out the door. "Daniel Pace was a good man, Sam. His widow deserves more than loose-living and hard words."

"You let me worry about what Eden needs, Deak. Eden's got no plans for livin' past killin' Ansell Black. I've a mind to change that some."

Deacon gave him an unexpected smile of approval. "I expect Daniel would like your idea better than Eden's, brother. Good luck."

Sam left the barn and nodded at his cousin in passing. "Charlie, you're right. It would be a shame to miss a moon like tonight."

Sam pocketed the chew he still held in his hand and crossed to the ranch house quickly. Rachel stood waiting in the kitchen. "You have chosen well, Sam. Your woman has sense. She'd be dead right now if she wasn't smart. Trust her."

Sam grinned at his aunt and started up the stairs, "I don't know that Eden would agree that she's my woman."

"Sam," Rachel stopped him. "She's gone."

"What the hell do you mean she's gone?" Sam turned on the steps and headed back down toward the door.

"I gave her my horse. She said she'd see to it that it was returned when she had no more need of it."

Rachel was calm as she delivered the words that cut a knife through Sam's heart. Then she added, "Come sit with me in the kitchen. There's some of Eden's supper left over. You didn't eat much and neither did she. Eat. We'll talk."

Sam didn't want to talk. He wanted to get on his horse and ride like hell to catch up with Eden. All the stupid things he'd thought about her, none of them had prepared him for the woman who'd lost a baby. And then he'd been lame-brained enough to think that she was a dream-walker too. Shame scorched through him.

"Sam." Rachel's voice was soft but firm.

Sam was unused to Rachel's tone. Anger churned in his gut and for want of anywhere else to send it, he turned it full force on his aunt.

"You had no right to interfere. She's my woman, Rachel."

His aunt surprised him with her smile. "Yes, she is. I have no doubt of that. But do you want a woman who walks beside you because she has to, or wants to? What have you offered her? What kind of life does she have with you?"

"You don't know how it is between us." Sam couldn't tell his aunt about the raging passion that was unleashed when Eden came to him. But Rachel nodded as if she did understand.

"When Gray Wolf was killed, I wanted to die. But I had a son to live for so I put those thoughts aside. My father tried to kill Charlie when he visited and I wanted to hide in shame that I let such terrible things happen, but Charlie was alive and thoughts of him kept me going. Eden has lost her husband and she has no child to live for. She chose revenge as a way to heal her spirit. It won't work. I know. Your grandfather spent a lifetime chasing revenge for every ill he imagined done to him. He was an unhappy man who lost his mind to evil."

Since Sam already knew the extent of Jonas McCallister's insanity, he didn't need Rachel to remind him. "That's got nothing to do with Eden. You've sent her out to get herself killed."

Rachel's concern was real, her expression worried. "Then you'll have to protect her."

Sam felt as though he was in bedlam. "Did I not just tell you I needed to be on my way?"

"Yes, you do. But first you need to eat and set your path. What is it Eden wants?"

Sam didn't like discussing Eden with his aunt or anyone else. His tone was belligerent when he answered. "How the hell do I know?"

As if that was the answer she expected, Rachel nodded and said, "Well, then, find out. Surely you can't fault her for wanting justice for her family. Would you not do the same?"

Sam could feel unease settle like a damp blanket over him. "What are you telling me? I don't know anything more about women than the whores I visit? You know damn well that's the truth."

He cleared his throat, which was suddenly constricted as though someone tried to strangle him. "I offered her part of the MC3. I offered her a place here. She turned me down."

Rachel's face relaxed. The stern lines that had marked it a moment before disappeared and she advised him, "That's a start. At least she knows your intentions are honorable."

Sam was startled by that. "Hell, yes, my intentions are honorable. I intend to—" The word marry clogged his throat, leaving him speechless.

"Sam, Eden doesn't want to love you."

Why Rachel thought he would want to hear that boggled his mind. He shoved the hurt deep inside himself and clenched his back teeth.

"But she does." Rachel finished the sentence and handed him the package she'd been fixing while she talked.

"I thought you just said..." Sam parsed through the sentence to figure out which end was important and then decided they both were.

"Think about that while you're on the trail. Eden isn't running toward Ansell Black. Right now, she's running away from you. She's lost one man and sometimes death seems the easiest place to hide from more hurt. I expect you might know something about that too."

Sam stood in the middle of the kitchen and stared at his aunt. "I've got to get on the trail. I don't suppose you know where she's going?"

Rachel beamed at him. "Sweetwater. I wouldn't let her use my horse unless she told me."

Sam considered that a moment then shook his head at Rachel. "Eden's going back to Wichita Falls. She didn't want to leave when—"

Rachel finished for him wryly, "you made her."

"That place was crawling with Ansell Black's gang and she'd have been dead before sunrise."

"Would she? Seems to me Eden has done a remarkable job staying alive. Is she determined to get killed or is it something else she's after? If Eden wanted to die, she could have drunk that whole bottle of laudanum that has you so upset or she could have shot herself with the derringer she carries."

"I don't have time for this bull." Sam grabbed the package and started for the door. "What the hell is this?" He held it aloft and then the aroma of beef stew and bread assailed him and he was reminded again of what a unique woman he'd found. "Damn, she can cook, can't she?" He was proud of Eden's accomplishments and the list seemed to grow daily.

"Yes, she can. So don't bungle this, Samuel McCallister. Naomi and I still have to learn her bread-making secrets and we're counting on you."

Horse was already saddled and waiting when he got back to the barn. Deacon sat polishing his gun and Charlie Wolf still leaned against the barn door. "Figured you'd need Horse soon," Charlie said as he handed him the reins. "Don't worry. It's a red moon. You can track her same as if it's daylight."

"So you knew she ran off too?" Sam could see they'd all colluded with Eden to get her free of him. "You think I'm not good enough for her?" Sam swung up ready to leave his partners behind as he pursued the woman he didn't want to lose.

"Hell, no, you're not good enough for the likes of her. We all know that. But thank God it's not our opinion that counts." Deacon took the package of food Sam carried. "She can sure cook." He walked away with his prize and added, "Don't screw this up, brother. Eden's got paper on her. You better hustle."

Charlie changed the subject abruptly and caught Horse's bridle, preventing Sam from leaving. "Dan Hawks stopped by. He's got a herd of mares ready when you are."

It was Charlie Wolf's message that got through. Sam thought about the land that he kept open and free. Dan Hawks wanted Sam to use it to build a herd of Palouse, using Horse for stud. The half-Kiowa horse whisperer wanted to partner with him but they'd have to use Sam's land. The MC3 was turning into a cattle ranch with Charlie Wolf managing it. And Dan's cousin Grady Hawks was fast building a herd of Hereford mix at Hawks Nest. Things were changing for all of them.

He'd sworn to keep the Indian land free of man's use and abuse. But Dan argued nothing could be more fitting than the remnants of the white man's slaughter enjoying sanctuary on Apache land. They'd be guarded while they replenished their numbers and grew strong again.

Sam mulled it over as he rode. What did he have to offer Eden? The funny thing was, before he'd met Eden Sam would have said he didn't have a damn thing to offer. Knowing her had made him feel different—whole. It was as though something had been missing inside him and Eden nurtured it to life by her presence.

*"Eden doesn't want to love you...but she does."* Rachel's words bolstered his determination.

*I have to persuade Eden that she wants me...no, that she needs me.* That idea didn't settle just right. He didn't want her hanging around just because he was good for money or even fucking. There was something else he wanted and needed from Eden.

Sam didn't use the word. He hadn't said it since he was six. *I love you, Mama.* Sam didn't visit that place in his mind much. It was tucked away with the other hurts in his life. He remembered the incident now, because it was the last time he'd said "I love you" to anyone. From the perspective of years gone by, Sam heard his mother's answer. *"Go away, Samuel. Mama is indisposed right now."* Mama was always indisposed.

Jonas McCallister had been on hand to witness Sam's declaration. *"You weak-minded simpleton, leave your mother alone. A man doesn't beg for love. Get out of here."* The whip had

flicked out and wrapped around his neck, choking him. *"Get out of here or I'll put an end to ya right now."*

Jonas grabbed Sam by the hair and dragged him out of the room as his mother fumbled for the tincture that always stood near. *"Get out of here, simpleton,"* had been accompanied by a kick in the rear as Sam was hurled through the door.

Sam let the memory fill his mind for just a minute, expecting it to jar some sense into his head. *A man doesn't beg for love.* But it didn't matter what his head told him, Sam knew in his heart he wanted Eden to love him like she'd loved Daniel Pace—rock solid and bone deep.



## Chapter Twelve

Eden's fifty dollars had to cover the horse billet, a room and her stake in the night's poker game. She didn't return to the fancy hotel where she'd slept in a tub of warm water. Her room was in a seedy section of town and when she checked in, the men lounging in the lobby gave her speculative looks.

It didn't matter. She kept her gun ready in her pocket and they stayed clear, evidently reading the hostility she projected. In her room at last, she took off her dress at once, using the tepid water in the pitcher to get ready for the evening.

After she propped a chair in front of the locked door, Eden slept. She woke later in the evening than she intended, another sign of her exhaustion. She dressed, fumbling in her rush to get to the tables before the players quit for the night. They were a motley crew, more dangerous than smart.

It didn't take skill to separate them from their money, what there was of it. But when the game played into the early hours of the morning, Eden excused herself to leave. One of the men joining the game after she sat down insisted on accompanying her to her room. She looked around almost hopefully for Sam. It wasn't to be.

"I'm afraid I prefer to walk alone." She had used that sentence many times to dissuade the saddle bums who wanted to know her better. It, along with her gun and polite reserve, had worked with them all. Sam had been insistent, ignoring her denials.

Eden missed him. Her eleven-month dialogue with Daniel had ended. When her thoughts turned to a man, it was Sam on her mind. The rough stranger loomed over her in a threatening manner and Eden readied her gun but tried her last nonviolent defense first. "My husband will be joining me. Maybe you know him, Snake McCallister."

The hand that had been reaching for her dropped to his side and he backed away with a mumbled apology. "Thought you said you were Eden Pace."

"It's McCallister now. You must have misunderstood." Eden missed Sam, but the blanket of his protection still surrounded her. She knew it and used it.

It had been raining and red muck oozed between the slats, making the footing slippery. When she stepped from the walk into the street, her shoes sank in the slop.

Her winnings hadn't been much more than two hundred dollars. It wouldn't replace her dress and new shoes and still let her keep back enough for the following night's game if she moved to a better part of town. Sighing, Eden resigned herself to the hovel she'd rented for another night.

When she reached the other side of the muddy street, she was aware of a shadow lurking in the alley by the hotel. Unwilling to blow a hole in the only dress she owned, Eden took her gun out of her pocket and held it ready, hidden in the folds of her skirt.

There was a scuffle and a grunt of pain from the alley. The distraction gave Eden time to hurry into the hotel and up the stairs to her room. She didn't worry about the trail of mud she left behind since it would blend in with the rest of the dirt on the floor.

She was closing her door when a big hand stopped the motion and a boot inserted itself to keep the crack open. "You figurin' on inviting me in tonight, pretty lady?"

"I'm a married woman," Eden told him.

"So I heard. You're Snake McCallister's woman, right?" Sam stood in the doorway looking at her wryly.

"When I need to be, it's very handy. Thank you for the use of your name again, Mr. McCallister."

Eden moved into the room, enormously relieved to see him. "Were you in the alley downstairs?"

"Yep."

It was all he said, but she knew that someone had been waiting for her. "You know you probably scared away the last messenger I'll have from Ansell Black."

Sam crossed to the bed. There was no chair in the room to sit on so she didn't protest when he sat on the edge of the mattress. When he began to remove his boots, she stayed in the middle of the floor and watched.

"Best get them shoes of yours off your feet before they dry and you can't get 'em off." He was prosaic and thoughtful when he added, "Eden, I suspect I didn't quite hear that entire letter. How about you read it to me before we turn in?"

She shuddered at the seedy accommodations, embarrassed at what she wouldn't have noticed before. She'd been armored in stoic intent for months. It had enabled her solo journey through Texas, but now her oblivion was gone. "This is an awful place."

"Yep, I wouldn't crawl under that blanket and hit the sheets, was it me." Sam's amiable agreement exasperated her more than if he'd criticized her flight.

"You're persistent, I'll give you that." Eden looked down at her shoes and shrugged. "You're right. If I don't get these off, they'll be stuck to me for good."

She sat beside him on the edge of the mattress and kicked off the ruined footwear.

"Get shut of those clothes and curl up in bed. It's late and you're tired. You can read me the letter in the morning." It was soothing to let him take charge, relaxing to know when she slept she would be safe.

Eden followed her nightly routine, sponging off the dress, shaking out the folds, then swiping the muddy towel over her shoes optimistically. Finally, in shift and nothing else, she walked to the other side of the bed and lay down on the top of the blanket. Still dressed, Sam stretched out beside her, his arm under her shoulders. As naturally as if she'd slept with him all of her life, she turned into his arms and fell asleep with her head on his chest.

When she woke in the morning, Sam was asleep beside her. His head rested on her shoulder. When she shifted under him to look more closely, he opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Morning."

"Morning," she whispered back. The walls were so flimsy, in truth had they spoken louder the sleepers next door might have been roused.

In spite of their carnal knowledge of one another, Eden felt the strangeness of being with him. He slid his arms around her companionably and said, "You reckon a man can get a good morning kiss?"

That was odd. Sam didn't ask for things. He took. Eden looked at him quizzically and then nodded. But he didn't kiss her. Instead, he looked at her expectantly. Exasperated and unwilling to initiate the embrace, she rolled from the bed and stood up.

"I have to get dressed and find a mercantile."

Sam lay with his arms crossed under his head and watched her dress. When she got to her shoes, they were so misshapen it was hard to get her feet in them. She expected him to offer to buy her new footwear. Of course she intended to turn him down. Instead he uncoiled his length from the mattress and said, "Ready?"

"You've forgotten something." She stopped him at the door. He had his hand on the knob and half turned to look down at her where she stood beside him.

"You can read the letter to me after we find you some decent clothes. If you're trotting around Texas calling yourself Snake McCallister's woman, you've got to dress the part. Woman, you'll ruin my reputation in that get-up."

Eden couldn't hide her smile as she reached up to him. "This is what you forgot." She pulled his head down and brushed her lips across his. "Thanks for bailing me out last night. I was a little worried about the man in the alley."

"Yep," he said as he received her kiss and brushed his lips against hers.

Instead of the unleashed passion of before, their embrace was a chaste show of affection. "You taste good in the morning," he murmured then stepped away. Opening the door, he pulled his hat low on his head and ushered her into the day.

Sam watched Eden count out her money as she paid the mercantile clerk for new shoes. She studiously looked away from the ready-made dresses and he knew it was something she wanted. Package in hand, Eden started for the door. Sam caught her arm and guided her back to the rack of women's garments. "Will you let me buy you a present?"

"No," she said regretfully. Then, as though she couldn't resist, she fingered the material of the tan-colored dress in front of her. Sam favored the light blue one more, but he kept his mouth shut as she stood indecisively.

"I can play in a better saloon with customers who have a bigger stake to lose. But I need to dress the part. I would let you advance me money against my winnings if you trust in my skill."

Sam looked at her judiciously as if measuring her ability to pay him back. "I get to pick the dress."

Eden looked surprised but said, "Maybe, if we agree."

The clerk, by this time sensing a bigger sale than she'd expected, swooped down on them with additional information. "I keep the finer dresses in the back. I don't want folks spoiling the material fingering them with dirty hands." She'd evidently decided that their hands were clean enough to see the good stuff. It tickled Sam's sense of humor.

He spent the next hour wrangling with two women about what looked good and what didn't. They finally all settled on a green dress, which he'd known was the one as soon as he spotted it. "It matches your eyes, sweetheart. There won't be a man at the table who looks at his cards."

Sam had already figured that the green was the most expensive in the room. The clerk was eager to have Eden try it on. She held it up to her and it looked good to Sam.

"It's too dear," Eden said, reluctantly, it seemed, turning it down.

"Expect you're right. I played you a time or two. Better go with one of them cheap ones if you figure to lose." Sam let his voice slide into derision.

"Side bet," Eden snapped. "*When* I win, you will come back here and use the money to buy some decent clothes."

"Only if you pick 'em out." He shrugged. "I've got no time for it." Since he'd just spent the morning shopping with Eden it was a flimsy evasion, but he was interested to see how Eden would dress him.

The clerk was all ears and seemed to enjoy the two of them. Sam followed the two women back to the front of the store and heard the clerk's whispered words to Eden. "Your husband is a generous man. You wouldn't believe some of the tight-fisted ranchers who come in here and dicker over a couple of pennies."

When Eden murmured back, "Yes, Sam's very giving," he grabbed the first two dresses off the rack as he passed them and when they got to the counter, he plunked them down too. "If I recall, a spell ago two of your dresses took some damage because of me." He was waiting for her argument but the tinge of pink on her cheeks and the quirk of her lips told him she had good memories of both times.

"I can't wait to dress you, Sam." Eden smiled at him. "I'm picturing you in a bright yellow, or maybe a polka dot shirt." Her eyes said she was teasing but her tone was sedate.

"We'll be moving to a better place too." His tone was stern and brooked no argument.

"I'll have to win big tonight, it seems." Eden's chin went up as she met his challenge with her own.

It suited Sam just fine if Eden wanted to hand him back his money so he could hand it to her again. Hell, he'd never had anything to spend it on but whores and booze. He had a sizeable sum on deposit in the Eclipse Bank. And he kept another stash of money on hand at the ranch. He didn't have anything he wouldn't give Eden, but if the lady wanted to earn her way, so be it. He'd gotten her into new clothes and a better living situation. He counted himself the winner of that round.

It had taken all of Sam's control the night before to let her walk the street alone. He'd been glad that he'd held back when he caught the shadow of a stalker across the way. Eden had some explaining to do, that was for sure. But Sam was enjoying the day with her and he hated to remind her of her mission. She seemed relaxed and at ease with him as she'd never been before. He hoped she still would be after the talk that was brewing.

Sam was carrying her packages and her knapsack of belongings. He took Eden's arm and escorted her down the street toward the fancy hotel where she'd stayed before. It surprised him a bit the way the ladies on the street nodded as they passed. He'd not garnered much respect in that quarter in the past. Even in her less-than-perfect get-up, Eden was every inch the respectable lady in her carriage and demeanor. It pleased Sam that he was accepted as equal. That thought startled him. Hell, he'd never thought of himself as less than equal, had he?

He checked them in and rented a second room next to the big suite in the corner of the hotel. At her questioning look, Sam explained, "I expect Deak and Charlie will be in tonight. They'll bed down in the extra room." Where he'd be sleeping was up to Eden.

The chaste kiss she'd given him this morning had meant a lot. Affectionate kisses weren't part of his world. Just remembering the brush of Eden's lips across his brought desire raging as hot as ever. But it wasn't enough. He'd concluded that in spite of her passionate nature, Eden was ruled by her head. Lust would not secure his claim. *What can you give Eden?* He aimed to find out what she wanted, because she owned his soul and no matter what it took to have her forever, it wasn't too much for him to give.

Eden wore Sam's green dress and he was right. It was the perfect match to her ring, and the eyes of the men playing poker were on her and not their cards. She played well and amassed a tidy sum as the evening unfolded. Sam lounged, watching her play as he smoked a cigar and talked to the people who lined the bar beside him. She divided her time between watching him and focusing on the game, but he proved more interesting.

Several saloon women agreed with her evidently. She counted three who sashayed up to him. One even leaned against his big length suggestively while she whispered up at him. Eden couldn't hear, but she knew what had been offered. She lost a pot that should have been hers due to her inattention. Anger at herself and Sam rekindled her focus on poker.

The evening was predictable until the saddle bum from the night before slid into a seat and bought into the game. "Logan Doyle, ma'am," he introduced himself.

He was a hard-faced man, his predatory nature stamped all over him. He caused a stir of unease in Eden. Had Sam not been at the bar, she would have excused herself then. But his presence assured her safety so she nodded at Doyle and waited to begin. The game was five card stud, and Doyle was more than adequate as a player. When the game was down to just the two of them, Doyle leaned toward her and murmured, "I need to talk to you later."

It was startling. After months of no contact, suddenly here it was. Before she could answer, Sam slid into a seat and threw down a wad of money. "Deal me in, Eden. I feel lucky tonight."

Doyle eased back in his chair and the three of them faced off in the first game. Sam divided his scowl between the other man and Eden and played aggressive poker, taunting her with his larger stack of bills and matching Doyle's bets dollar for dollar. It was clear to Eden that her dwindling pile of winnings wouldn't last long. The two men challenged each other for power. She would have loved to play, but she had a dress to pay for and no money to risk in the game.

"I'm afraid I'll have to bow out, gentlemen." Eden sighed demurely. "I don't have enough to match your play." The men glared at each other across the table, silently accusing each other of running her off.

Sam split the remaining money in his roll of bills and handed her a stake. "I'll collect my winnings later," he told her.

The game was on. Eden hid her smile. "Fifty dollar ante, gentlemen?" she asked. Sam tossed his in indifferently but Doyle frowned at the high stakes. Nevertheless, his fifty joined hers in the pot.

Eden shuffled, offered the cut to Sam and dealt the first round. His relaxed manner didn't fool her. He planned to strip Logan Doyle of his bankroll. Perversity and the need to exercise her skill contributed to Eden's goal—she set out to separate both men from their cash.

Eden played ruthlessly, establishing early it would take money to stay in the game. She wanted it clear from the beginning she intended to show no mercy to either man. Sam wouldn't expect it and Doyle's grim expression satisfied her that he'd also gotten the message.

Eden knew she would win and the longer they played, the more apparent it was that Doyle did too. Sweat beaded his forehead and the nervous twitch of his eyebrow became frequent. She didn't miss Sam's grin when she raised Doyle, sliding another hundred to the middle of the table.

Doyle studied her as she knew he would. She had a possible straight showing against his pair of sixes. "I think you're bluffing, Eden."

"That's Mrs. McCallister to you, Doyle," Sam growled, and Eden didn't need to look at him to know his earlier anger had returned. Since Eden had been using his name for protection she was in no position to dispute his claim.

The bet was on Doyle. She ignored the man across from her who seemed more concerned with Doyle's familiarity than with the money in the middle of the table.

"Side bet," Sam said. He pushed a stack of bills to a separate pot. "That ought to cover what you have there, Doyle. One card left in this game. You might get lucky and pull another six. I'm betting you don't. That makes the straight that Eden's sitting on top dog tonight. If her card is anything but an ace, your pair has her beat already and you've got the kitty and my cash too."

It was a nice recap of what they already understood, but Doyle shifted on his chair again and Eden knew Sam enjoyed the other man's indecision. "What do you say, Doyle?" he taunted the other man, adding, "I'm betting that my *wife*," he emphasized the possessive word and this time Eden did look at him, "has an ace in the hole. Are you willing to find out?"

Doyle looked at her cards again then at Eden. "Side bet acknowledged and accepted. You're bluffing, Eden."

"Am I?" she asked and slid her own money over to the side kitty. "I think I like your style, Mr. McCallister," she said to Sam. "Second side bet. If Mr. Doyle's last card is anything over a six, winner takes all."

Doyle frowned, parsing her words before asking, "What if I pull a card under six? My pair still stands top." Eden hid her smile. The odds of Doyle having a hidden six had been low. Without realizing it, he'd just assured her all he had was a pair. He could be baiting a trap. Eden was betting he wasn't.

"Maybe," Eden agreed pleasantly. "If your pair wins with a low card last draw, Mr. McCallister wins my side bet and you win the pot."

The combined pot now held over four thousand dollars. Sam nodded his acceptance, adding, "Deal 'em, pretty lady."

She played Doyle's last card, a seven of spades. Eden had been unaware of their audience until that moment. A soft chuckle called her attention to the room, where Sam's partners sat watching the game. She felt the easing of tension inside her. Charlie and Deacon's presence rendered harmless the ring of roughly dressed spectators crowding around the table. Doyle flipped over his hidden card—the Ace of clubs.

All of the men in the room waited for her to show hers. Eden smiled and turned over her last card—the Ace of hearts. Doyle's eyes were cold, but he didn't whine or flinch.

"Like I said, Logan, Mrs. Sam McCallister, my *wife*, never bluffs. You just slide the rest of your money across the table to me and say goodnight now."

"Excuse me Sam," Eden corrected him. "I believe the pot is mine." Then she collected her winnings and bowed to the men in the room. "Good night, gentlemen. It has been a pleasure playing our game this evening. Thank you for the entertainment."

She was aware of the silence behind her as she left but knew all would be well with the three McCallisters at her back. Sam exited the building with her. "Mr. Doyle said he needed to speak to me."

"That sonofabitch," Sam growled and half turned back toward the man in the bar.

"Not that kind of speak to me, silly." Eden put her hand on his arm and squeezed, lowering her voice. "He's a messenger from Ansell Black, I think."

Sam turned her around and shielded her body with his while he yelled into the bar. "Bring Doyle with you and come on. We've got a score to settle with him."

Eden looked over her shoulder as Sam escorted her down the walk. Charlie and Deacon followed with Doyle walking between. The third man didn't look worried. In Eden's opinion he should have.

They all went to the suite Eden had claimed. Doyle seemed very relaxed for a man who had three McCallisters staring at him fiercely.

"Eden tells me you have a message for her." Sam's words brought a quick frown and a perplexed look from Doyle.

"No, not a message." He bent over and fiddled with the heel of his boot, removing an object before he straightened and handed the star to Sam.

Sam studied the badge, turned it over and then handed it to Deacon. "Texas Ranger, right Doyle?"

"Yep," the other man answered. Then he pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it over to Sam. "Your wife sent this to Ranger headquarters a while ago. When the wanted poster came out accusing her of murder, we got curious and decided to open it before she got herself killed. Glad we did."

"You're a little late helping Eden." Sam grudgingly handed the letter to Deacon and waited.

Doyle had more to say. "We've been after Ansell Black for two years. That's a pretty sorry record and damn it, we've still got nothing to use to catch him. I've been figuring that as smart as Eden is—" Sam's growl got his attention and he changed his address to, "Mrs. McCallister. As smart as she is, I figure she might know something she's holdin' back."

Deacon spoke up then. "Hell, Doyle, for all we know you could be Ansell Black. You think we'll take this star as a guarantee you're on the up-and-up?"

Doyle nodded and shrugged. "I've been living with those polecats for months. Running with the gang I didn't find out anything, but by damn, it's true. Nobody knows what the boss looks like. If there's anything else that E...Mrs. McCallister can share, the state of Texas would appreciate her help."

Eden listened to the men discuss her as if she weren't present. "I'm standing here, Mr. Doyle. You may speak to me."



Sam's swift frown indicated he liked the other arrangement better. Much as Eden wanted to take charge, she trusted Sam's instincts. She stepped closer to him and looked up for direction.

He took that opportunity to slide his arm around her shoulders. She leaned back against him, feeling the strength of his support.

"Up to you, sweetheart." Sam's gruff words acknowledged her right to choose those she trusted.

"Your boots are a tell, Mr. Doyle. They don't match the rest of your clothes. And when you're playing poker, your eyebrow is a giveaway every time you're going to call or ante."

Doyle looked at his footwear thoughtfully as Eden said, "You're not really from Texas. I'd say you're more likely from farther south. Every now and then you lapse into a Spanish cadence."

When his eyes moved back to Eden's face he nodded appreciation. "Thanks. A thing like that can get a man killed. I had these boots special made to hold my star. Guess I'll have to beat 'em up a little more to make sure they're not noticed. And I thought I'd got the Spanish flavor from my accent. I'm a Texan sure enough, but I lived south of the border for a lot of years and spoke the lingo there."

He paused and then added, "Mrs. McCallister, Texas needs your help. Ansell Black has made fools of every lawman in the state and it's got to stop. We're set to move against Clover. As soon as we got your letter, we started. My job is to let you know that once Clover comes down, your protection from Black is shot all to hell. If you know something about the bastard—" He flushed. "Sorry. If you know anything that can help us bring in the worst criminal to hit the state for a long time, we'd appreciate it."

"I'll speak to—" Eden stopped with the words "my husband" almost out of her mouth. "Sam. If he thinks you should know, I'll let him tell you."

And with that, she brought to a close the meeting and Doyle moved to the other room with Deacon and Charlie Wolf.

Sam hadn't moved from behind her. He still rested his arm on her shoulders and said nothing. She turned and leaned her cheek against his chest and he lightly stroked her back while she prepared her words.

"I didn't see Ansell Black. I heard him. He came to the jail the night that the banker decided to kill me. I will never forget his voice. He is educated, very cultured and above all, arrogant. Sam, I'll never forget his voice. And I told him so in the letter I sent to Clover. Someday I'll hear that man speaking and I'll know him. And then." She looked up at the man who held her lightly in his arms. "Then, I'll kill him."

"Eden, sweetheart, he knows what you look like. Once we take down Clover, we'll have to keep you sequestered and protected until he's caught."

She shook her head. "I'll not find him by hiding in a house somewhere. I have to be out in public to hear."

"And all your poker playing, has that brought you any closer?"

Eden knew it hadn't. But her quest had brought her to Sam McCallister, and for that she counted it a success.

"What should I do?" she asked him.

He studied her face before he answered. "Marry me for real. Let me take you home to the MC3 where I can protect you."

Eden shook her head. "No, that won't work."

At Sam's grim look she added, "Not the marrying part, that's fine. But the hiding on the ranch won't do anything but prolong the agony. I'm not running from Ansell Black. He's running from me. I'd like to keep it that way."

Sam growled, "You sure about that, Eden?"

"Yes," she answered. "We don't want to let him start over again. We've got him rattled, Sam, I know it. We need to figure out how to bring him in the open."

"I mean, you sure about the marrying part?"

Sam's face held an odd expression. "Well of course that's all right. Half of Texas thinks we're man and wife anyway. We might as well make it true. But I don't want you sticking me away in some location where I have to sit and worry about you while I hide from danger."

"Eden." Sam's voice was gruff as he asked her again, "Will you marry me?"

"Yep," she answered, mimicking his usual one-word answer. He frowned instead of giving her any indication that her answer pleased him.

"We don't have to, if that's not what you want. It was your idea." She offered him an out, but he had already dropped his arms from her and crossed to the door to the other room.

"Deacon," he called through the opening, "bring your Good Book and come in here."

Eden was married for the second time in her life to Samuel McCallister. His brother Deacon performed the ceremony and Charlie Wolf gave her away. Logan Doyle stood witness, looking more than a little puzzled by the wedding of two who he'd thought man and wife already.

She didn't know what to expect after the ceremony. Sam leaving her alone in the bed while he spent the rest of the night in the other room was a surprise. Eden understood that the men were talking and devising strategies to capture Ansell Black. She wanted that to happen. But it was still disconcerting when it seemed Sam had lost interest in the carnal side of their relationship.

Eden lay awake for a long time after he left, thinking and wondering. This time, it wasn't revenge on her mind. Sam stirred longings, desires that she'd thought gone forever. Not just the lust for his flesh, but the need to be part of him, to care for him, to... She closed her eyes and sucked in her breath. Words had a way of taking on a life of their own. She didn't name her yearnings.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sam didn't know how to feel. It was the God's truth. One minute he was lusting after a woman he couldn't have and the next minute she up and married him. It wasn't the way he'd planned to have her. He'd been set on courting her, winning that devotion she'd lavished on Daniel Pace. The name soured his thoughts. It wasn't to be. Eden had made it clear from the start that she wasn't interested in him for any reason other than her pursuit of justice. Her ready acceptance of his proposal was just another confirmation of that fact.

*A man doesn't beg for love.* Jonas McCallister's words mocked him as he talked to the other men and thought about the woman who slept alone in the other room. He wasn't prudish by nature and didn't much care what anyone thought about his habits. But what he did with Eden was a hell of a lot different from the whore-fuckings of his past. He'd go without forever before he'd bed Eden with three men listening on the other side of a thin wall.

If any of the men thought his wedding night was misspent, none of them made the mistake of stating his opinion.

By daylight, the plans for Clover were set. Sam ventured into Eden's suite a number of times during the night, long enough each time to stare at her sleeping form, once to pull a strand of hair from across her mouth, which curled into a soft smile as though she dreamed sweet things. Sam turned away from the sight, sure that Eden's thoughts were filled with Daniel Pace.

Eden opened the door between the rooms early. He'd let her sleep, hoping some of that pinched look of exhaustion would disappear. She wore the light blue dress he'd bought her and that pleased him something fierce.

"We'll be going to the MC3 today, Eden. Best get your things together if that meets with your approval."

Her swift frown spoke volumes, so her, "No, not yet, we have things to do today," didn't surprise him. But when she finished her list of chores, he was struck dumb.

Eden counted out the money for her green dress and then the stake he'd given her for the poker game. Doyle, Deacon and Charlie Wolf watched her transact business with interest.

"We have clothes to purchase before we go. And I have enough now to get a pair of boots. I've need of those if I'm traveling with the McCallisters."

It surprised Sam that, anxious to get started as she was, Eden didn't ask about plans to track down Ansell Black once. She reached up and pulled a lock of his hair that hung

ragged and unkempt. Deacon snorted when she told him, "Either you go to a barber, or I'll be using Rachel's trimming shears on you when we get home."

Sam ate breakfast with her and the three other men, waiting patiently for the mercantile to open so Eden could spend her money and watch him spend some too. As to the haircut, Sam had a mind to see what Eden would do to his rough thatch, so he brushed aside the idea of a barber as wasted time.

The clerk remembered them from the day before and beamed at Eden's dress for the day. "I told you that man of yours has an eye for color. And that dress couldn't fit any better if it was tailor-made."

Eden supervised his choice of shirts, held up denim pants against his waist to check for length and frowned at the handmade boots that he laced to his knees. He must have telegraphed his repressed urge to growl because she dropped that inspection and moved on. He chose her boots because the woman had no sense about what she'd need to navigate rough ground.

He knelt in front of her as she tried on footwear. It was a sad truth that even the sight of her stocking-clad foot aroused him so much that he had a hard-on just from holding it. They gathered up their purchases and left Wichita Falls. Sam focused his mind on the trail of Ansell Black and set aside his inner confusion. Every now and again, one of her cautions slipped into his thoughts. "I'll be using Rachel's trimming shears on you when we get home." *Eden thought of the MC3 as home?*

"What's got you frowning like an out-of-sorts bear?" Eden asked as they rode side by side.

"You and a pair of scissors attacking my hair," he grunted. He was mesmerized by the slow smile that warmed her face.

"Don't be afraid, Sam." Eden laughed at him and reached across to pat his thigh. Her hand skimmed across an erection that refused to simmer down and it wasn't an accident. That got his attention too.

By the time they reached the MC3, Sam was cocked and ready to explode. He knew it and so did Eden. He didn't figure to do anything about it though. Like the hotel, only worse, the ranch house didn't afford much privacy and he had no plans to entertain his relatives all night long.

Sam's aunt was the first to greet Eden when she walked through the ranch door. "I'm glad to see you made it back safe and sound." Rachel McCallister didn't look surprised to see her.

Sam deposited Eden's clothes in the bedroom that was usually his and looked at the bed wistfully. Down below, Eden had been commandeered for kitchen duty and even he couldn't fault that assignment since his stomach would benefit too.

The meal was good, better than good, but it could have been sawdust that Sam ate. His senses were focused on the woman who sat on the bench beside him and not on the meal. After supper, Eden was back to ordering him around again.

Sam let her, half-amused by her assumption of authority over his haircut. He dutifully seated himself on a chair in the kitchen. Eden wrapped a towel around his neck and combed out the thick strands that were many lengths.

“Don’t be making me look like a milksop.” Now that she had the shears in hand, he wasn’t so sure that letting her cut his hair was such a good idea.

She snipped them on air a couple of times, smiling wickedly, then teased him softly. “Lost your nerve, Sam?”

He didn’t know what game she was playing but he settled in his chair, resigned to the outcome, bleak though it might be.

It didn’t help any that the other two women gawked at her chore and gave liberal advice as she snipped at his hair.

“Maybe a little more off the back.” That was Naomi. “Charlie Wolf is letting his grow again. I like it long myself. I hope our baby has hair like his. Mine is just a curly mess unless I rinse with Rachel’s magic hair concoction.” Naomi filled most of the silence but it was Eden’s movements around him that had his attention.

He could feel the heat from her body and when she leaned close to clip a lock from around his ear, her scent reached him as well. Sam shifted uncomfortably on the chair, trying to manage his hard-on discreetly. The three women ignored his dilemma, but he was for damn sure that Eden noticed and if he wasn’t mistaken, deliberately added to his torture.

When she finished, she whisked the towel away and handed him a mirror. He ignored it, saying, “I can’t do anything about it now, so no point in taking a gander at it.” When he stood, ready to escape from the three women, Eden held him back to brush the stray hairs from his shirt.

There were things Sam wanted to do and say, but none of them were fit for the eyes or ears of the other women. He suffered the burn in his belly and managed his rigid length silently, escaping to the barn when Eden released her hold on him.

“You fixin’ on hidin’ out here all night?” Deacon’s snide question embarrassed Sam into going back to the house. What the hell was he supposed to do? The whole damn McCallister clan was watching—and listening—with interest. He just knew that Naomi and Rachel would be lurking in the kitchen for a glimpse of him before he went up. Naomi would probably have some advice for him if she followed her usual habits.

But when he got to the kitchen it was empty and the house was quiet as though all had gone to bed. Odds-on favorites though, they all had their ears pressed to the walls. Sam grimaced and climbed to the room that didn’t even have a latch on the door. It was another idiosyncrasy of the old man’s that no one had changed. No locks, latches or bolts had been allowed to separate Jonas McCallister from the victims of his wrath. The shadow of the old bastard still hung like a shroud over the family.

Eden was brushing her hair when he walked in. *Damn it.* The black cascade gleamed and he could tell from across the room that she’d had a bath while he was

gone. He didn't think his cock could get harder. He was wrong. It wasn't much of a mirror, but Sam knew she watched him in it as he entered.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Not much privacy to be had in this house. I reckon it would be best if we only slept tonight."

Just about then he noticed what she had on. *Dammit*. She wore one of those filmy things that you could almost see through. It was scandalous. Sam's cock throbbed behind the fly of the new jeans she'd insisted on. He could see that either it would need constant attention or Eden would have to buy him a bigger size in denims from now on.

Painfully he eased across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. It creaked under his weight, making him wince. The silence of the house sucked up the sound greedily and magnified it ten times louder than it should have been.

Eden set the brush down and crossed to him. "Let's go for a walk. The moon is still strong enough to see the way." She held out her hand to him, waiting.

"You're near naked," Sam accused. "You're all ready for bed."

Eden shrugged and stepped barefoot into her new boots. "Come on, don't be so grumpy."

Sam peered at her in amazement. She'd called him grumpy. He'd been described a lot of ways in his life, most of them bad, but grumpy was a new one. He clenched his back teeth to keep from yelling at her and growled, "Eden. I'm not in the mood to play."

"I am," she answered, reaching for his hand. "Come on. Take me for a walk in the moonlight."

When he stood, she stepped closer and leaned that silken body of hers against him, rubbing against his thighs and the cock that stood ready to greet her. "I need you, Sam," she whispered.

"Me, or this?" He juttied his hips against her crudely and nodded at the creaky bed as he stated flatly, "Not much can happen here that would pleasure either one of us."

She looked at him quizzically and asked, "Can we find a private place for intimate loving?"

A place came to mind as soon as her request registered. "All right, pretty lady." He'd take what he could get and be glad to get it.

Sam tucked a blanket around her and walked her to the door. Heat centered in his groin as he anticipated the feel of her again. He let her precede him down the narrow stairs.

He pondered Eden's words as he led her down the path behind the ranch house. *Intimate loving*? He'd used women without much concern about whether they enjoyed coupling with him—loving the woman who lay under him had never been part of the act. He figured he might as well make his stand now. He didn't want Eden pretending what she didn't feel and offering what she didn't have to give. The words he'd been holding back escaped in a rush, sounding belligerent even to him.

"I don't call it loving, Eden. I want us to start off honest. I want to fuck you every way a man can fuck a woman. I want to smell your scent when you're hot and claim your release with my mouth and cock. But love doesn't come into my plan. Pleasure, though, you can count on. I'll give you anything you ever want, and probably ask for some things you don't."

She didn't withdraw her hand or respond other than to gaze at the moon that shone on the path they traveled. "Why was the moon red the other night?" she asked, changing the subject.

Sam relaxed a little, glad for a safer topic. "I don't know the reason of nature. The Indians call it the green corn moon. Charlie Wolf can track a man under a moon like that as easy as if it was sunlight."

They reached the bank of the narrow creek bed and before she could protest, he swung Eden into his arms, crossing the shallow water to a tiny island. He found his favorite spot, a bare patch in front of a big rock, and set her on her feet while he cleared the area of debris and checked for snakes before laying the blanket down.

Eden sank gracefully to the blanket and held out her hand to him. When he took it, she tugged, pulling him down beside her.

Sam cleared his throat, ready to get the talking out of the way. "Deacon brought back news you need to hear." But he got no further before her fingers covered his lips.

"No yesterday or tomorrow. Just now, tonight, Sam." Then she laughed softly. "I don't know what to call it. I haven't been accustomed to your choice of words. But yes, let's fuck here in the moonlight. Give me the pleasure that you promised. I need you, Sam."

Eden was already in almost nothing and it didn't take Sam long to catch up. He removed the flimsy covering and asked gruffly, "Where the hell did you get this?"

Eden giggled. Sam had never heard the sound from her before and it startled him. "Comfort Quince has many things in her store. Naomi and Rachel got it for me while we were gone."

He was dumbfounded that the women had counted on him to bring Eden back. But seeing Eden naked in the moonlight wiped that thought from his mind.

His cock was beyond hurting, a solid hunk of pain between his legs. He wanted to jump on top of her and have at it. Instead, Sam leaned back against the rock and put his arm around her shoulders.

He fiddled with the heavy mane of hair that flowed down her back, remembering how the first night he'd wanted to wrap himself in it. His arm cushioned her and she leaned into him as he used a strand of it to tease her nipple.

She shifted against the brush of hair, arching her back for more sensation. Sam covered the silky hair topping her mound with his hand.

"Pussy, Eden." He riffled his fingers through her nether curls and asked, "Do you know why men call it that?"

Her laugh was husky as she rubbed against his hand. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

He petted her curls as if she were a kitten. "A cat loves to be touched. It'll rub its back right up against you to get more. Kinda like you are right now, sweetheart." He teased a strand of hair back and forth across her breasts and watched her nipples become hardened peaks.

Then he added a second assault on her senses. His thumb explored the crease below, where flesh separated into liquid heat. She raised her hips and he brushed inside her folds, traveling slowly through the swollen lips of her woman's place. Sam savored her response. His cock stood hard and ready, but he needed this. He needed to know Eden.

Even to his own ears his voice was a growl. But he continued talking to her, forcing her to divide her attentions. "Pussy," he whispered gruffly and pressed his thumb against her sensitized pearl. Her hips arched up and honey flowed from her channel. Sam rubbed his thumb against her pulsing flesh, drawing a line through the wet flow of her desire to the entrance where it began.

He stopped there to take Eden's mouth in a kiss. "Pussy," he breathed into her as he slid his thumb into her heat and felt her inner walls clasp and beg for more. "Cats love cream, Eden, and pussy keeps it close all the time." He released her lips and kissed his way down her neck, stopping on the slope where shoulder became breast.

His thumb was surrounded by pulsing flesh that clenched and gave him more of her honey. "Do you want me to taste these cherries first?" Sam pulled on her nipples, extending them before he scraped across the tip with his thumb. Eden arched toward him but he stopped her with another question. "Or do you want me to lap your cream?" He teased her nipples with his fingers while he ducked his head and planted kisses on the swell of her breast. He trailed his tongue across the rosy flesh and stopped, sucking hard and deliberately leaving a red mark before he continued with his questions. "What do you want next, Eden? This?" He brushed his lips across her nipple, grazing it with his tongue at the same time he pressed his thumb deeper in her cunny, twisting it inside the clasp flesh. "Or this?"

Sweat dropped off his forehead and mixed with hers, glistening on her body. She didn't disguise her desire for him as her breasts heaved and she gasped her pleasure.

"Tell me what you want, Eden. But use my words. When we fuck, we do it in my language." He grasped her nipple between his teeth and bit, hard enough to hurt but not hard enough to harm. Then he sucked on it, pulling with strong suction, tonguing the flesh while his thumb plunged and twisted and teased her below.

"What do you want, Eden?" She moaned when he stopped to talk again. She pushed her breast at his face, silently begging him to continue his attention. He withdrew his thumb and waited. "Tell me in my words," he ordered her.

"I want you to fuck me." Her green eyes were clouded by passion but she held his gaze in the moonlight while she parodied his earlier words. "Fuck me every way a man



can fuck a woman. I want to smell your scent when you're hot and drink the cum from your cock. But love doesn't come into my plan. Pleasure, though, you can count on. I'll give you anything you ever want, and probably ask for some things you don't. Fuck my p—" Sam claimed her mouth and stifled his crude words that didn't belong there, even as it pleased him that she would say them for him.

Eden no sooner repeated Sam's words than he lifted her thighs, spreading them wide. He draped her legs over his arms and plunged his staff in a hard thrust that seated him deep inside her. She could feel her wet heat trickle from where they were joined and forge a trail to her anus, which flexed at the touch.

He withdrew slowly, not moving enough to trigger her release. "Tell me what you want, pretty lady." He teased her with short, hard pumps of his flesh. The walls of her channel closed around him, squeezing him hard.

"All right." His laugh was guttural and rough. "I understand that language too." He pulled her upright so that she was seated with cleft splayed open pressing against his groin. She faced him, impaled on his cock, her thighs now straddling his.

"Show me then, Eden. Make your pussy talk to me." And she did. She pushed against his groin and ground her pearl against the bone, bringing flashes of pleasure pulsing through her. Her flesh inside clasped and grasped his, milking the length as she rode him.

When Sam ran his hands up her ribs, cupping her breasts and pushing them together so he could suckle first one, then the other, she arched her back and thrust against his shaft even harder. She wanted him inside her core. She grabbed his head and held him to one breast, thrusting her pelvis and withdrawing, squeezing his length with each slide.

He pulled on her breast, tonguing her nipple then biting it hard, and her climax burst over her. She came in wave after wave of pleasure. Her breath was a ragged gasp when she slumped against him. He turned them over on the blanket and eased himself out of her sheath.

Her cunny flexed around him, kissing his length as he pulled free. Before he touched himself or spilled his seed on her belly, she pulled him to her and took him into her mouth. She wanted to taste him again. She needed to have his seed inside her. The need was so great that she forced his length down her throat and suckled him at the same time. When spurts of cream pumped into her she came again, her hips thrusting upward as though seeking what she swallowed.

When they both lay spent, side by side on the blanket, Sam rolled over her one more time and fitted his already half-aroused cock inside her. They lay belly-to-belly, her cunny flexing greedily, stirring what it wanted to life.

"You're my woman now, Eden. Know that." He braced his arms on either side of her shoulders and stared down at her. "From this night forward you're Eden McCallister." He nudged deeper inside her and she splayed her legs wider, bracing her

feet to lift her pelvis against his. "'Til hell freezes over," he told her, meeting her invitation with a thrust.

"Well," she answered wryly, already caught up in passion again. "At least 'til death do us part."

\* \* \* \* \*

They didn't get much sleeping done and Sam sprawled in a satisfied heap on the blanket watching Eden put on her nightgown the next morning.

Her lips were swollen from his kisses and the strawberry marks on her breasts claimed her as his. When she sat to pull on her boots and held them up for him to admire, Sam reluctantly stood and put on his pants.

He grinned at her when her belly rumbled. "You didn't eat much at supper and nothing since that can count for food." A blush stained her cheeks as she turned and folded the blanket. Sam enjoyed teasing the suddenly shy woman who had been a wanton in his arms all through the night. He lifted her and when she protested, he growled, "I will carry my wife across the creek."

"I could walk, you know. I have these boots now." She waggled her feet in front of them and held on.

When he set her down on the other side, she draped the blanket over her arm and took his hand as they walked through the morning mist to the house.

Sam didn't think he'd ever walked hand in hand with a woman before. He stopped her in the path and shifted both blanket and Eden to his left side, then took his place on the right, claiming her hand again.

He answered her puzzled look. "I always keep my gun hand free, pretty lady. I can use both in a pinch. But it's the right one I favor." He couldn't tell what her thoughts were about his occupation. Daniel Pace had been a doctor so Sam's profession fell short of even close to measuring up to that standard.

Eden squeezed his palm and quickened her steps, pulling him along behind her. "If we hurry, I might be able to get dressed and breakfast on before Naomi and Rachel get started. Cooking doesn't seem to be a skill that either has mastered yet."

Sam laughed out loud and matched her stride for stride. "You've got that right. Meals are a pretty questionable affair with those two. But they're both good women." He looked at Eden sideways to see if she disagreed. As the former squaw of Kiowa brave Gray Wolf, Rachel McCallister was an outcast from society. Naomi, by her marriage to Charlie Wolf, shared the same status. But the soft smile curving Eden's lips denied any social animus toward his two female relatives.

*I like this woman.* Sam admired her. She was tough, in many ways as unyielding as the multifaceted green gem sparkling in her ring. But Sam knew the sensual woman hidden inside and she'd never fool him again with her reserve.

He stopped her for a minute on the path and muttered to her as he pulled her into his arms. "One more time, Eden." Finally, after he'd tasted her mouth and molded her body against his in a lingering embrace, he stepped away, releasing her with a groan. "You go to my head, pretty lady." She couldn't hide the shiver that instantly brushed through her and he asked, "What is it, Eden?"

"Goose walked over my grave," she murmured, linking her hand in his as they continued to the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden expected to be left behind on the MC3 when the three bounty hunters returned to their business. But her business had become theirs as soon as Sam had made her a McCallister.

Robert spoke to her while Sam readied the horses, making sure she understood his efforts and what had to be done. "Eden, we have to get you in front of a judge and get that killing declared self-defense. You tell your story, and with the evidence of the ring, Ansell Black's involvement and the death of Daniel, we'll not have any trouble clearing your name.

"Charlie Wolf will ride over the Territory with a letter from the U.S. Marshal establishing your innocence. We've got to get those handbills picked up before every jake in Texas starts tracking you."

Eden could see that the men had been thorough and methodical in the way they planned to bring down Clover. She looked forward to the event. Eden felt Sam's presence although she'd not heard him enter.

"We'll be in Clover by afternoon, Eden, and this mess will start getting fixed." Sam stood behind her and she understood that his proximity was both to gain her agreement with the plans and to assure her that he'd keep her safe.

"And then what? What happens to Ansell Black?" She was curious to hear what the bounty hunters might predict.

"First we take care of your future. Then we worry about justice for past events. Understand?"

"What will you do in Clover?" she asked. "Remember, Sam, he is an arrogant man, one who believes he is smarter than everyone else. He'll expect you, I know it."

"Doesn't matter. You're going to turn yourself in. I'm going to collect the bounty the town of Clover is offering. Judge Conklin from Eclipse will act as prosecuting attorney and Circuit Judge Harlan Brown is going to conduct your trial on the spot and declare your innocence. Then Charlie will take care of announcing it to the public."

Eden was already moving, eager to embrace their plan. "This is happening today?" She glanced over her shoulder and smiled grimly. "Ansell Black will be very unhappy if you take down his town."

"No doubt." Sam grinned in agreement. But his eyes changed and became flat and cold when he added, "We're counting on that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden rode beside Sam, surrounded by the men in the posse assembled by Hiram Potter, the sheriff of Eclipse. The soothing sense of well-being that Sam had nurtured inside her was gone. She dreaded the day before her.

On the first walk break they took, Potter matched his step to hers and pulled out a copy of the handbill with her face on it.

He ignored Sam, who had pulled up his horse too, and said, "Deacon tells me that you shot this banker in self-defense. This poster says murder. Which was it?"

"Neither," she answered sharply. "It was an execution." Then she told him what she'd not shared with the McCallisters. "He came to the cell they held me in, where I'd been left to die, and the sheriff gave him the keys and disappeared. I took the opportunity to exterminate Aaron Richards when he tried to choke me to death."

She saw that Sam had stiffened, she assumed in shock at her words. "They left you, sick as you were, in a jail cell?"

"Only because the rest of the men were too squeamish to kill a woman and thought I'd die anyway."

Sheriff Potter then asked, "Did they fetch a doctor for you?"

"The doctor was dead," she answered bitterly. Eden didn't want to tell her story twice, preferring to wait until the trial in Clover. The sheriff was insistent though, so she led him through the night's robbery, then later when for two days she'd lain in the jail cell. She'd been in shock from her husband's murder and still weak and ill from giving birth to her stillborn child.

"I knew that they'd figure out sooner or later that I wasn't as sick as I pretended. The bank president got over his scruples the soonest. After Ansell Black told him to clean up the mess he'd made, he decided to put an immediate end to his problem."

She rubbed her neck where thumbs had pressed, suffocating her. "I didn't hesitate. The sheriff hadn't searched me. I had the gun I'd shot the other outlaws with still loaded in my pocket. I saved it for when I needed it most."

"So when did you figure out who Daniel's killer was?" Sam had taken up the questioning.

Eden told them both what they needed to know. "Alexander Pettigrew came late the first night. The sheriff was on surprisingly good terms with a man who had just committed a crime in his town. They thought I was unconscious but I could hear them talking. The sheriff was supposed to get the green ring once I was dead. Sheriff Lubbock left and then the banker came in and told Pettigrew that Ansell Black would be very upset. When I got loose, it didn't take me long to discover the rest."

Her hatred had given her the strength to hang on. Her need for revenge had nurtured her spirit and her will had taken over when her health flagged. She said grimly, "Aaron Richards gave me the opportunity to kill him and I took it.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sheriff Hiram Potter gathered the men riding with him and proceeded to Clover. Sam rode next to Eden as they skirted the town to visit the scene of the first crime. Eden stayed mounted and stiffly silent as the sheriff entered the house while the posse waited.

"Will you be all right here?" Sam didn't want to leave her alone with the strangers who eyed her curiously. But he needed to see the place where Eden's life had changed forever.

In the cabin, Hiram Potter studied the floor and directed Sam's attention to the drops of dried blood that led to the ladder and room above. "It looks like someone was hurt when they went up. Eden didn't say anything about wounding Pettigrew. I'm going to surmise that the blood trail is hers."

Sam followed the track to the loft and avoided the spatter as he climbed. The blood trail widened above and led to the window and the rope ladder that still hung there. He pictured her escape, frantic with worry for her husband at the same time she tried to protect the child whose birth had begun. Eden had lost both.

Sam climbed back down from the loft and told the waiting sheriff from Eclipse, "Hanging is too good for these bastards."

Potter agreed. "I reckon I'm looking forward to meeting Ansell Black's sheriff. We'd better move on now. The federal marshal is meeting us in town. I expect a lot of the trash has already left."

Sam flashed a feral grin at him. "Charlie Wolf and Deacon have that covered. Won't any of Ansell Black's followers escape today."

The men left the building and Sam crossed to where Eden waited on her horse. He put his hand on her thigh, squeezing it to reassure her. "Anything you need from inside, Eden?"

Her stiff headshake indicating she wanted nothing was all Sam waited for. "It needs to burn clean," he told the sheriff. "And when we clear the trash from Clover, we'll burn it down too. I don't want a stick of wood left for Ansell Black to build on again."

Potter's grim nod sanctioned the action and Sam doused the side of the doctor's house with whiskey, lit a lucifer and watched flames climb up the building. Then he mounted and took his place next to Eden as they left the remnants of her life behind and approached the next leg of her journey toward retribution.

The federal marshal was already in Clover, along with other representatives of the law. Judge Conklin from Eclipse stood beside both Territory judges running for re-election. Anxious to gather credit for the arrests, Alan Riker and Harlan Brown would

both officiate. The town was filled with ambitious politicians and angry lawmen, all waiting for Hiram Potter to deliver his prisoner.

Sam dismounted, lifted Eden from her horse and escorted her into Sheriff Lubbock's office. The man was pacing nervously from one side of the room to the other.

"Surprised you didn't join the other lawmen out front, Billy." Sam spoke easily, keeping himself between Eden and the sheriff. "I've come to cash in the bounty on Eden Pace. You got the money ready to go?"

Dumb as he was, Billy Lubbock looked hopefully at Sam as if the parade of men coming to town had been to escort this one lone woman.

"Sure, McCallister, I've got it in here. We can't keep anything at the bank since she shot the president. I locked the money up in a strongbox." More than likely it was another stash of Ansell Black's, but Sam waited patiently as Billy counted out the hundred dollar bills. When the money was all in his hand, Sam folded it into a wad and handed it to Eden. "Ready?" he asked her.

"Now just a damned minute," Billy sputtered. "She's got to stay here. She's under arrest."

"Well as to that, Sheriff Lubbock, we'll be needing your testimony too. Eden's trial is about to begin."

Sam walked Eden out the door with Lubbock cowering in the sheriff's office like a scared rabbit. The trial was conducted on the board sidewalk in front of the building. Judge Conklin acted as prosecuting attorney and presented the case against Eden Pace. They had a shift in judicial representation when Federal Judge Alan Riker presided, sharing duties with Circuit Judge Harlan Brown.

Deacon questioned the addition of Riker sharply, not trusting anything he hadn't arranged himself. The Federal Judge displayed his identification and Judge Conklin vouched for him with a snide explanation, "Harlan's willing to share the judicial politicking with Riker. He's hoping to win a seat in Austin this year and is looking for Alan's support."

The trial went forward from that point with no surprises. Hiram Potter delivered the information his investigation had garnered.

"In spite of injuries sustained during the robbery, Mrs. Pace killed two of the outlaws before she rode here..." He paused to look at the Clover sheriff's office with contempt. "For help."

Sam entered the sheriff's office again, this time through the back door. He came up behind Billy Lubbock, Ansell Black's token lawman. Billy stood, gun in hand, watching the front door as he filled his saddlebags, readying to leave through the back exit.

"Tell me something, Billy." Sam's question was murmured softly. "Which one of you hurt Eden? Was it you, Billy? Or was it Pettigrew? What exactly did you bastards do to Eden Pace the night you killed her husband?"

The knife at Billy's throat encouraged his cooperation. Sam waited tensely, controlling the urge to kill the son of a bitch.

"She was hurt already when she come to get me. Hell, she should've stayed out there away from town. Nobody would have cared. Things might've gone different. But no, she had to ride in here and report what nobody was going to do anything about."

Billy clearly felt a grievance against Eden's persistence. Apparently it extended to Alexander Pettigrew, also.

"Pettigrew still wanted that damned ring. When he heard she came to town, he came to the jail with orders for me to take it when she finally died. The fool woman tried to resist arrest when I put her in the cell. I only knocked her in the head. It was earlier when one of Pettigrew's men hit her with the rifle." Billy's voice shook as he felt the edge of Sam's blade against his neck. "I didn't have nothin' to do with her losin' the kid."

Sam's hand trembled. It was an effort to hold back the slice of blade through muscle and bone. He shoved the crooked lawman outside to face the jury that had been imported from Eclipse.

It was easy to see that Billy Lubbock was more than a little nervous and it was the rooftops that had him the edgiest. Sam left the man facing a cadre of lawmen from all walks of life who were outraged at the illegal operation Ansell Black had set up smack in the middle of their jurisdiction.

Sam moved behind Eden and eased her out of range of any bullets that might start flying. Billy clearly expected to be cut down and it wasn't the law that he feared, although his sideways glances at Sam left that open for debate.

"Keep to the shadows, Eden," Sam instructed her. Then he went back through the sheriff's office and exited into the alley. The federal marshal's crew had already been through the Clover buildings, emptying the citizenry, such as they were, into the streets. Sam was more interested in the rooftops.

He followed the alley to the end of the buildings and untied a horse from the hitching post. Being sure to keep the animal between him and the opposite roofs, he walked the horse to the livery stable at the end of the street and then sent it galloping back as he sprinted to the far buildings. Had Sam been on the roof, he would have been making tracks already, since the horse was an obvious distraction.

Ansell Black's man wasn't any smarter than Billy Lubbock. Sam found him crouched low on the roof of the bank, evidently trying to decide who to shoot first. Sam ended his quandary by taking him from behind in a move that forced the rifle from his hand and emptied his holster at the same time.

"Haven't seen you for a while, Perkins," Sam said. "I thought you were long dead by now."

Sam looked around for any other shooters, but Perkins was the lone man left behind. He spouted curses and empty threats concerning Ansell Black's ability to wreak



havoc on any jail cell that held gang members. He quieted down when he reached the boardwalk and faced the angry lawmen gathered there.

"Perkins, I take that as a real challenge," Hiram Potter drawled. Although the Eclipse jail was smaller than the Territory lockup, with the bounty-hunting McCallisters next door, so to speak, criminals had a way of riding right past the town.

"Eden Pace." Judge Riker called their attention back to the trial at hand. "Do you have anything you would like to add to the information that has been presented here today?"

Eden shook her head, remaining mute as the lawmen handled her case.

Sam could see the interest in Riker's eyes as he studied the beautiful widow. Jealousy flared in Sam's gut and he said gruffly, "That's Eden McCallister now, Judge. That's my wife you're talking to."

Judge Harlan Brown ignored Sam but not his words. "Is that right, Eden? Did you marry a McCallister of your own free will?" His tone implied that only a crazy woman would do such a thing.

If Eden was going to recant her vows, this was her opportunity. Sam figured there wasn't a man there who'd hold it against her if she took her freedom and fled Texas as fast as she could.

Eden stepped from the shadows and spoke her words in a clear tone, assuring the Judge and all the other men who looked at her wistfully, "Sam McCallister is my husband 'til the day I die." Nobody could doubt from her tone or words that she meant what she said.

"Wrong," Sam muttered. "You're my wife 'til hell freezes over, Eden." If she heard his claim, she didn't acknowledge it, but the other men nodded, understanding the *forever* Sam demanded.

The trial came to a close when Judge Riker pronounced Eden innocent of murder and vacated all warrants issued and circulating.

Sam stood beside Eden, thinking hard about what to do with her. He couldn't leave her on the MC3 with Naomi and Rachel. Without a doubt, she'd take off on her own the moment she got the chance, playing cards and taunting Ansell Black with what she'd done to him.

Each time Eden said, "'Til death do us part," Sam heard her message loud and clear. It seemed that Eden was willing to marry up with him until her plans to depart this world kicked in. Eden apparently didn't much care who she spent her time with between then and now.

Ansell Black was a backstabbing thief who didn't scruple at much, but he wasn't stupid. The very nature of his Clover set-up spoke to that. Sam didn't figure the man would hit Eclipse, although Hiram Potter had done everything but send him a written invitation.

The bank was empty of cash and most of the criminals left to be rounded up were low-lifers. Again, Ansell Black had been ahead of the law and moved much of his enterprise somewhere else. Clover was finished, but the outlaw probably already had a new town established and a bank president in his pocket.

There was no point in telling Eden as much. She wanted to catch Ansell Black, but the truth was, now that the threat of revealing Clover was gone, Ansell could forget about Eden and live happily ever after robbing, stealing and probably murdering too. The law wasn't any closer to catching him than before Eden brought down his town. And as for her knowing his voice, Sam didn't plan to ever let Eden get within listening distance of anyone who might pose a threat to her.

Eden didn't see the McCallisters exchange words, but they worked in an organized unit nevertheless. Sam gave the writ, an Exoneration Proclamation prepared by Judge Riker, to Charlie Wolf, who nodded and left the others. She assumed he rode out to pick up the handbills still threatening her freedom.

"Eden, come here." Sam spoke abruptly and waited beside Robert and the three judges. He watched her closely as he handed their marriage paper to Judge Riker. "I intended to carry this to the Territory clerk, but I expect you can see to getting this marriage made official."

Sam seemed to expect her to make some kind of sign of consent so she agreed, "Yes, please do."

Judge Riker nodded and pocketed her commitment as he went on with the proceedings without a pause.

The citizenry that stood crowded together on the street were a motley crew made up of prostitutes and unsavory characters. Eden wondered why she had never noticed in all the days she and Daniel lived in Clover how undesirable these people were. But when she reflected on that time, she remembered how busy she and her husband had been and how infrequently either of them had gone into the town itself.

She looked around at the miserable place and its people. The jailhouse cat scurried from the front door of the sheriff's office, reminding her of the horrible night she'd almost died. Only the scrawny animal brought any feelings of compassion. The people could burn with the town as far as she was concerned.

Her trial ended but segued into hearings on all of the captured gang members including the merchants who had profited from Ansell Black's town enterprise. Riker and Brown divided the trials, ensuring the proceedings were thorough but swift. The lawmen served as jury members and found the Clover outlaws guilty of everything from theft to murder.

When it was over, all three judges made it a point to speak to Eden, tendering their condolences. "Mrs. McCallister," Alan Riker lifted her hand, and in spite of Sam's growl, held it while he murmured apologies for the unlawful activities in Texas.

Harlan Brown, not to be outdone when it was his turn, bowed over her, smiling sympathetically. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Pace." Sam corrected her name to McCallister, but the judge ignored him and patted Eden's arm, adding, "When I take office in Austin, I intend to clean up the criminal activities that are a scourge in our State."

Judge Conklin seemed more interested in getting his picture made standing between the two younger politicians. Eden listened to his rather high-pitched whine and lost interest in what the older judge had to say. She stared at the caravan moving slowly from town.

The members of one of the most notorious gangs in Texas had lived in Clover and conducted their illegal business without notice. Ansell Black had embarrassed those protecting the state of Texas, and the lawmen were grimly determined to bring the outlaw leader to justice. Men and women who were in cahoots with the gang were shackled and herded out on foot. It was a grand escort of outraged lawmen accompanying the prisoners to Eclipse.

Eden recognized the black-clad preacher from the stagecoach and warned Sam. "I imagine he carries a gun in that Bible he holds so close."

"Yep, already spotted the skunk and took his Good Book away from him. He had a nice little derringer stashed in a cutaway compartment." He left her watching as he joined Deacon to set the first fire. It didn't take any convincing for the rest of lawmen to join in. When Eden rode out of town, the heat from the burning buildings warmed her back if not her soul.

She wasn't sure what the exchange between Sam and Deacon was about, but when the others rode toward Eclipse, Hiram Potter and the two McCallister brothers turned toward the other end of town.

Sam's face was so grim she didn't want to ask him what horror awaited her next. Her question was answered when they returned to the home she'd shared with Daniel and stopped in front of the two shallow graves she'd managed to dig. The charred remains of the house smoldered bleakly, underscoring the end of every part of her life in Clover.

"Eden." Sam called her attention back to him. "We'll move Daniel and your baby on to McCallister land when you've picked the spot."

Try as she might, she couldn't keep the tears from brimming over. "Thank you." It was all she could manage and he seemed to understand her reluctance to speak more.

Hiram Potter, uneasy at her grief, offered awkward comfort. "You've got a good man now, Eden. You'll have more babies and maybe this won't hurt so much then."

She was surprised that the sheriff of Eclipse thought so highly of the McCallisters. Her earlier impression had been that the three bounty hunters were tolerated in his town, not admired. But then, when she considered the prisoners who were walking toward the lawman's responsibility, Eden realized that he counted heavily on the three McCallisters to keep Eclipse safe from the payback Black might try to deliver.

She answered Sheriff Potter grimly. "This is not over until Ansell Black meets justice."

Deacon McCallister grunted his understanding and Potter nodded assent. Sam remained silent by her side. Eden straightened her spine and settled deeper in her saddle. Someday she would see Ansell Black suffer before he died and if there was a way possible, he would die by her hand.

Sam scooped her from her mount and held her on his lap for the ride home. Indifferent to the others, she leaned her head against him and buried her face in his shirt, accepting that she no longer had to bear her grief alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden felt Rachel McCallister's gaze follow her as she paced the floor of Comfort Quince's parlor. She'd been sequestered with Sam's female relatives who had also been moved from the MC3 ranch. Eden slept restlessly and alone while Sam joined his partners scouting the streets of Eclipse for outlaws. She woke early, ready to demand to see him, filled with the need to make sure he was all right. Rachel joined her downstairs in the parlor soon after Eden began her watch out the front window.

"I'm very sorry that I have brought this trouble to your town." What else could she say? Until the outlaws were collected, every person in Eclipse was threatened because of her.

If she expected platitudes, Rachel McCallister wasn't the woman to converse with. "Not my town, so no apology is needed for me. It's interesting though. I don't often get the chance to mix and mingle in Eclipse. I hope I can go to the mercantile before we leave for the ranch."

Rachel seemed indifferent to danger and more interested in using the transfer from the MC3 to town as a rare shopping adventure. Sam's aunt grinned at her wryly and she saw Sam in the planes of her face. "A McCallister woman has to learn to grab fun where it's offered."

"In that case, let me in the kitchen. I need something to do besides worry about Sam." Eden was too tense to sit in a drawing room drinking tea. She needed something to do. The night before, Eden had listened while Comfort Quince advised her boarders that they would be safer at the local hotel. The sheriff escorted the departing ladies down the street and away from the McCallister women who might be targets of Ansell Black.

Now, even though it was just the McCallister women boarding there, Comfort worried aloud about meals. "Yesterday, I told Becky Goode to stay home." She frowned at Naomi and Rachel, unlikely replacements for her cook. "I have no ability in the kitchen."

"Eden needs something to do. And besides, she fixes better meals than Becky Goode." Rachel volunteered her.

It was a relief to Eden to focus her mind on preparing breakfast, she was glad to be alone with her thoughts. Her solitude didn't last long. As soon as the coffee brewed and the smell of frying meat filled the air, the ill-assorted women drifted into the kitchen and filled cups with Eden's coffee.

Comfort Quince was elegant from her kid slippers to the ruffled lace at her throat. Rachel McCallister wore her deerskin clothes proudly, unconcerned with her odd appearance. Naomi McCallister had donned a gray dress, primly designed and relieved only by a white collar. All the women were quiet. Even Naomi's usual chatter was silenced by worry.

Eden removed the cup from Naomi's hand and replaced it with a glass of milk. "Baby needs this, not coffee. So do you." Her words were unintentionally brusque as Naomi frowned and handed it back. Comfort's cat meowed hopefully, watching the white liquid slosh in the glass.

"I don't like milk, thank you." Naomi had no sooner said the words when a voice from the shadows spoke.

"Woman, do you intend to starve yourself? Drink the milk." Charlie Wolf remained in the corner but Naomi came alive, her face, which Eden had considered rather lifeless and bland, became radiant as she rushed across the room to where he stood waiting. The milk in her hand was forgotten in her haste.

*Why, they love each other. He looks at her like...* Eden's thoughts were interrupted by a sharp scold coming from Naomi, even though her actions nullified them. "Charlie Wolf. You..."

He took the glass from her before it sloshed over and spilled on both of them, set it on the nearby chair and wrapped Naomi in his arms. The cat took advantage of the moment and leapt to the seat, immediately lapping the abandoned drink.

Charlie Wolf pulled Naomi along with him when he carried the cat by the nape of the neck to the door and set it and the milk on the porch. "Animals need to stay outside."

Comfort said, "Tell that to the mice and I'll gladly leave Tabby outside. Until then, she's direly needed. Hamilton brought her back on his last trip..."

Eden hid her smile and handed platters of food to Rachel. By mutual consent they gave the couple in the kitchen a tiny moment of privacy. Comfort followed along and continued her cat and mouse story as the three women moved to the breakfast room.

Once there, Comfort stopped her simple tale and wasted no time laying three guns on the table after she pocketed her own. "I trust you ladies know how to handle these."

Eden protested again. "I need to go to the hotel. Ansell Black has no grievance against you or the McCallister women."

Charlie Wolf, coming from the kitchen, Naomi at his side, disagreed. "Black is offering a bounty for every McCallister man brought to him dead and every McCallister woman brought in alive. He's declared war on the family and since we've separated

more than a few badasses from the living in Texas, the ones remaining are happy to oblige."

"Charlie says that there are citizens who are very unhappy that Hiram Potter involved Eclipse in this fight." Naomi kept her hand on Charlie Wolf's arm as she spoke and Eden could see that in spite of the calm words, she clenched her husband's arm tightly.

Deacon McCallister came through the door of the kitchen and Eden looked beyond him for Sam. He caught her look and shook his head. "He's guarding the house."

"I'll take him coffee." Eden brushed past Naomi and the two McCallister men but Deacon's words stopped her before she could follow through with her intent.

"You'll distract him. Leave him be." Deacon spoke mildly but Eden understood. When Sam was in a room, she couldn't look elsewhere or focus on others. She knew from experience Sam felt the same.

"What is happening out there?" Eden was the only one who asked, but she suspected all the women wanted to know.

"The federal troops authorized by Judge Riker will be here midmorning tomorrow. Meanwhile, Ansell Black's already got riff-raff drifting in to make trouble. Deak and I already nabbed four wanteds. Sam and Hiram a few more." He winked at the women and went on. "We'll be collecting on a stack of handbills after Ansell's gang tries for the prisoners during the transfer."

Eden shivered, appalled at the dangerous situation. *What have I brought down on these people?*

Charlie Wolf smiled then, a feral grin. "The trap is baited. Now we wait." He turned his smile on Eden, adding, "Old Apache trick. Hope it works."

Eden was left standing in the middle of the room with her mouth open as Charlie Wolf turned his attention back to Naomi. "Woman, do not say a word."

But Naomi wasn't silenced by his order. "Charlie Wolf McCallister. I was a spinster schoolteacher with no prospects when you met me. Now I'm to be a mother, and I have a fancy home, and I'm married to an *almost* reputable man." She drew breath at the same time she poked her finger at his chest. "Don't get killed. I need you."

The couple ignored everyone else until Charlie looked up and saw the mesmerized women who stood around them witnessing the moment. Scanning the silent voyeurs, he placed his hand across Naomi's stomach, grimaced and said, "A son, Naomi. Please, a son."

"Charlie Wolf, I'm partial to the idea of a daughter. I like little girls and they're easy. Comfort and I have already assembled a layette in pink. It's decided, we're having a daughter. You'll have to get used to the idea. Big noisy boys just... Well, there are enough loud McCallisters..." She was still talking when the kitchen door closed behind them. The rest of their conversation was hushed and punctuated with long pauses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Deacon joined Charlie in the kitchen, drank coffee, then moved to the breakfast room where platters of uneaten food sat on the table. Eden followed the two men, intending to question them about Sam. Comfort waved them toward the food, admonishing them, "Don't break the dishes. They're imported."

Charlie Wolf and Deacon both gave identical sly grins that startled Eden by the resemblance. She looked around the room at Rachel McCallister's face. The same stamp of intelligence, determination and bizarre humor was there. Comfort stood next to Naomi, who hovered close to Charlie Wolf. They were a family and the implicit bond and trust they shared overwhelmed Eden.

"Is Sam all right?" Eden tried to keep the anxiety in her voice hidden.

"Yep," Deacon and Charlie said in unison as they ate the rest of the food and left. When that was the extent of information provided, Eden moved back to the other room. She was restless. The kitchen soothed her more than the company of the women. She needed something to occupy her time. If there was a plan, Charlie Wolf and Deacon hadn't shared it.

Rachel McCallister followed her and watched with interest as Eden made pie dough and rolled it on the counter into flat circles. "Mine crumbled when I tried to press it into shape."

"Too dry." Eden relaxed and added wryly, "This might be better if I knew what to fill it with." It had been silly to start the makings of a pie and not even have ingredients gathered for the process. She shook her head with disgust. "I can't concentrate."

Rachel agreed. "I worry about my son and my nephews. I love them. You worry about Sam. Why?"

Eden closed her eyes and felt the knife-edge of fear slice through her. "Please don't." She could feel the other woman's gaze and spoke without opening her eyes. "I've led your family into this mess. I'm worried about all of you and the men."

"And Sam?" The other woman persisted.

Eden straightened and said, "*Sam* will be very disappointed if there's no pie made today. Now where do you suppose Comfort keeps all of her perishables?"

It wasn't subtle but it was firm. Eden was not discussing Sam with anyone. She didn't know what to say anyway. Sam was just Sam—a mass of contradictions. He was ugly-handsome, godlike-devil, satanic-angel, ruthless lover. She didn't want to talk about Sam. She didn't even want to think about Sam. But he filled her mind as she strained to hear every creak in the house and cringed at the sound of shots farther away.

She didn't realize she was standing in the middle of the kitchen staring until Rachel touched her arm. "Apples. Sam likes apple pie, Eden."

The other woman guided Eden to the table where the apples were piled. While Eden had been steeped in despair, Rachel had found the storage bin. "We'll have to peel them. It's a lot, but I'll help. I can peel apples."

Eden had no idea how long she'd stood frozen to the floor.

Rachel looked at her and smiled. "They will be all right. They're grown men, hard men, not boys."

"Even hard men can die." Eden's words tumbled out filled with fear.

"They know what they're doing. Trust them."

Eden stood abruptly and went to the window, shoving her fist against her mouth. "I've brought this down on you," she whispered in horror.

"No," Rachel disagreed. "Ansell Black brought this when he attacked you. Now you're our family. Don't get confused about where blame lies."

Rachel's words left no room for self-pity. Eden walked back to the table and reclaimed her seat. "Then this better work," she told Rachel flatly. "Because I cannot lose another man I love."

"Sam will live. Don't doubt him or that fact." Eden looked at the other woman who spoke with such conviction. Rachel smiled at her and added, "The McCallisters stand together. Sam brought you in and we're not sorry he did. So, for better or worse, you're a McCallister now."

Calmed by Rachel's confidence, Eden picked up apple and knife. She peeled and listened to Rachel talk about Sam.

"Robert says when he was a boy, Sam loved his mother something fierce. But..." Rachel paused as if deciding what to say.

Eden said, "She dosed herself with laudanum. Sam calls it dream-walking."

"Yes." Rachel looked relieved and Eden suddenly understood that Sam had entrusted her with a family secret.

Rachel continued. "I expect that Sam thought it was him she didn't want. When I knew her, she was a weak woman consumed by imaginary illnesses. She wouldn't have had much time for her sons even without her medicine. She hated Texas... Maybe if my father had allowed my brother Charles to return to the East with her..."

Rachel sighed. "So many maybes in life. Melody was timid and my father terrified her. Charles tried to pacify both of them." Rachel paused, lost in thought for a minute before she added, "She was pretty, light-haired and delicate. Sam gets his coloring from her, but he grew into the stature of his father."

Eden watched a smile play around Rachel's mouth as she remembered Sam's father. "Charles was tall, big and gentle. He looked like my father but he had a tender heart." Eden wondered if Rachel spoke of more than Sam's physical resemblance to Charles McCallister. But the other woman didn't elaborate and turned her final comments to Deacon. "Robert looks exactly like my father, Jonas McCallister, the man we all hated. It makes it hard on Robert sometimes...us too."



Eden listened to Sam's aunt talk about the boys who were now hunters tracking outlaws for money. Rachel's voice was filled with pride at the men they'd become. "I don't really know what happened after I was taken. It was a hard life before. I expect it got worse after I was gone."

"When did you leave?" Eden knew Charlie Wolf was a half-breed but details were scarce.

"You mean when did I get taken by the Indians?" Rachel smiled, a genuine look of humor.

"Gray Wolf kidnapped me when I was sixteen. It was the summer and there had been raiding parties all that year. My father said they'd leave us be." Rachel paused and shook her head. "My father was a fool. He thought because every person on the MC3 was scared of him, the Indians would be too." She stopped her story and bit into an apple, reflecting the past. "Well they weren't afraid of him. They hit the ranch hard, killed my mother and carried me off."

Eden stared at her bewildered. Rachel ate the apple with gusto as if enjoying a highlight in her life.

When she caught Eden's look, she stopped smiling and added, "I loved my mother and I grieved for her. But after living with Jonas McCallister, life with the Indians was easy, especially after Gray Wolf made me his squaw."

Eden struggled to understand. The woman had been kidnapped by the Indians and her life had improved.

"I lived with the Kiowa for fourteen years. When Gray Wolf was killed, his last instruction to our son was for him to bring me home. Had he understood my father, Gray Wolf would have let me die with him. I wanted to. Jonas McCallister hated me and the half-Kiowa son who was evidence of where I'd been. He tried to kill him more than once. I finally had to send Charlie away, back to his father's people. But he never abandoned me. He returned as often as he could, and both my nephews protected me when he couldn't. Sam got real good at drawing the crazy rage my father carried with him all the time. Sam felt the whip often on my behalf."

Eden looked at her with horror. Surviving had been all about tactics. Eden could see that the McCallisters had started early honing their skills.

"Whip." Rachel nodded and then squinted at the apple in her hand. She held it aloft and explained. "My father carried a bullwhip with him at all times. He was good with it. He could slice the skin right off an apple and never touch the flesh...or he could cut it in two with a flick of his wrist. Of course, he could beat down a person with words and do remarkable damage too."

Sam's explanation from the cave drifted through Eden's mind. *"Had lessons every day for damn near six years, 'til I got tired of the beatings for not being smart."*

Rachel set down the unmarked apple and took another bite of her own. She smiled thoughtfully, switching her story back to the present. "I doubted that Sam would ever find a woman who he'd trust enough to love. I suspect I was wrong." She pointed at

Eden with the half-eaten apple and said sternly, "Sam will live, Eden. Just make sure you do too."

When the pies were finished, Comfort's pantry was considerably depleted. A long line of baked and waiting-to-be-baked apple pies stretched across the counter. The air was filled with the smell of sugar, apples and cinnamon and the pies were decorated in intricate patterns of lattice work making them almost too pretty to eat. It was a sight to behold, and an irresistible lure. The other women clustered in the kitchen and cut into the first pie out of the oven.

Eden smiled at their wonder. "Baking pies is easy. I'll teach you how someday."

Rachel arranged them carefully along the counter, cradling them in a towel to keep from burning herself. "I'd like the recipe for sure. It might go over big at the next Eclipse social."

The rest of the women chuckled over that. The McCallister women would have to carry more than apple pie to the citizens of Eclipse to be welcomed into that circle.

"I don't mind you using all the apples and dry goods in the house, Eden." Comfort's expression was quizzical. "But what in the world do you intend to do with all those pies when you finish?"

Eden looked at the women solemnly and gave them her one word answer. "Celebrate."

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Eden stewed all day about Sam, and yet he never once came into the house or left word for her with his partners. Then, she saw every hour on the hour as they raided the kitchen and drained the coffee pot. She waited up late, expecting Sam to come in. When that didn't happen, she finally gave up and climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

Eden's foot hadn't even hit the last step before Sam caught up with her. Relieved that he was safe but angry that he'd kept her uninformed all day, she paused and said acerbically, "Mr. McCallister, only women are allowed in the quarters above. I'm afraid we'll have to discuss your day's activities in the morning."

He didn't argue, scooping her up in his arms instead. "You be real quiet, honey, and Comfort will never know."

Eden was forced to wrap her arms around his neck. "And that's another thing," she told him sharply, not sure what the first thing was but there were so many grievances she harbored against him they could no longer be counted.

"Don't call me honey. That's what you called the saloon girl in Eclipse who offered her favors to you." It wasn't what she'd planned to say. In fact that complaint was so inconsequential compared to the others she wondered why it had popped out of her mouth.

Sam bounced her in his arms and whispered, "Remember, we need to be quiet."

Eden sputtered into silence. When he carried her down the hall, Rachel stepped out of her room and smiled for the first time that night. "Comfort will be very unhappy with you, Sam, she doesn't allow men up here, you know." But his aunt was already moving back through her door to give them privacy.

Sam winked at the woman. "I'll be real quiet, Aunt Rachel. I don't know if I can guarantee that Eden will though."

Eden pushed against his shoulders and twisted to free herself, irritated at him at the same time she thanked God he was okay. He ignored her efforts and carried her into her bedroom. As the door clicked shut, Sam captured her scold with his mouth, silencing her with his kiss. Need roared through her. Earlier worry that the fool would get himself killed now combined with out-of-control passion.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Eden gave herself up to the touch of the man her body craved. Sam backed them against a wall and pulled her skirts out of the way, shoving her drawers down before delving his fingers inside her folds. "Wrap your legs around me," he growled.

She moaned and moved against his hand. She was already wet, her cunny weeping tears of need. Sam stroked the lips of her sex that were sensitive and felt swollen. He

played in her liquid heat as he traced his fingers from the sensitive nub of nerves at her apex to the opening of her body. She shuddered, straining against him, seeking more. "Stop teasing me," she panted.

"Best be real quiet, Eden, if you don't want Comfort to run me off." It was the last coherent sound he made. He fumbled his pants open, let his engorged flesh spring free, and prodded her until he found her opening.

Eden met his upward thrust with a downward plunge that seated his cock inside her. Her panted breaths were desperate and she clawed at his back, grinding her pearl against his pubic bone. "Move," she whispered against the mouth she captured this time.

Sam tried to open the bodice of her dress in an attempt to claim her breasts and the skin above her waist. When the material refused to part, Eden heard him give an exasperated grunt as he reached behind his head for his knife. "Don't you dare destroy another of my dresses."

He scowled at her and Eden giggled as he dropped his hand to her rump and cupped her buttocks, pulling her into a punishing thrust.

"Shhhhh..." he cautioned, driving into her again, and then again. Sweat trickled in a stream down the split of her rump and she clenched tight around him, straining to capture release. She needed to taste him. Eden kissed her way up his neck and claimed his mouth.

His tongue met hers as they dueled for control. He pulled free of her kiss and nipped his way down her neck in sharp bites that made her insides twist in need. Roughly he pulled at her collar with bared teeth and Eden heard her dress rip as he exposed her shoulder.

She wrapped her legs tighter around him, riding him as he buried his face in the crease of her neck, licking, sucking, and then as she began her climax, biting. Her flesh squeezed his cock, pulsing in a heated rhythm that spiraled through her body. His groin jerked against her in hard stabs as he swiveled his hips, roughly pushing against her core.

He muttered something that Eden took to be "again" and pinched the slippery nub of nerves at her apex. Heat jolted through her as Sam brought need pulsing through her again. She met his thrusts, her inner walls milking his length as they flexed tightly around him.

As her second orgasm rolled through her, Eden thought, *Nobody should ever need this much.* But even as the thought crossed her mind, her body coiled, wanting more. She turned her head sideways and looked at Sam. He leaned grimly against the wall, his shaft still hard, confirming his control.

*There's something wrong with a man who can't give it a rest for two minutes.* Nevertheless, Sam's cock wouldn't be denied. He didn't have time to undress Eden,

although God knew he wanted to hold her breasts while he pounded into her, but his cock said now.

They made it to Comfort's fancy sofa. Sam pulled from her body long enough to turn Eden, leaning her over the back so she could brace her hands on the seat of the settee. Skirts were flipped up, wadded and pulled to the side, pantalettes tangled in a bunch on her shoe, as he splayed her legs wide and fucked her pussy from behind.

Concentrating on the feel of silk beneath his touch, Sam kneaded her rump, massaging each cheek until it turned rosy red. Eden's pussy gripped his flesh and wrapped him in velvet heat. *God, let me live to be a hundred and fifty and be with this woman every day.*

He leaned over her back, continuing to massage her buttocks, now sliding his thumbs inward, teasing her sensitive flesh. "Slow," he whispered in her ear. Then he nipped it before he sucked and kissed his way toward her mouth. She turned her head and met his lips with hers. Their tongues tangled, mating in a languid greeting that matched the rhythm of his hands and cock.

He rode her in long, drawn-out strokes, wondering at the way her walls were both slippery, easing his way, at the same time they clasped him tightly in yielding flesh. When he cupped her mound with one hand, rubbing his thumb against the swollen nub at her apex, she found her release. Her cunny surrounded his cock in velvet heat, squeezing and flexing so hard the burn of it shot screams of ecstasy from his toes to the top of his head.

Sam held Eden through her bucking orgasm, changing his strokes to hard, fast jabs that speared her core. He couldn't stop the growl that emerged as she bit his lip and then sucked on it. Eden trembled beneath him. His chest rested against her back, they both panted for breath and he was two seconds from spilling his seed. He slid his arms around her waist and held his hard length deep inside as he staggered with her to the bed.

She groaned when he withdrew and moved her to the center of the mattress. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off his boots. Eden gazed up at him as he stripped her of her clothes and arranged her body as he saw fit. He kissed a spot on her hip and assured her, "Next time we'll both be naked. This time you'll have to settle for —"

She pulled his lips down to hers and arched her back, rubbing her nipples against his shirt. "You," she breathed into their kiss, "only you."

Eden wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his neck as he entered her. He felt the rapturous slide of his cock finding home and she moaned, "Yes." She moved into the rhythm he set, matching every caress and stroke with her own.

When her orgasm pulsed through her, Sam cradled her buttocks and thrust deep, holding her still as his seed poured into the core of her body. He watched her eyes darken with understanding and they locked gazes in a final stare-down contest. Eden

touched the side of his face with fingertips and murmured, "I think you just stacked the deck."

"Yep," he agreed and reluctantly rolled off her, never relinquishing the embrace.

"Sleep now," he mumbled in her ear and curled around her protectively "Sleep now, pretty lady." Sam buried his face in her shoulder, pulled her tighter in his arms and took his own advice.

He woke a short time later, eased off the bed where Eden slept soundly and covered her with a blanket. When he brushed a kiss against her forehead, she didn't wake. Sam crept down Comfort's stairs, made a side trip to her kitchen to look for leftover coffee and used the pump at the sink to splash cold water on his face. He'd not had much sleep lately and once he went back into the night, all of his senses had to be alert.

"Anything left in that pot?" It was Deacon. Sam split the remaining cold liquid and handed one of Comfort's fancy cups to his brother.

"Who's outside now?" Sam knew Deacon wouldn't leave a post unattended so someone else now patrolled the perimeter of the house.

"Hiram took over for a minute. He's got two deputies manning a full jail waiting for the federal troops Judge Riker authorized. They'll be here late morning to escort the prisoners to the Territory Prison. Until then, we've got four deputized Eclipse citizens, Hiram and his two and Charlie Wolf, you and me."

Sam gulped down the coffee and settled his hat. "I better get on out there. I'll make a round of the town, check out the livery and the buildings farther out. You stay here near the women. I trust Hiram Potter with the citizens of Eclipse. But family guards family."

Sam was ready to leave the kitchen when Potter poked his head in the door and said, "I've got someone out here needing to talk to the McCallisters. Probably ought to listen to what he has to say." Hiram looked hopefully at the pot of coffee but at Sam's headshake shrugged. "Okay to send him in?"

Logan Doyle ducked through the back door. Sam's hand was on his gun but when Doyle stepped inside he dropped it to his side. Doyle didn't waste time on small talk but he did look at the coffee pot hopefully. When Deacon rattled the empty can, Doyle got right to the point. "Here's what I need from you." He spent the next fifteen minutes outlining the plan and then all three men left the kitchen to set it in motion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden woke up alone. Her arms ached, strained from the position that she'd held while Sam had taken her from behind. Her womb flexed, testing itself, reassuring her that her parts were still intact. Nothing had prepared her for the raging lust that had consumed both of them.

Sam had covered her with a blanket and left. She was glad she didn't have to face him as she sat on the edge of the bed remembering what they had done.

Naked, Eden's hand crept to her belly and in spite of the warm day she shivered and hurried into a robe. She needed to dress, to join the other women in the downstairs salon where they would soon meet for breakfast. Instead, she sank onto the bench in front of the vanity and stared at the person who looked back at her. She was changed, everything was changed. Daniel was gone. Sam McCallister had superimposed his image in her brain and stamped his brand all over her willing body.

She'd stayed in the parlor with Rachel the night before but they'd both been silent. Eden had faced the reality of what her reckless vengeance had brought. Every gunshot in the night was followed by a stab of fear to her heart. Because of her, Sam McCallister was risking death, pursuing countless outlaws who were pouring into Eclipse faster than the available lawmen could handle.

She didn't want to think about Sam. Eden wanted to run back to her memories of Daniel and hide among them. Or she wanted the numb grief that had propelled her forward and given each day one-dimensional focus. Every minute and deed had been devoted to finding Ansell Black and killing him.

She touched her bottom lip, swollen from Sam's kisses. Her finger traced the path his tongue had traveled and she drew a deep breath. The door opened and in the mirror she watched Sam carry a napkin-covered tray into the room and set it beside the money on the side table.

"I thought you might be hungry." She didn't have to be adept at reading people to see that Sam was uneasy this morning. One of his new shirts was already stained but she suspected the wrinkles were mostly from their wild passion of the night before. He hadn't shaved and his lip was bruised and cut where she'd bitten him.

Eden's mouth curled in an involuntary grin. "You look like you went fifteen rounds with a bare-knuckle brawler."

Sam's face relaxed as he chuckled. "Damn, Eden, I can't get enough of you. I'm like a randy bull if I get within a mile of you. Jesus."

His confession made her smile more. "Likewise, only you turn me into a yowling she-cat." She felt better for admitting her equal loss of control.

"Well, pull that damned thing you've got on tighter and come over here and eat your breakfast. I bought it at Callie's Place so it is what it is."

Eden found that the "is" wasn't all that bad. She blotted the excess grease off the fried potatoes and tackled the plate of ham and eggs with relish. When her question, "Have you eaten?" was met with a negative answer, every bite or so, she handed the fork to Sam for him to share the meal.

It was an intimacy that she had practiced with Daniel and she slid into it so naturally that another broken part of her life healed itself without her notice.

As the ladies who lived in the boarding house emerged from their rooms, the sound reminded Eden of breakfast yet uncooked. She shook the fork at him. "Comfort Quince

will skin you alive if she catches you up here." It was a small transgression compared to the night before, but evidently Comfort remained ignorant of Sam's visit.

"I'll sit back real quiet and let you do the explaining if she catches us." Laughter bubbled inside until he said, "What's the problem with me calling you honey? I think you mentioned that last night."

Her mirth disappeared and she snapped, "I am not an easy woman you consort with for meaningless pleasure."

Sam touched her chin with the tip of his finger, tilting it up so that she stared into his eyes. "Sweetheart, it ain't easy knowin' you, and there's nothin' meaningless about the pleasure I feel when I'm inside my wife. What do you reckon that means, Eden?"

She didn't know what it meant but told him, "Until we decide, just don't call me honey." When he snorted, she turned her head and captured his thumb in her mouth, biting down on it hard. "Understand?"

He grinned at her frown, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her nose. "Got the message loud and clear, pretty lady."

She rubbed the rough whiskers on his jaw, remarking, "You need a bath and a shave. You're wearing the blood from your outlaw-hunting and you've ruined your new shirt."

He shook his head and frowned. "I'm a bounty hunter, Eden. I don't dress fancy to bring in the wanteds."

She began stacking the plates to take back to the cafe, but Sam pulled her down on his lap and hugged her. "Just sit still for a minute. We need to talk about what we did last night."

Eden didn't want to talk about it. She already knew what *he'd* done. She wiggled to get out of his embrace but he tightened his arm around her middle and held her in place.

"Eden, I don't know how this all will play out. I expect in spite of all my safety measures, you'll find a way to get at Ansell Black if we ever get him cornered." Sam cupped her face in his big hands and made her look at him. "I don't figure being married to an illiterate savage is much to live for." He dropped one hand to rub her belly. "I put a young'un inside you last night, Eden. I sure as hell know I did. If you're honest, you'll admit to it too. I expect you to protect our baby. Live through this mess and raise him. You hear me, Eden?"

His words were stern, his look tender. "You hear me, Eden?" He repeated his question and waited until her hand joined his on her belly.

"I hear you, Sam. And of course you presume that it's another McCallister male we've begun." Eden's voice was loaded with irony but not disagreement. She cupped his face and touched the cut on his lip where she'd bitten him.



Sam closed his lips around her thumb and the warm heat of his mouth seduced her. He held her gaze and she felt the stroke of his tongue before he sucked on her flesh. Eden shivered, her body suddenly flushed with heat.

The thin material of the robe was little barrier between them. She shifted on his lap, erotically teasing his swollen member, reminding him of her power too. He released her thumb and grinned at her slyly. "Ain't that somethin', this thing we've got between us?"

Eden didn't agree or deny but matched his fierce gaze with her own. She ordered him, "Don't you get killed either. I don't fancy raising a McCallister hellion alone."

It was as close to a declaration of feelings either had ever given. The kiss that ended the conversation seemed a pledge.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam left his post beside the house when Deacon eased back outside bearing a cup of coffee for him. "Hell, Sam. Eden can cook. You need to stay straight with her and keep her happy."

Deak had a wedge of hot apple pie in his hand and munched on it as he spoke. Sam took the coffee and looked hopefully for his own slice. "Eden send out a piece for me?"

"Yep." Deacon grinned around the final crumbs he swallowed. "Sure was good."

He was still smiling when the splinters kicked up from the side of the house and the distant crack of a rifle sounded.

"Show time, brother, wipe the apple juice from your face and get ready." Sam's lips were drawn back in a tight smile as he entered the alley behind Comfort's house and merged with the shadows. He stayed tight against the buildings, working his way toward the shooter.

His solitary approach was interrupted when Alex Quince joined him. "Damn, kid. You're determined to get your Pa riled up and pissing bullets, aren't ya?"

The Double-Q heir wasn't clothed in finery today but, as far as Sam was concerned, the repeating rifle the kid held made him the best-dressed man at the party.

Sam didn't have time to chitchat. "You know how to shoot?" He kept moving after his first look and muttered the question over his shoulder.

"Not much with a six gun," Alex Quince replied, "but I'm hell on wheels with this Winchester."

Sam nodded and said, "If that be the case, welcome to the party."

They wound up at the end of the row of Eclipse businesses and Sam pointed toward the roof across the way. "Damn fool didn't even take his hat off."

The kid aimed at the roof and when the head bobbed again, Quince's bullet slammed into the target. His skill was confirmed when the body toppled to the street below. He prepared for battle, chambering another round in the Winchester and said,

"Black's got his men stationed on every roof. I'd not want to be riding in the parade when the federal troops arrive."

Sam readied for a dodge-and-run to the livery stable. "Keep an eye on Hiram Potter. I reckon he's got his ducks all in a row. Figure I'll find a peck of my own trouble there." He pointed at the barn at the end of the street. "Keep good watch, Quince. Mind what I said about the sheriff."

Before Sam took off for his sprint, Alex Quince said, "Best stay alive. There are more than a few men around who'd willingly take your place with Eden Pace."

Since Sam figured Quince was one of them, he grinned, pulled his hat tighter to his head and replied, "It's Eden McCallister. Get it right next time."

The kid's face crinkled into a grin and then as an afterthought, he warned Sam, "Late last night, a fellow named Logan Doyle was shooting off his mouth in Teddy James' saloon. Seems you tricked him into losing a good sum of cash. I put it down to dumb on his part, but he was stirring up ill will as fast as he could."

Then, before Sam could start his zigzag jog to the horse barn, the army rode in. A detachment accompanied by Federal Judge Riker filled the streets of Eclipse, ready to take charge of the prisoners housed in Potter's jail.

"Well I'll be damned." Sam snorted in disgust as the transfer of prisoners was interrupted for a moment. Two more judges joined Judge Riker to get their picture made. On one side, Judge Conklin, Eclipse's version of judicial representation, lined up on horseback. On the other, Harlan Brown, the local circuit judge, took his place.

"What the hell are they thinking, getting in the way of the transfer?" Alex Quince looked at the tableau in amazement.

Sam grunted, "Election year. Figure the pansies'll collect credit from today fast as they can."

Sam tensed for action when a U.S. marshal dismounted and disappeared inside the lawman's office, clearly ready to get on with the proceedings.

The street was quiet but for the snorts and fidgeting of the horses. The cavalry sat, hats pulled low, tensely alert, waiting for trouble. Some of the men looked upward as the Eclipse sheriff, joined by the U.S. marshal, escorted the string of outlaws from their cells into the street.

The prisoners, bunched together tightly and slumping dejectedly, were herded toward the mounted soldiers. It would be a long walk in the sun for the outlaws, and a hangman's rope waited at the end of the journey.

"Damn fools better get their weapons ready. The roofers aren't going to wait forever." Quince frowned at the waiting soldiers when one of the horses squealed. A rider kicked it into motion at the same time a signal from the commanding officer was given. The caravan began the slow trek toward the Territory Prison.

The three judges separated from the moving line, distancing themselves from the danger that they'd soon take credit for embracing. It took all of the detachment that

kept Sam alive to focus. Deacon had the house covered. Sam had his own job to do, but unease twisted his gut when he thought of Eden waiting at Comfort's place.

"Stay alert and keep your back covered, kid." Sam started his sprint, yelling over his shoulder, "Don't trust anyone. You'll live longer."

Sam halted by the right side of the barn and stepped into the shadows. A man waited there, holding a gun pointed at him. Before Sam had time to protest or fight, Doyle notched his ear with his knife. Blood flowed profusely from the wound, spilling down Sam's face and wetting his shirt.

"Nothing like a few props to make the show look good. About time you decided to join the party, McCallister. I've got a spot I'm holdin' just for you." Logan Doyle pressed the gun against Sam's back while he stripped the gun from Sam's holster.

Then the other man shoved Sam between the shoulder blades, pushing him toward the livery stable's entrance.

"Lots of old friends inside, *hombre*. You'll enjoy the reunion." Doyle wasn't gentle with his push toward the interior. Sam closed his eyes as he stumbled through the door, speeding up the adjustment from bright to dark for his eyes. He blinked open to see the familiar faces he'd memorized from a half-dozen handbills.

"Hell, Doyle, I won't even need help catchin' this crew." Sam let his eyes play over the hard faces of the wanteds. "Guess you fellas didn't hear that Ansell is out of business. He'll be dead before the end of day. Better pack it in fast and git."

Sam had their attention. He put his hands behind his head, fingering the blade he carried there. The outlaws shifted nervously when he drawled, "Damn, just to show ya there ain't hard feelings, I'll hold back my partners and give you a good head start."

"Shut the fuck up, McCallister," Leonard Small swore at Sam from the corner of the barn. He sat on an overturned bucket and looked as if he might be thinking about the bounty hunter's offer.

Instead of backing down, Sam continued his taunts. "Hell, Small. Don't matter a damn what happens to me. Deacon's got paper on ya and Charlie Wolf can track a man from his scent alone. Damned if I can't smell your sorry ass all the way over here." He shrugged and shook his head sadly. "Today, tomorrow, ain't no never mind to me. You'll all dance at the end of a rope someday."

"Kill that sonofabitch, Doyle, or I will." Leonard Small reached for his gun. "Cut his throat and shut him up."

But Doyle nodded toward the street and said, "Wait for the signal." He shoved Sam roughly and said, "Big talk for a man that's got a gun held on him and bleedin' like a stuck pig. Ainsley, look out the barn door and see if we have that signal yet."

Ainsley had no sooner peered from the door opening when shots rang out in the street. He said, "Hell, that ain't the signal. Some fool jumped the gun." The outlaws turned their backs on Sam and Doyle, rushing toward the door of the barn.

“Did you ever notice how goddamned stupid outlaws are?” Sam drawled his words as he reclaimed his weapon and he and Doyle made short work of the fools who’d waited too long to join the party out front.

## Chapter Sixteen

Ansell Black rode into town accompanied by his friends. It was an interesting occasion for him. Such a somber occurrence had him hiding his smile of satisfaction. The McCallisters had done his work for him. It didn't matter what outcome the day held, the Ansell Black Gang would disappear and he'd be remembered as the outlaw who outsmarted every lawman in the Territory.

As for the Pace woman, he almost snorted out loud. He'd removed all of his money from Clover when the stupid ass Pettigrew killed the doctor. Eden Pace had only lent spurs to his intentions and his plans had surged forward successfully, as they always did.

*Who cares what a woman out of her head with grief and pain claims to have heard? There's not a court in Texas that will take her words as evidence against me, even if she eventually recognizes my voice. If the new Mrs. McCallister survives today, I must stop in and offer my condolences again. It will be good for the voters to see my sympathy for the widow so wronged by—he smiled to himself—me.* He rode into Eclipse well pleased with himself and feeling secure in his future.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eden stayed in the kitchen all morning and kept the coffee fresh for the men who slipped in and out of the back door. None of them were Sam and her anxiety ratcheted higher. Comfort's house was guarded as well as a fortress and as the day climbed toward high noon, it seemed less and less likely that Ansell Black would be foolish enough to attempt a visit.

"The federal troops are here," Comfort called from the parlor.

Eden joined the other women to watch from the windows. She saw the army begin herding the slow-shuffling prisoners who were dragging their feet through the red dust of the street. Hiram Potter walked with them, urging them on.

Three horses separated from the line and their riders turned toward Comfort's Boarding House, approaching slowly. At that moment, gunshots sounded. Outlaws, hidden strategically on roofs and in alleys, opened fire on the federal troops. Hiram Potter sank to the ground and the prisoners dove for cover too, avoiding the spray of bullets that picked off the mounted men. It was a horrifying sight as the women stood pressed to the window watching the carnage.

The riderless horses ran in terror through the streets and the soldiers lay lifeless beneath their feet. "Oh my God, we need to go out there and help them," said Naomi. She held a gun in her hand and was heading for the door.

"Get your derriere back in here, Naomi Parker McCallister." Comfort stopped her. "Come back over here right now. I don't figure on losing my scalp and that's exactly what will happen if Charlie Wolf finds out I let you get in trouble."

Eden had stayed in front of the window, riveted by the new events unfolding. "'Old Apache trick,' Charlie said. Naomi, I think I know what he meant now. Come look."

The outlaws lining the roofs stood boldly shooting down at the mounted men. But the prisoners and Hiram Potter were on their feet, guns blazing as they dodged out of harm's way and turned the tables on their attackers. The cavalry, made up of outlaws tied in their saddles and gagged to keep them from crying out a warning, slumped dead on their mounts, killed by Ansell Black's Gang.

The shooting after that was sporadic as Eclipse citizens along with the federal troops took back their town and killed or maimed the miscreants who had dared invade their streets.

"I think I'll put the coffee on," Eden said. The bloodbath outside sickened her. But it was justice in its rawest form. She looked at the tight smiles of the other women and realized that this was how they lived. Whether she could do the same was a question her mind left unexplored.

Sam came through the back door accompanied by Logan Doyle.

Eden pointed the gun in her pocket at Doyle. "Stop right there." He froze in his tracks. Comfort's cat took that opportunity to scoot around his ankles and shoot through the door into the kitchen.

"Come over here, Sam." Her order brooked no dissent. She held the gun on Doyle while she inspected Sam's bleeding earlobe then asked, "What happened to you?"

"It looks worse than it is. The asshole notched my ear." Then Sam looked at the pies on the counter and said, "One of them will fix me up."

Eden felt inclined to throw the gun at him. He stood there with blood all over him and joked that her pie would make his ear better. "Is it over?" she asked tensely.

"Close enough," Sam assured her with a satisfied growl.

"Can I come in now?" Doyle eyed the gun still trained on him.

\* \* \* \* \*

It didn't take long for the house to fill up after that. Deacon and Charlie Wolf came through the back, full of information. Charlie spotted Comfort's cat immediately and growled, "I put that animal outside. What is it about a female that they won't stay put?"

"Quit picking on Tabby." Comfort hugged the cat in her arms, defending her. "I saw a mouse the other day, and it's her job to hunt it down. She can't do that outside." She backed through the kitchen door into the parlor carrying her pet with her.

The McCallister women sat at the kitchen table and ate pie as Deacon explained the strategy that had brought down the outlaws.

Hiram Potter beamed at everyone, unconcerned with the risk he'd taken. "Never doubted we'd pull it off," he asserted as he scraped his plate clean. "Wasn't much choice really, when it seemed clear what Black had planned."

The sheer audacity of the outlaw had been his undoing. "He might set up somewhere else, by damn. But it will be a long time before he gets a lock on the Territory like he had before."

Potter's words were satisfied, but Logan Doyle frowned and shook his head. "He's got to be stopped. But you're right, today sure backed him up some."

Evidently Comfort had invited the town in for Eden's pies. The parlor was full of cavalry officers and lawmen from all walks of life. Eden stayed close to Sam in the kitchen, worried about the blood still coming from his ear and unready to face anything else for the day.

"Are those outlaws all dead?" she asked.

"Nope." Sam licked the fork and pushed his plate at her for another piece of the apple dessert. "Wanteds aren't any better at hitting their mark than being smart. Plugged a few of the prisoners and killed a couple, but most of them laid low and played dead when the bullets started flying."

Reluctantly, she left him long enough to carry the fresh pot of coffee into the parlor. It was interesting conversation as the lawmen recapped the events of the day and congratulated themselves on a job well done. Eden listened as she circled the table filling the cups.

Judge Conklin, who Eden had already surmised was something of a popinjay, extolled the virtues of Hiram Potter. That was interesting since the day before word had filtered into the boarding house that he was calling for the lawman's removal from office.

"Hiram is a very adequate sheriff," Judge Brown agreed. "It would be hard to find a better lawman in these parts."

"Well," Alan Riker observed, "Hiram took a big risk on himself. I doubt that will be forgotten by many when it all sorts itself out." He looked to his left and said dryly, "Right Judge Conklin?"

Comfort's cat took that moment to show her lack of manners. She leapt to the center of the table, inspecting the cream pitcher sitting there.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry. She just loves cream. Hamilton says she won't catch the mouse because I feed her too well." Comfort was flustered as she grabbed for the cat and missed. It dodged her grasp, probably afraid of being evicted from the house again.

The pontifications and self-congratulations of the men were interrupted for a minute while they all reached to secure the animal. Alan Riker picked it up and laughed as he handed it to Comfort. "I believe this elusive feline belongs to you, Mrs. Quince."

Comfort beamed at him and carried her pet toward the stairs. "I'll shut her in a room 'til everyone is gone."

It seemed to Eden that Judge Conklin was anxious to mend fences. He returned to the subject at hand and assured everyone at the table in a voice filled with self-importance, "Potter will have no trouble getting re-elected. I'll see to that. I might even contribute to his election campaign. It's not cheap running for office, even in a town the size of Eclipse."

Harlan Brown had his handkerchief out, wiping his nose after a fit of sneezing. He pulled on his collar as though it was suddenly too tight, and his gaze followed Comfort's retreat with Tabby. "Cats, I can't say I love them." Wiping his eyes, he gave a strangled cough and agreed with the Eclipse judge in raspy tones. "Very true, Conklin. I've found my war chest depleted a number of times. I've invested a lot in this enterprise, my friend."

*I've invested a lot in this enterprise, my friend.* Shock rippled through her. She looked at Comfort's cat and remembered the jailhouse feline Ansell Black had ordered removed. Eden didn't pause as she heard the wheezing words of the old man in her nightmare. Carefully she finished her tour of the room. "I'll have to refill the pot," she apologized. "I'll be right back."

When she returned from the kitchen, Sam, Hiram Potter and Logan Doyle followed. Logan Doyle lounged against a far wall and Sam stopped in the doorway watching as Hiram Potter handed Judge Riker a slip of paper. As the Federal Judge read the note, the sheriff shifted attention back to the table, commenting ironically, "Judge Conklin, if you keep extolling my virtues the way you have been, neither one of us will be officiating in Eclipse another term."

Eden filled Logan's cup and then Hiram's. Sam stood carelessly sipping his own. "Let me thank you gentleman for all of your efforts to bring this evil to an end." She filled Harlan Brown's cup and slipped into the seat Judge Riker had vacated so that she might face Daniel's murderer.

"Ma'am." Judge Brown raised his cup and drank the coffee down quickly before he stood, bowing to her politely. "I must be on my way but I wanted to pay my respects before I leave. I hope you can someday put this behind you and know that Texas is a safer place today because of your perseverance in pursuing the criminals."

Eden folded her hands and agreed. "Yes, it is." When the man she faced struggled to speak, she said, "You seem to be having difficulty catching your breath. My late husband noted in his studies that some people have terrible allergies to cats. Might you be one of them?"

His voice was harsh and constricted when he answered, "Yes, I hate cats." He clawed at his throat, loosening his tie. When he recognized the silent accusation in her stare, he gasped, "No one will ever believe—" Clutching his chest, Judge Brown's eyes bulged in his head and he staggered backward reeling across the room. Big man that he was, a path cleared to avoid the weight of his fall.

The cavalry men clustered around helplessly until one called, "Someone get a doctor. I think he's having a fit of some kind."



"The doctor's dead," Eden said softly. "There's no one to fetch."

Sheriff Potter leaned over the dying man on the floor and peered at him closely. "Yep, it appears to be some kind of fit. You think Comfort's cat killed him?"

"No. He worked hard at his enterprises," Alan Riker drawled blandly. "Must have been too much excitement for him today."

"Looks like he's gone," Logan Doyle pronounced clearly. "I'll get him out of here. Wouldn't want to mess up the floor for no reason."

Eden rose and walked to the kitchen, unwilling to look any longer at the effects of her justice.

Sam followed her out of the room and pulled her into his arms. "Jesus, how much of that shit did you put into his coffee? He went down like a dead hog."

Eden looked up at him with a tight smile. "All of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, Eden, satisfied now?" Sam sprawled on one of Comfort's elegant sitting room chairs, the cigar in his hand still unlit. His ear hurt like a sonofabitch where Doyle had nicked it with his knife.

Eden stood next to him and washed away the blood, concentrating on the remnants of the earlobe and not on him. He could feel the heat from her body and it reminded him of their unfinished business. He wanted to see her face and be able to read her eyes. He didn't know whether this was a beginning or their last showdown.

He figured Eden might be ready to clear out. If that was the case, it was a damned shame since he wouldn't let her. There it was, a fact as plain as the pretty nose on Eden's face. It didn't make a goddamned bit of difference to him if she thought her future didn't include him. Sam had a lot of experience in disrupting people's plans.

Besides which, there was sure as hell another McCallister on the way. Sam counted that another hold he had on Eden. It wasn't the way he'd wanted to have her, but he'd take what he could get.

Ansell Black was dead, Eden cleared of all charges and her life was her own again.

Earlier, Doyle and Potter had made a beeline for the sink and emptied their coffee cups quickly. "No offense, Mrs. McCallister," Doyle had said. "Your coffee is a little strong for me today."

The sheriff and Doyle had been more than willing to take Eden's word that Harlan Brown was the infamous Ansell Black. "Never doubted you'd spot his tell, Eden," Doyle continued, ignoring Sam's warning growl for being so familiar with her name. "That was one arrogant sonofabitch. To think he'd walk right in here and smile at you like he was invincible. It's easy to see from this side now how he managed the robberies and jailbreaks. Hell, Brown had all the inside information, the same as the rest of the judges in the Territory."

The recaps ended when Alan Riker cautioned them all. "It won't do the law in Texas any good for word to get out that one of their own was the mastermind behind a hundred crimes. I'd appreciate it if Harlan remains dead of apoplexy."

That was good enough for Sam, and no one else cared what story made the rounds. Eden hadn't commented or seemed concerned either. Now Sam waited to see if that's how she looked at things. He wanted her to say something. Instead, she stood next to him, fiddling with washcloths and paying him no mind.

"Part of your ear is gone." It was a flat statement of fact. It wasn't quite the conversation Sam had envisioned.

*Hell yes, Doyle notched the earlobe pretty damned good. "You got a problem with having a lop-eared bounty hunter around?"*

Sam shifted uneasily on his chair. She wasn't saying much. *Damn it.* She wasn't saying anything, just puttering around beside him as if she had no interest in him at all. Sam set his back teeth and prepared to change her mind. Then he remembered he didn't know what in hell was on her mind.

Finally, she finished with whatever she was doing. The spectators had all left them alone. For once the McCallisters showed some sense too.

"Are you feeling all right?" He had to ask her because, tough as she was in spirit, Eden was as fragile as Comfort's best crystal in many ways. Eden moved in front of him so he could finally see her face. She had a real serious look about her and it didn't bode well.

"I'm fine. Are you in a lot of pain? Can I get you anything?" But as she asked, she removed the unlit cigar from his fingers, set it on the table by his arm and curled up on his lap.

*Damn.* It took him by surprise. He shifted to make her more comfortable as she leaned against his chest and looked up at him.

"I love you." Her simple words were delivered firmly. Her lips traced a path up his neck as she murmured, "I never said the words to you before, but I won't spend another day of our lives without including them." She stopped to nibble on his jaw before she whispered again, "I love you so much I ache with it."

For once Sam was speechless. *Hell.* Eden wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled him like...like... Sam hesitated and then admitted, *Like she'll never let me go.* Since it didn't seem as though Eden was finished saying, he waited a little to claim her mouth with his. Some words were worth waiting for.

"When Doyle brought you in with blood all over you, I thought you were badly hurt." Her voice was as fierce as the nip she delivered to his good ear. "Don't do that to me again."

He knew she was being serious and probably had more yet to say, but he had to taste his fine woman and he couldn't wait any longer. Eden whispered her words against his mouth, finally accepting Sam's timetable. "I'll love you forever... 'til hell freezes over."

Sam had her right where he wanted her, in his lap, in his arms, in his life. There was only one thing missing. "You reckon Comfort would let a wounded saddle bum sully her pristine sheets?" He posed the question with sly innocence.

"Maybe if you're really quiet, she'll not find out that you broke her rules." Eden mimicked his words from just the night before.

"I don't know, pretty lady. Sometimes a man just has to throw the rule book out and make up his own." He thought about Jonas McCallister's taunt and snorted at the fool the old man had been.

Eden eased off his lap and took his hand. She pulled him toward Comfort's staircase at the same time she tried to shush his gruff voice.

He needed to tell her this one last thing, though. "When I was a kid at that Indian powwow with Lozen, she sent all three of us McCallister boys spirit walking. Do you know what I saw that night, Eden?"

Sam stopped her for a minute and folded her into his arms. The face of the woman in his dream stared up at him from eyes as green as emeralds. Sam was a little awed at his own words, because what he told her was pure truth. "I saw paradise, Eden. I saw you."

They walked up the stairs together, his arm around her shoulders where it needed to be. By the time they reached Eden's bedroom, she had his shirt unbuttoned and had started work on his pants. He put a stop to that when he closed them into the privacy of the room.

"My turn," he told her. He unfastened her buttons and eased her clothes off 'til she stood naked before him. When he studied her meditatively she fidgeted and then began to blush as if he'd never seen her unclothed before.

"You embarrass me the way you look at my body. It's just me. I haven't changed since the last time we coupled." Eden's nose wrinkled and her eyes sparkled with green fire as she looked across at him.

Sam had to have her closer. He eliminated the space between them by pulling her into his arms. Her stiff nipples brushed against the soft material of his shirt and a rosy glow spread up her body and stained her cheeks pink. Words clawed at his throat and he counted the freckles on Eden's nose to get control.

Her shyness tickled something inside him. That melting feeling, as if things were breaking apart and changing, came over him again. *Hell*. There were words that needed said, plans needing discussed. But he couldn't get any sound to emerge. *She needs to know what she's getting herself into, dammit*.

Holding his gaze, Eden fumbled with his pants until they dropped to the floor. Sam shrugged out of his shirt and let it fall too. They stood naked in each other's arms and the words she'd said to him before came back to him. He wanted to hear them again, but wouldn't ask.

As if she could read his mind, and hell, maybe Eden could, she cupped his face in her hands and said, "I love you. I'm going to show you every day how much."

*Damn. That's the second time she's said it.* He lowered Eden to the bed, his gaze locked on hers. Their joining was completed quietly. He thrust once and filled her, loving the way her snug passage wrapped him in velvet heat at the same time her arms held him close.

Eden flexed her internal muscles and squeezed his shaft in a way that Sam likened to soft kisses. When she nibbled her way up his neck and brushed her lips across his mouth in a sweet caress, her climax pulsed around him and he released his seed deep inside her womb. Peace settled over him as he held her in his arms, blue eyes staring into green. Words Sam hadn't spoken for twenty-five years slipped free from his hold and slid into the silence between them. "I love you, Eden."

## **Epilogue**

Spring, 1884

"I'm telling you, Deak, you need to stay put on the MC3 and take up horse breeding with Dan and me." Sam sat next to Charlie Wolf on the porch, arguing with his brother.

Robert McCallister stared at the two men who had partnered him all his life. The baby on Charlie's lap stood upright, stretching and showing his strength as his father held him by his tiny hands. The boy stared back at Deacon from fierce gray eyes that matched his father's. Thick black hair curled on his head and bounced as he flexed his knees and gurgled at his uncle.

Sam shifted his smaller treasure in his arms. He spent most of his time these days raising his Palouse horses and sticking close to home, enjoying the family he thought he'd never have.

"If you two aren't roped, branded and loving it, I've never seen the like," Deacon accused softly. Sam could see envy in Deak's gaze as he looked at his McCallister nephews.

"Yep," Charlie and Sam agreed in unison.

"Better get busy, Old Man." Sam deliberately used the name they'd called Jonas McCallister. "A man may have to live with his choices, but he for damn sure doesn't have to choose wrong."

Deacon mounted his horse and readied to leave. "I figure I've got a hunt or two left in me. If I can stay ahead of that sneak-thief, Beauregard, I'll come home at end of summer with a sizeable wad of cash to invest in the spread."

It was a fact the sassy kid half Deacon's age was giving him fits. Deak spent a good part of his time tracking bounty only to have the stripling swoop in and grab them before Deacon got the chance.

"Maybe you should partner up with Beau. Having a wolf at your back's not bad." Charlie Wolf grinned slyly and offered the advice. The kid in question rode decked out in weaponry and companioned by a lupine menace.

Deacon McCallister spat with disgust and snorted, "When hell freezes over."

"Careful, Robert," Eden said affectionately as she moved to stand behind Sam. "That's one of those challenges fate might take you up on."

Naomi joined Eden behind the men. As they all watched, Robert McCallister pulled his hat low on his forehead and turned, riding down the trail that led from home.

Naomi broke the moment when she said, "It's time to feed Wolf. He'll start chewing on your fingers if you don't pass him over to me."

"Woman, you are the bossiest female in Texas," Charlie growled up at her. He lifted his son high and gave an Indian war whoop. "A warrior, Chattering Badger has given my Kiowa tribe a mighty warrior."

"Well be that as it may be—*Chattering Badger* or not—I'm right." Naomi dismissed his nickname for her and continued with her scold. "Mighty Warrior is cutting teeth and he's gnawing on everything. He's a McCallister male, just like you—into everything with nothing stopping him. The next one will be a girl." Naomi ordered her future as Charlie ushered her into the house. Her last words drifted back at them as the door banged closed. "I mean it, Charlie Wolf, I will have a daughter this next one, and don't you forget it."

Sam stood and Eden took the kid from his arms. *Damn, she's a fine-lookin' woman.* Sam's cock began to swell in spite of the fact it should have been plum worn-out from the use Eden had made of it all night long.

"I believe it's time for Elliot's nap." Eden brushed her lips across the sleeping baby's forehead and sighed. "He's perfect."

Sam eased his arm around her and hugged her up against his side. "Did I tell you lately, pretty lady, how much I love you?" *Dammit, I've got to quit sayin' it all the time. I need to hold back some. No reason to give her an edge. She already knows I'm dumb crazy about her.*

"I believe you mentioned it once or twice last night, Mr. McCallister. I think I might have said something similar too. I don't recall. The events of the evening are blurred." Eden teased him with her grin.

"The kid's wet." Sam directed her attention away from his mushy words to his son, who was a fine-looking boy, even if he did say so himself.

"Don't call him a kid. He's not a baby goat. He's a McCallister... Well maybe he is a baby goat." Eden laughed up at Sam with that glint in her eyes and it was almost more than he could handle.

"Elliot's a sissy name. I'm not making the kid wear it. Hell, he'll have a broken nose by the time he's three, defendin' his honor."

"His name is Samuel Elliot McCallister. It was good enough for you, and it suits him just fine. There is no reason to have him trying to measure up to his daddy all his life. He'll be his own man. Elliot is a fine name."

He'd been all set for Eden to name the boy Daniel after her late husband. But she'd gone and made the kid a junior. *Damn.* He had to admit he was proud.

He pulled her closer so that his cock, which had found new life, nudged hard against her hip. "Figure the kid needs his rest. I'm a mite tired too, you keepin' at me all night the way you did. I figure a little nap in the afternoon won't hurt anything."

Eden gazed down at the baby and ignored Sam's hint. "I want a daughter next too. I'm ordering it ahead of time, just like Naomi. I'm not getting any younger and neither are you. Five, I want five babies, one more boy and three daughters."

There she went again about this big family she wanted. Hell, he'd hardly got a chance to figure out how to do this one. The horse business was coming along and he had enough money stacked away to get up and running with Horse bein' such a fine sire. Yep, he was in tall clover these days. But he wasn't startin' this big family she had mapped out until he watched the kid grow a little.

"No more yet." Sam made his voice firm. She knew how he felt about it. They'd wait and see if the kid could read. *Hell, I don't care if the kid can read or not, but...*

Instead of taking him seriously like he meant, Eden cuddled against him and shifted the kid so she could step even closer. She pulled Sam's head down until they were nose-to-nose. "Are you suggesting, Mr. McCallister, that *you'll* say when it's time for us to have another baby?"

He stared into those green eyes he couldn't get his fill of and frowned as he answered, "Yep."

She kissed his nose and then nibbled her way down his neck.

Sam warned her sternly, "Now, Eden, you don't need to try that seduction stuff on me. It won't work."

He felt like a fool when she rubbed against the hard-on that was about to burst through his fly. "I love you, Sam."

*Hell, she's had my tell since the first poker game.* She nipped his ear and damned if she didn't suck on his earlobe. Sam felt that melting inside him that had him grinning most of the time. "Eden, it's not gonna work."

She shifted tighter against him, mocked his Texas drawl and whispered in those husky tones he couldn't resist, "Wanna bet?"

The End

## About the Author

Gem Sivad is a multi-published, award-winning author. She crafts stories about fictional worlds of half light and half shadow. Gem writes about roaming alpha males, unsavory outlaws, and fearless women who use their wits and powers of seduction in their struggles to survive.

Because Gem believes romance is the essence of life, every hard-bitten male finds his mate, and even a strong-willed woman accepts the lover who is the other half of her soul.

Visit her website for her current projects and books coming soon.

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

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