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*The
Husband
Contract*

BRIDES OF BACHELOR BAY 2



Brides of Bachelor Bay 2

The Husband Contract

Even after the arrival of a boatload of brides from the East coast, men in the Washington Territory outnumber women fifty to one. Without the constrictions of proper society and too few women to satisfy their needs, the men on the shores of Bachelor Bay have honed little more than brute strength and lust.

Looking to escape an unsavory fate back home, Olivia and her sisters secured passage to this untamed land. Olivia is under contract to marry, but tempted by debauchery she only dared imagine in Boston, she gives her heart and body completely to two men.

She would rather lose both Jack and Aaron than be forced to choose between them. Will her final decision cost her both of the men she loves, or is there a loophole in the husband contract?

Genre: Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre

Length: 30,959 words

THE HUSBAND CONTRACT

Brides Of Bachelor Bay 2

Bella Grace

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

THE HUSBAND CONTRACT

Copyright © 2011 by Bella Grace

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-447-2

First E-book Publication: May 2011

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

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DEDICATION

For anyone who has ever overlooked the fine print or even the bold writing on the wall to risk it all for love. And thank you to Sofia Hunt for coming up with the intriguing idea for this series.

THE HUSBAND CONTRACT

Brides of Bachelor Bay 2

BELLA GRACE

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Prologue

1864, Port Steele, Washington Territory

Ladies,

Gallagher Logging and the Gallagher brothers welcome you to Port Steele on beautiful Bachelor Bay in Washington Territory.

You have chosen to embark on a journey rife with excitement to an untamed land of incomparable beauty where the trees are as tall as mountains, the water as blue as any sapphire, and the men outnumber the women fifty to one. To leave the comfort of civilization and the support of your families to journey west takes great courage, but you are all courageous women. Together we will write the history of Washington Territory and develop the foundation of future generations.

Thank you for joining us in our quest to settle this land. May you love well, live long, make your fortunes, and attain your desires.

Logan, Gage, Andrew, and Noah Gallagher

Chapter 1

Olivia's Journal, December 31, 1864

Port Steele, Washington Territory

The New Year is upon us. While the town still lacks in luxuries and social graces are in limited supply, dates for the evening festivities abound here on the rugged shores of Bachelor Bay. There are simply too many choices of suitors for us to handle our options in a decent manner. I fear few of the remaining brides-to-be who made the voyage from Boston will remain in Port Steele with their honor intact until their wedding day. I hesitate to admit my dear sister Amelia and I may ourselves be tempted by the debauchery this wild land entertains. My new brothers by marriage, the Gallaghers, have been gracious hosts and have done their best to lead by example. I simply believe the men in their employ were raised to hone little more than their brute strength and, heaven help us, lust.

* * * *

“I want it tighter.” Amelia turned to the side, examining the length of her figure in the looking glass Logan had given her sister Lizzie for Christmas.

Olivia laid her book down next to her on the bench at the foot of Lizzie's bed. “If I pull those laces another inch, they will either snap to pieces or you'll be resting your chin on your bosoms all evening.”

They had been in Lizzie's bedroom for the past two hours while Amelia primped and preened her already-beautiful features and

scandalous curves to practically sinful perfection. Olivia would like to pretend she had worried less about her own appearance for this evening because vanity was not the mortal sin she succumbed to. The truth of the matter was she knew that no amount of combing, dabbing, and corset tightening would disguise her plainness or her lack of enthusiasm for the outrageous flirting Amelia had turned into an art form.

Olivia sighed. In Boston, she had experienced impulses that drew her thoughts into arenas a true lady would never enter, but here, amidst the loosened morals of this wild Northwest Territory, her unspeakable impulses haunted her more frequently than ever. Almost daily, she caught herself daydreaming of big, strong hands, bare skin, pleasures of the flesh that could only be satisfied by all manners of indecencies she dared not drift into thinking about now. Heat rose up from her chest despite the wet winter chill that hung in the room.

She reached into her skirt pockets for a fan and fingered the cameo necklace her mother had given her. Ann Marie Prescott would turn in her grave if she knew such thoughts crossed her daughter's mind. Olivia murmured a quick prayer for forgiveness and crossed herself. Surely it was simply the over-abundance of bachelors at her disposal that gave her such audacious ideas.

She pushed her glasses up her nose with the tip of her finger. Her saving grace was that she hadn't fallen in love with any of the lumber men the way Lizzie had. But with the increased frequency of her salacious fantasies, she barely trusted herself to go to the required social hours anymore. She feared she may meet an available gentleman she hadn't yet noticed and that in the throes of infatuation she may not be able to control her Jezebelian impulses. The same uncertainties made her hesitant to attend tonight's New Year's Eve party. If she had a choice, she would remain in Lizzie's parlor for the evening and allow herself to be seduced by her own wicked thoughts and the pages Jane Austen had so scandalously penned.

She lifted her chin and waved the fan in front of her neck. "I fear

my head is beginning to ache. Perhaps I should stay in tonight.”

“Honestly, Liv, do you care to find a husband or not?” Amelia faced her, delicate hands propped on her hips, and her rosy lips pressed into a practiced frown that appeared more impish than menacing.

She dropped the charade. Ultimately, the choice had already been made. She must marry or be forced to return to Boston when she and her sisters’ past caught up to them. Their uncle had already proven that he would not let them live in peace here in the Washington Territory. He’d already sent one person to track them down and could have cost Lizzie her marriage. Surely he would send another of his associates, or God forbid, come after them himself. She and Amelia would be well-advised to marry, and to marry quickly before their uncle could do anything to prevent them from fulfilling their agreement with the Gallaghers. She slid her fan back into her skirt pocket and laid her precious Jane Austen novel on the bench next to her. “Stop pouting. If it is meant to be, I will marry. Surely, the ratio of men to women alone ensures that my chance of failure is as likely as a drought in this mud-drenched territory.”

Amelia hoisted her skirts and crossed the room. When she reached Olivia, she turned around. “Yes, you must marry, but don’t resign yourself to settle, sister. With a little effort, you could have your pick of husbands. Now, do tighten me, please.”

As Olivia worked Amelia’s laces, Lizzie hurried into the room and shut the door. She stood with her back pressed to the wood, a worried frown creasing her brow.

“Sakes alive!” Olivia’s pulse quickened. Lizzie, the oldest and most practical of the three, did not panic over trivial matters. She was as statuesque and had as much fortitude as the towering Douglas firs that Gallagher Lumber and Timber made a fortune felling. Olivia had learned through the years to trust Lizzie’s judgment almost without question and that her facial expressions rarely revealed the true gravity of their situation. The frown on Lizzie’s forehead spoke

volumes. Olivia's stomach twisted into a knot, and her entire body tensed in anticipation of the words that were about to reach her ears. Whatever news Lizzie carried must not be taken lightly.

"Don't just stand there scaring the wits out of us." Olivia couldn't keep the alarm from her voice. "What has happened?"

Lizzie looked from one to the other, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. "A ship arrived from New York this afternoon. I can't be sure, but Uncle Robert may have been on it."

Amelia gasped. Olivia dropped the laces, letting them fall loose against her sister's back. If they were not betrothed before the ship pulled away from Port Steele, they may find themselves on a voyage back East to endure the worst fate imaginable.

* * * *

Jack Bartlett walked down the ship's wet plank and planted both feet on the dock. It felt good to stand on solid ground again and to finally be free of the insufferable company he had been saddled with since the ship pulled out of port in New York.

Robert Prescott was without doubt one of the shadiest characters Jack had ever had the unfortunate opportunity to become acquainted with. Perhaps the only thing less appealing than the man's character was his personality. Rude, obnoxious, loud, self-serving and demanding only began to describe him. Furthermore, he was too vague about his business in Port Steele to be trusted. The small community of lumbermen would be best served if Robert Prescott's presence among them was as brief as possible.

Jack pulled his hat down on his forehead and ducked through the rain as he made his way toward the familiar mud-caked streets of Port Steele. The businesses lining the main thoroughfare looked exactly as he remembered, but change was in the air. Good change.

Letters he'd received from his business manager, Aaron Lambert, told of the almost comedic chaos that had ensued since the

Gallagher's boatful of brides had arrived. A few lumberjacks had come into the mercantile so flustered by the sudden presence of the opposite sex and the possibility of fornication they'd mistaken Aaron for Jack while standing two feet from him, though they'd known both men for years. Admittedly, the resemblance between Jack and his business partner was uncanny for men who didn't have an ounce of the same blood in their veins. They had the same tall, sturdy frame crowned by dark, wavy hair. Even their noses were similar in shape, almost too prominent but balanced by a square, clean-shaven jaw. The similarities between the two went beyond their physical attributes. Their taste in women and the qualities they each sought in a future wife were nearly identical. Any woman that one of them loved the other was almost certain to be smitten with as well. While Jack and Aaron had been mistaken for one another before, anyone who knew them both would only confuse their identity from afar. Indeed the lumberman who had mistaken Aaron for Jack had succumbed to the excitement that had gripped Port Steele in the wake of the bride boat. Aaron reported some of the men seemed almost feverish and delusional in their pursuit of a wife. He'd had to talk sense into a few who wanted to drain their savings accounts to order over-priced baubles from Seattle that the ladies accustomed to Boston fashions would turn up their noses at.

After receiving Aaron's accounts of the fate that had befallen the giant, typically roguish men of Bachelor Bay, Jack made a point to triple his textile shipment from his vendor in New York. He ordered bolts of durable but feminine fabrics he previously had not had the customers for. He'd also shipped back a crate of assorted powders, perfumes, hair accessories, stationeries, candies, and even some silver hatpins and brooches for the slew of anniversaries that would soon be celebrated. At least he could supply the hardworking lumber men with affordable luxuries the women would be flattered to receive.

Jack reached the end of the dock and turned right toward the center of the modest business district and his apartment on the second

floor of the building he owned. He made his way past a handful of storefronts, taking advantage of the overhanging roofs and wood sidewalks to get out of the rain and mud. He paused to shake familiar hands along the way, catch up on local happenings, and deliver brief news from the bustling cities a world away. The ten-minute walk to the mercantile he operated took nearly an hour.

At the end of the street, a hand-painted banner in celebration of the evening's party hung from the porch rafters of the mess hall. Green holiday wreaths adorned each of the double doors and pine garlands wrapped around each of the porch posts. He smiled. Yes, the women had arrived. And not a moment too soon. Port Steele had suffered from the lack of a feminine touch for too long.

Unfortunately, he would personally have to suffer that very fate himself for a while longer. He had hoped to find a woman who intrigued him during this past jaunt to the East Coast, someone he could bring back to both warm his bed and stimulate his mind. The combination of intrigue, intellect, and beauty that he hoped to find appeared to be too much of a requirement to expect within a single individual, at least with the women with whom he'd had the opportunity to become acquainted. No matter that the female population along the shores of Bachelor Bay had boomed. He would have to wait until his next trip to find a wife. Even on the off-chance a creature such as he was looking for had somehow been acquired by the Gallaghers, she would not be an option for him. The future brides were intended for and contracted to choose a spouse from the men employed by Gallagher Lumber and Timber. The Gallagher brothers had fronted the expense as an investment in their employees. Any reputable business man would honor such a contract as if he had signed it himself.

Jack stepped through the door of his store, removed his hat, and shrugged off his coat.

“There you are!” Aaron Lambert looked up from his ledger book and hurried around the counter. “I’d hoped to meet you at the dock, but we’ve had customers all morning.”

Jack hung his wet outerwear on the coat rack near the door and stepped forward to meet his dear friend and business manager. “Sounds as if I left the place in good hands.”

The men exchanged hearty pats on the back and good-natured ribbing before making their way back to the books Aaron had open on the counter. Aaron tapped the wide, leather-bound ledger book emphatically and nodded for Jack to take a look at the neatly penned numbers in two columns. Fat figures in the income column brought a big smile to Jack’s weary face. “Ah, the women are better for business than we’d hoped.”

“They are better for a lot of things.” Aaron chuckled drily, and gave Jack a knowing look. “And worse for others.”

“I take it there’s one you wish you’d contracted yourself, my friend?”

“Olivia Prescott. Her elder sister has already married Logan Gallagher. Her younger sister is breaking every lumberjack’s heart from here to Port Gamble, and Olivia seems too bemused by something within her own thoughts to give any of the men her full attention.”

“You’ve spent time with her, then?”

“Of course not. I’ve kept my distance from all of the women, and eschewed temptation by working late instead of attending any of the social events. I’ve only observed them in the store and kept an ear open when Hattie spins her yarns and pours drinks at the inn. She’s mentioned Olivia’s preference for books over any of the men she’s met. That in itself is almost as appealing to me as her slender frame and lovely face.”

Jack laughed whole-heartedly for the first time since he’d left New York. “I’m afraid to meet this Olivia of yours. If there weren’t a contract on her head, we might have a time sorting her out between us.”

“We would indeed, my friend. We would indeed.”

Chapter 2

*Lizzie Gallagher's Journal, December 31, 1864
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

If the pre-dawn of this New Year is any indication of what 1865 holds in store, I fear I shall have to wage the most vicious battle of my life. I have paced the floors since my dear sisters left to join the ladies at the inn, and now have taken pen in hand to occupy my worried mind until Logan and Gage return from the docks with news that will either flood me with relief or sink me with resolve. I've no doubt our uncle will stop at nothing to retrieve what he has no right to claim, especially since his previous attempt to prosecute me failed and his cohort, Winston Farrier, proved to be ineffective for him and profitable for my husbands. If either Olivia or Amelia falls into Uncle Robert's hands, the marriage he will force her into will be even more brutal than the first one I endured. I will not allow my sisters to fall victim to such a heinous fate or to pay for the rage our uncle feels for me.

* * * *

The chatter and rustle of skirts that filled the gaudy parlor of the only boarding house in town sank into Olivia with a comforting familiarity. Strangely, she felt more connected with her adopted society here in the rugged Washington Territory than she had ever felt in the respectable social circles she'd been born into in Boston.

Most of the twenty-two women who had endured the trip from the East Coast together had gathered to await the arrival of their escorts for the evening. Though the room could easily accommodate them all, two groups stood huddled so tightly their dresses brushed one another with every movement. The groups were divided by an imaginary line that had been drawn along the center of the threadbare carpets. These alliances had been forged on the long passage from Boston, via New York to South America, where they traded their ship for a train then boarded another ship, which carried them through the fog of San Francisco and eventually to their new home.

The women who had looked to Lizzie for guidance on the long, miserable, storm-ridden passage from Boston and continued to trust her judgment on these dank foreign shores gathered along the fireplace wall. Wedding bands circled eight fingers in Lizzie's camp, and two bellies protruded beneath skirt pleats.

The women who misguidedly entrusted their navigation through these unfamiliar social affairs to Constance Kendall instead of Lizzie surrounded their underhanded leader on the opposite side of the room. Four of them had married and were easy to spot with their more conservative necklines. Hattie Red, the innkeeper and house sage of impropriety, bustled around the room pouring thimbles of sherry for the women who desperately clung to the conventions of their former lives. She doled out whiskey in cut-crystal highballs for those who had given in to the harsh realities of their new homeland.

Rumors swirled that Hattie had run a house of ill-repute in Seattle and had been persuaded to move her business to the shores of Bachelor Bay by one of the pioneer business owners, an entrepreneur who believed a fortune lay in wait for anyone who could provide the lumberjacks with women, booze, and a place to gamble their hard-earned money. He, of course, intended to hold at least partial ownership of any such business, including Hattie's inn. According to accounts, Hattie would neither confirm nor deny that the business owner found it in his best interest to shutter his shop when the

Gallagher brothers took over their parents' lumber company and demanded that the men who worked for them to be treated with integrity.

Outside, rain thickened the muddy streets and added a deep, damp chill to the already wintry air. The women had become accustomed to relentless downpours in the past seven months since their arrival. Neither a boot, nor a yard of wool had escaped the muck. On days when the sun broke through the clouds, the benefit of the rains could truly be appreciated. The land sprouted every shade of green and trees grew so tall, looking up at them was dizzying. By Olivia's observance, such overgrowth bred brawny lumbermen as wild as the land itself. Only women with fortitude could properly domesticate such men. Perhaps having the courage to leave the comforts back East for such unfamiliar circumstances demonstrated such required fortitude.

Constance had lifted her chin as Olivia and Amelia walked into the inn, and she continued to maintain a posture of proud defiance. She was nearly as outwardly beautiful as Amelia. Dark ringlets lay against her plump, creamy shoulders. A paisley scarf, folded on the diagonal, wrapped around her upper arms and was pinned in place with a brooch that glittered from across the room. Unfortunately, Olivia had grown certain the heart of a snake beat beneath the fleshy mounds of her plentiful chest.

"It must absolutely kill her that Lizzie married before she did," Amelia whispered behind a gloved hand.

Olivia could not suppress her smile. "Yes, I'm certain it does. Unfortunately, that only gives her more motivation for vengeance. I'm quite certain any man who shows an interest in one of us will fast become her next object of desire."

Amelia lifted her skirts and rubbed her boots on the matting Hattie had placed in front of the door. The women who had sailed into Bachelor Bay along with Olivia and her sisters were given free boarding at the hotel until they found suitable husbands. When Lizzie

married, she welcomed Olivia and Amelia into her new home, no doubt to keep them under her ever-watchful eye and out of reach of Constance and her catty cohorts.

The only downfall to their new living arrangement was the necessity to trek through the rain whenever they needed to join the other women for a social event or community service project. Tonight, the Gallaghers had arranged for the women to be picked up at the hotel and escorted over to the mess hall turned dancehall. Unfortunately, the mode of transportation was canvas-covered wagons that had been constructed to haul just about anything but a lady's dignity. Carriages were unheard of here, not that they would be of any use at all sunken to their hubs in black mud. Transportation, like everything else in Port Steele, tended to err on the side of practicality.

Olivia and Amelia cleaned their boots enough to step off the mats just as the door flung open and the threshold was filled with the hulking frame of the most striking man Olivia had ever laid eyes on.

His quality wool trousers and coat could have come straight out of the window of Boston's finest tailor. It was a pity the trousers' hem revealed traces of the mud that covered the toes and heels of his boots. Olivia cordoned the urge to offer her hand at cleaning him up. She didn't care to be anyone's handmaid, but a man who put that much effort into his clothing deserved a sharp feminine eye to help him tend to the details. Though his size rivaled that of the biggest men in area, his careful appearance was a rarity among the lumberjacks, and his wardrobe was definitely not of the town's typical variety.

Constance lifted her skirts and hurried across the room. Olivia's spine stiffened. If Constance believed for a moment she or Amelia had an interest in this man, she would make it a point to win him for herself just to spite them. And while Amelia could hold her own against any woman, Olivia knew she didn't stand a chance of out charming Constance and her ever-displayed bosom.

“Sir! I don’t believe we’ve been acquainted.” Constance put just enough breath in her voice to ensure she had his undivided attention. “Let me offer a terribly improper introduction of myself.”

He bent to kiss her proffered hand, but his touch didn’t linger. “Jack Bartlett. Bartlett Mercantile and Machinery. I’ve just returned from attending personal business on the East Coast.”

His manners and proper, clipped enunciation set Olivia’s heart aflutter almost as much as his hazy blue eyes and beautifully masculine features.

“Oh. How very impressive, Mr. Bartlett,” Constance crooned. “You have been sorely missed in your absence.”

“I fear your silver tongue may be deceptive, my dear. My business partner, Aaron, keeps the mercantile running smoothly while I’m away, and there is hardly a shortage of men to clamor for your attention here in Port Steele. I’m quite certain my absence went entirely unnoticed.”

Constance covered her mouth with her fingertips as she laughed. Olivia’s heart sank as color rose in Constance’s cheeks. She flirted so naturally she could blush on command!

Olivia watched in dismay as Constance continued her feminine assault on the handsome Mr. Bartlett.

“Yes, men are as plentiful as raindrops here in this uncivilized wilderness of yours,” Constance said. “But quality is so much more important than quantity, Mr. Bartlett. Surely a man of your distinguished taste and impeccable dress can appreciate my opinion on that.”

“Yes, I don’t suppose we’d disagree on that, Miss...?”

“I am Constance Margaret Kendall of the Boston Kendalls, by way of Philadelphia.”

“Boston and Philadelphia, two of my favorite cities. A far cry from this *uncivilized wilderness* of ours. Now if you’ll excuse me, Miss Kendall...”

Constance stepped forward blocking his path as he began to fully enter the room. “Surely, you don’t mean to dismiss me, Mr. Bartlett. Our conversation has only just begun.” Despite the quirk of his brow and the faint line of irritation that creased his forehead, Constance stepped even closer and continued. “My family owns a dry goods store in the heart of Boston proper.”

“Then you must have been quite the family disappointment to find yourself in our unsavory town.” He smiled politely. “I will take that as my counsel and mind that I don’t get caught up in your beauty or entrapped by your undoubtedly well-practiced, but possibly ineffective manipulations.”

Olivia’s mouth popped open, and Amelia failed to sufficiently stifle a snicker. Gasps erupted from both sides of the room. Color rose in Constance’s cheeks, and she drew her arm back as if to land a slap across Jack Bartlett’s handsome, clean-shaven face.

A figure in the doorway caught her eye, and she immediately pasted a smile on her painted lips. “Mr. Petty, my darling. You have appeared just in time to rescue me from this beast of a man’s brutal tongue.”

Miles Petty, the co-owner of the Gallaghers’ biggest logging competitor, quirked an eyebrow at the mercantile owner. “I see you’ve met my dear Constance.”

“Yes, and now I will leave her to your attentions.”

Olivia had been living with the Gallaghers long enough to know few of the local businessmen thought highly of Miles. She had formed her own opinion as well. Whether Miles was a shady businessman or not, the Gallaghers had paid passage for potential brides for the men in their employ. To have a business competitor unabashedly courting one of those women seemed almost vulture-like and, at the very least, in poor taste.

The only man Olivia would have cared to see walk through the door less than Miles Petty was her Uncle Robert. Hopefully, Lizzie would be able to confirm the rumor that their uncle had arrived in Port

Steele to be untrue. Until such news set her and Amelia's minds at ease, Jack Bartlett promised to be a most welcome distraction.

Jack moved further into the room without exchanging a handshake or pleasantries with Miles. Olivia forgot all about Miles and her Uncle Robert the moment Jack's gaze fell upon her. He paused in his tracks, as if taken aback by her presence, and for a moment, neither of them moved a muscle. Her breath caught in her throat, and her heart pounded in her chest.

Once the temporary paralysis passed, she reached back to self-consciously pat the smooth, schoolmarm twist of hair at her nape and slid her glasses up her nose. The man was mesmerizing. As firelight danced in his smoky eyes, the heat of embarrassment crept up her neck. Perhaps she should have taken more time with her appearance.

She sighed and let her gaze drift to the floor. She shouldn't tease herself with such wistful thinking. A man as handsome as Jack Bartlett would not waste his time courting a woman as unremarkable as her, and he wasn't one of the Gallaghers' lumberjacks that she was contracted to marry anyway.

Jack Bartlett crossed the space between them and held out his hand, palm up. "You know my name, but I haven't yet had the pleasure of hearing yours."

Olivia placed her hand in his and shivered when his lips brushed her skin.

"Olivia Prescott. Mr. Bartlett, the pleasure is mine."

"Olivia Prescott, is it?" His lips quirked, and then his laughter roared through the room.

The heated embarrassment that had flooded Olivia quickly flared into the fire of humiliation.

"I can't say that I understand why you find my name so amusing." Her cheeks flamed, and she bit her tongue from keep from further taking him to task for his rudeness.

"Please. I apologize. It's not your name I find amusing." He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I was told you were the most

intriguing woman in town. I found it amusing that I found myself equally mesmerized the moment I laid eyes on you without knowing who you were.”

Olivia’s hand flew to her heart. Amelia’s eyes widened, and she gave an almost imperceptible nod of approval.

“Mr. Bartlett, I find such blatantly untrue flattery a little offensive. Are you sure you aren’t using lovely words to disguise the true reason you laughed at my name?”

Jack Bartlett continued to hold her hand in his. He moved so close his breath feathered her ear when he spoke. “Miss Prescott. I assure you, there was nothing untrue about what I said. You have more than one man in this town smitten, and neither of us has sufficiently gotten to know you yet.”

Before Olivia could gather a response from the odd flutter of thoughts running through her mind, Jack stepped back and released her hand.

Hattie crossed the room carrying a glass of whiskey. “I hope you brought back plenty of books. Olivia has read every novel in Port Steele more than once. She’s our resident librarian.”

“Is that so?” He lifted his glass to Hattie. “It’s high time we had a library. I’m profoundly more impressed by Miss Prescott every moment I’m in her presence.” He turned back to Olivia. “Is it true you’ve read *every* novel in Port Steele?”

She nodded and realized with a sinking feeling he must think her the dullest bookworm to grace the planet.

He cocked his head in what could have either been a mocking tease or an accusatory challenge. Olivia could only guess which. “When Aaron mentioned you, he didn’t say you’d been nosing through my bookshelf.”

“Of course I haven’t!” The accusation stung in her cheeks like a slap. “And I’m afraid I’ve yet to meet an Aaron in your...lovely...town.”

Jack threw his head back and laughed again. “Not a fan of our little town either, Miss Prescott? Aaron is my business partner. You’ve no doubt seen him at the mercantile.”

Olivia blushed for reasons Jack Bartlett could never guess. The only man she’d seen on this side of Bachelor Bay that intrigued her nearly as much as the man standing before her was Mr. Lambert. Most of the times she’d been in the store, he’d been bent over books in the back while a young stock boy attended to the customers, but when he’d gazed upward to scratch his jaw in contemplation or reach for another of the books he kept stacked around him, she found herself holding her breath, hoping to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of his masculine features. Or worse...imagining his hands, his body...*Oh my!*

“I have seen Mr. Lambert, but we’ve not been introduced, and I had not heard his given name. Actually, I do enjoy the breathtaking beauty of your little town, Mr. Bartlett, when the rain stops long enough for me to see it.”

“I shall have to make certain you get a proper tour of Port Steele the minute our dreadful weather meets your approval. And it is high time you were properly introduced to Mr. Lambert. We will call at your door as soon as the clouds clear.”

* * * *

Lizzie hurried to the front of the house at the sound of heavy boots on the porch. She flung the door open, praying Logan and Gage would bring the news she hoped for. Her mouth fell open in horror.

“Hello, Elizabeth.” Robert Prescott stepped forward as if to brush past her. His waxed mustache drooped from the humidity, and his thick, unruly eyebrows held drops of rain like prisoners between their wiry hairs.

She blocked the doorway. “You’ve not been invited to enter my home.”

“I will not tolerate your rudeness. Move aside.”

She stood her ground. “You will find my husband to be less welcoming than I am.”

“Your husband and brother-in-law will be tied up in some business matters for a little while. I’ve made arrangements to give us enough time to discuss some business of our own.”

She cringed at the reference to Gage as her brother-in-law. For practical purposes, she couldn’t let on differently. But her heart belonged to both Logan and Gage. She was no more a wife to one than to the other, except on the marriage certificate that declared she and Logan had legally wed.

“We’ve no business between us. You have no claim to me now that I’ve married again.” She braced herself against the doorframe and hid her other trembling hand behind her back. Steel sounded in her voice, but inside, she rattled like a child. The torture she had endured because of this man came alive every time she saw his face. She dared not underestimate his intentions or let him think he had the upper hand. His responsibility for the death of their parents may remain unproven, but she had no doubt he stood behind the murders. She must not forget the level of violence in his capacity or her resolve to protect her sisters from him. He would never draw another ounce of blood from her family while she pulled breath into her lungs.

“Give me the deed, pay your sisters’ passage back to Boston, and we shall call it even.”

Lizzie squared her shoulders. She would die before she allowed him to force marriage to his perverted cousins upon Olivia and Amelia. And the deed to their parents’ properties was the only thing he hadn’t stolen from them already.

“No such deal will ever happen.”

“I’m not an unreasonable man. As a show of good faith, I will demand only one of your sisters return with me. The deed, however, is a non-negotiable matter.”

For a moment, she was tempted to offer him a proposition. Vengeance ruled his demand that either Olivia or Amelia return with him. But what he really wanted was the deed. Logan had already suggested she let him have it. He and Gage would provide for her and take care of her sisters until they found husbands of their own. Perhaps she could persuade her uncle to take the deed in exchange for his agreement to leave both her sisters alone.

Lizzie sorted the idea through her mind quickly. There were two major problems with the proposal. Firstly, she didn't trust him to honor his word, or even a written contract, for that matter. And secondly, pure stubbornness and principle prohibited her from giving him the deed on any terms.

"I've had my fill of this nonsense!" He pushed his way forward in such an unstoppable manner she was forced to step back quickly or be bowled over by his short, rotund body.

He stopped in the middle of the room and turned back to face her. She flattened herself against the wall next to the door and eyed the possible weapons available to her. Her eyes landed on the poker next to the fireplace on the far wall, but he read her thoughts.

"I would have it in my hand before you could get it into yours, my dear Elizabeth."

"You are not welcome in my home! Leave immediately, or my husband will have you arrested for trespassing."

"Don't they just shoot trespassers out here in the wilderness?" He raised one of his caterpillar brows and reached inside his coat.

She saw the outline of the weapon he carried beneath the wool.

"I would hate for such a prominent man as Mr. Gallagher to be killed for mistakenly drawing a gun on a dear uncle come to visit."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Scoundrel!"

He laughed, and then added with a sneer, "The ship sails in eight days. Documents proving my ownership of the land and business in Boston and at least of one my dear nieces will be tucked safely in my quarters when we pull out of Port Steele." He crossed the room

quickly and pushed a fat finger beneath her chin with enough force to raise her face to his. "One way or another, I will get what I want."

He stalked out of the house, leaving the stench of cigar and stale whiskey hanging like a cloud where he'd stood. She bolted the door before he stepped off the porch and ran across the room to grab the fire poker in case he decided to return.

When Logan and Gage returned and let themselves in the back door, they found her crouched near the fire, her hands wrapped around the poker so tightly her knuckles were bone white, and she was trembling with a combination of fear and rage that had completely taken hold.

Logan gently took the poker from her hand while Gage poured a small shot of whiskey and held it to her lips. "I take it he came here? We've confirmed he was aboard the ship."

"He made more enemies than friends on the passage, and we've made certain his stay in Port Steele won't be a hospitable one."

Tears of relief filled her eyes as Logan wrapped his arms around her and Gage coaxed the liquor into her mouth. She choked and sputtered as the whiskey burned a trail down her throat.

"He demanded the deed and says he will take either Liv or Amelia back to Boston."

"The hell he will." Logan's voice was low. He wasn't easy to rile, but Lizzie knew he would be a force to be reckoned with for anyone who crossed him.

Gage nodded in agreement. "We'll make sure he does no such thing. I know how you feel about this, but if you give him the property, perhaps you will be rid of him for good. We can comfortably provide for you."

Lizzie stiffened. Gage meant well, and she knew Logan agreed with him. But if Olivia and Amelia did not find suitable husbands here, they may wish to return to the East Coast. They shouldn't be denied the joy of having families of their own, and they should not be dependent upon anyone else for financial support when their dear

parents had left them sufficient inheritance. Rational thoughts filled her mind, but it was the anger of righteousness that flew from her lips.

“After everything that horrible man has taken from us, I will not allow him to take our last penny!”

She turned her face into Logan’s chest and Gage began to rub the tension from her back. “Perhaps we should delay our entrance to the party this evening. I know how to help our lovely wife relax.”

Logan kissed the top of her head. “Don’t worry, love. Andrew and Noah will be at the New Year’s Eve party. Our brothers will be sure Liv and Amelia are well cared for.”

Gage spoke low in her ear, “And we shall make it clear if Robert Prescott steps foot on Gallagher property again, it will be considered malicious trespassing. And if he threatens our wife again, his grave will be dug in Washington Territory soil.”

Chapter 3

*Olivia's Journal, January 1, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

The New Year finds me giddy and forlorn. The giddiness I attribute to Mr. Jack Bartlett, his wicked tongue, and my undeniable attraction to both. The forlornness I likewise attribute to Mr. Jack Bartlett, and to his admirable principles, and to my fatal attraction to both. Perhaps if Mr. Bartlett had accompanied me to the New Year's Eve party, my feet would not have been trampled by the boots of lumberjacks and my lips would be bruised from a thousand midnight kisses. I suppose it is a blessing my wicked dreams did not come true. Had Mr. Bartlett pursued me, my rational mind might compare him to...I shudder to entertain this thought...Miles Petty. Jack is not a competitor of Gallagher Lumber, but he is definitely not within their employ, either. I'm afraid my intriguing Mr. Bartlett is too reputable to unduly influence me to break my husband contract with the Gallaghers. But I do hope that same honor will impose on him enough that he keeps his promise to show me the beauty of his rain-drenched town. Oh sun, do shine today!

* * * *

Olivia wrapped her fingers around the long, smooth shaft and rasped, "What could she possibly have done with this?" She shivered at the thought of Lizzie protecting them like a savage with such a crude weapon. But she was quite certain their dear sister would have

exerted every ounce of strength and called upon every reserve of animal instinct in her nature if their uncle had threatened bodily harm to any of them.

Amelia used her fingertips to muffle her whisper. "I would have walloped him over the head with it, but I imagine after what that devil Lizzie was forced to marry exposed her to, she knows places to put it that we don't."

Olivia's mouth dropped open and the fire poker clattered to the floor. "Who on earth has been feeding your thoughts with such violence?"

Olivia trembled and rubbed the beginnings of a headache from her temples. This town did nothing to prohibit masculine thoughts from entering a lady's mind. From violence to debauchery of every nature, there was nothing too brazen to consider here in this wilderness. Olivia had become accustomed to the dark alleys of her own imagination, but Amelia's mouth had become more tart by the minute since they reached Bachelor Bay, and she was rapidly learning the power of her voluptuous body. If she didn't find a husband soon, she'd be hiking her skirts up to her knees and trading stories of debauchery with Hattie Red.

Not that either of those possibilities could be any worse than the fantasies Olivia entertained herself. She picked up the poker and stood the horrendous weapon back against the wall next to the fireplace. Wood crackled and burned, filling the room with a comfortable heat that had absolutely nothing to do with the color that had risen to her cheeks.

She thought her fantasies had been vivid and scandalous before, but after meeting Jack Bartlett, two of the hands and one of the bodies in her imagination had a face. She pressed her palm to her belly as a flutter of memories engulfed her and tightened her stomach with desire. The hands and bodies had *two* faces!

She fanned her face with an open hand. It was time for a proper introduction to Mr. Aaron Lambert indeed.

“Are you ill?” Amelia asked. “You’ve gone flush.”

“I’m...” Olivia sat down quickly. “I’m fine.” Her eyes flicked toward the window. “You don’t suppose the rain will relent today, do you?”

Amelia giggled. “I certainly hope it does. Or you shall surely lose your wits pining for your mercantile owner.”

“Hush!” Olivia craned her neck to peer into the study where Lizzie read a book and Logan and Gage pored over the latest newspapers from Seattle. “A gentleman’s reputation is at stake.”

“And if he continues to speak so boldly with you, yours shall be ruined.” She leaned close with a devilish smile. “I saw it in your eyes. You wouldn’t deny that man anything.”

Heat flared in Olivia’s cheeks, and she stifled a laugh. “You are purely wicked. And very observant, I fear.”

A knock sounded at the door. Both women turned toward it, but neither moved. Olivia glanced back toward the poker that stood against the wall. Gage stepped out of the study, his blue eyes focused so intently on the door, he didn’t even glance their way. Olivia’s shoulders relaxed, and she heard Amelia’s soft release of breath. As large as most of the men in the area, Gage was an imposing force despite his quiet demeanor and easy smile. Olivia felt profoundly safe here in the Gallagher home.

A cold draft accompanied the open door, but the wet winter air did nothing to cool the fire that flooded Olivia’s veins. Jack Bartlett stood half a head taller than Gage. His hat hung from his hand and partially covered a muscled tree-trunk of thigh. The man was a giant, an imposing giant, with the wickedest of tongues and a magnetism that drew Olivia beyond reason.

She reached up to arrange the hair that lay against her shoulders and straightened her back to give her modest breasts all the help she could.

Gage greeted him with a hearty handshake. When Jack stepped into the room, it was as if the large log home shrank. He commanded

space and drew every ounce of Olivia's attention. Her heart pounded and then missed a beat altogether. As Jack Bartlett cleared the doorway, another imposing figure filled the frame. Aaron Lambert was almost identical in stature, and the two men were so similar in features it made Olivia's mouth water. The dreams that kept her tossing through the night and had left her damp with desire came flooding back.

Both men nodded to her and Amelia.

"Good evening, ladies," Aaron said.

"Olivia, my dear." Jack smiled. "I trust you're not still riled at my rudeness." He turned to Amelia. "Good evening, Miss Prescott."

Amelia sang out a cheery, "Good evening."

Olivia lifted her chin. "Mr. Lambert, it's a pleasure. Mr. Bartlett, your tongue is nothing I am not equipped to handle."

Jack raised an eyebrow and the quirk of a smile tilted his generous lips. "That's so very good to know."

"I'm glad to see you're all acquainted. Is this a social call?" Gage asked.

Jack squared his shoulders. "Actually, we have business to discuss if you, Logan, Andrew and Noah can spare the time."

"Andrew and Noah are out at the site, but Logan and I are available now for whatever you need to discuss." Gage gestured toward the study, and the men hung their coats before following his lead across the room. A moment later, Lizzie joined her sisters next to the fire, and the thick door to the study shut out any hope Olivia had of hearing the conversation within.

Amelia went to the window and turned back to Olivia with a gleam in her pale eyes. "I do believe the rain has stopped."

* * * *

Aaron and Jack emerged from the study with Logan and Gage close behind them. All four men wore broad grins and shook hands respectfully.

Aaron approached Olivia and Amelia. Olivia's breath caught in her lungs. Here in the comfortable quarters of the Gallaghers' living room Aaron Lambert was even more handsome than she'd realized from across the mercantile floor. The striking contrast of his light eyes and dark hair held her captive, and the slight hint of a dimple in his left cheek melted something deep in her core. Oh, how could she be so completely smitten with two men at the same time?

"Miss Prescott, would you and your sister care to join us for a tour of Port Steele now that the rain has temporarily passed?" He turned to offer Amelia a pleasant smile but quickly returned his full attention to Olivia.

"What a lovely invitation." She didn't even bother to gain Amelia's acceptance of the invitation. "We would enjoy that immensely!"

Amelia stood as if to thank him personally but quickly sat back down throwing the back of her hand to her forehead as she gracefully landed again in the chair. "Oh! I'm afraid I feel a little faint. Do go without me, Olivia. I haven't quite been myself all morning."

Olivia's heart sank in her chest. "If you're ill, I should stay here with you."

Amelia shot her a look of disbelief but quickly rearranged her features again to feign her sudden illness. "Don't be silly. I'm not quite headed to the infirmary, and Lizzie is here if I need tending to. Go enjoy the company of these gentlemen and allow them to show you all the hidden gems their expansive but quaint town has to offer. You simply must tell me every detail when you return."

"If you're sure." She studied Amelia, grateful for the opportunity to spend time with both the men of her desires but curious why Amelia wouldn't jump at the chance to be courted by one of them herself.

“Of course, I’m sure. Now don’t waste another moment of this beautiful sunshine concerning yourself with me.” She gave Olivia an almost imperceptible wink and a barely suppressed smile tugged the corners of her lips. “Mr. Lambert, please escort her from here before she turns into a mother hen before our very eyes.”

Aaron Lambert chuckled. “As you wish, Miss Prescott. We’re terribly sorry you aren’t up for joining us today, but we will be sure your sister has plenty to tell you about when she returns.” He held his open palm to Olivia. “Miss Olivia Prescott, I would be honored.”

Olivia took the hand Aaron offered and allowed him to help her to her feet.

* * * *

Seated between Aaron and Jack, Olivia shivered at the brush of their masculine arms against her shoulders. The wagon bounced along the uneven roads that led away from the business district of Port Steele and traveled north along the rocky coast. A canopy above their heads protected her skin from the sunlight and would offer some coverage in the event the rain returned, but even the most distinguished men in town did not travel by carriage as she had hoped they might. She realized she would soon have to relinquish some of her ideas of necessary comfort and give in to the virtues of practicality.

Despite the harsh bounce of the wagon’s wheels against the uneven roads, a single journey had never been more divine. The scent of their masculine colognes blended with the fresh coastal air and swirled in her nose before filling her lungs and chest with a paradoxical mix of longings and contentment. She could drink them in all day, become drunk from their entertaining and intelligent conversation and positively swoon from their physical features.

“Oh look!” Olivia pointed to a small hilltop ahead on their right away from the coast. Emerald grass covered the earth like a carpet,

and compared to the towering firs that grew rampant in the area, the trees on this hill appeared almost miniature.

Jack smiled. "You guessed our destination."

"We're going there!" Olivia could barely contain her excitement. "It's like a postcard from Ireland. I almost suspect the ground to be carpeted in clover and Leprechauns to be hiding behind the rocks."

She grasped Aaron's forearm. His taut muscles worked beneath her touch as he made a slight adjustment of the reins he held to guide the horses off the main road and onto a narrower trail that led toward the hill. "You had this planned all along?"

He nodded. "We had a feeling you would like it."

Sunlight glinted off the bright green grass of the hill and puffy white clouds sailed across the pale blue sky that hung above it. The place was magical. She could feel it in her bones. Anything that happened on that hill would be a wish come true. A smile spread across her face. It was magical indeed and she was the luckiest woman in the world to be headed there with the two most intriguing men she'd ever encountered.

Jack helped Olivia down from the wagon, steadying her waist with one broad hand and holding her fingers securely with the other. The soft grass sank beneath her boots. The hill wasn't covered in clover as she'd imagined it to be, but the wide green blades of the native grass were no less beautiful than the moss and clover in any of the Irish fairytales she'd read. Perhaps she would still have the opportunity to make a wish come true today. She shivered at her own audacity. There wasn't a single wish in her mind that wasn't completely scandalous, and in Boston she would never have been allowed to go gallivanting about the countryside with two bachelors.

"What is on that intriguing mind of yours?" Jack asked.

Heat rose to Olivia's cheeks. "I'm not accustomed to wandering about so freely with men. I'm afraid it's a bit difficult to leave behind all the standards of my upbringing."

Jack squeezed her hand. "Your innocence is nearly as intoxicating as your beauty and your intellect, sweet Olivia."

"Sir, your flattery is doing little to ease my East Coast nerves." Her heart clung to every syllable uttered from his mouth, begging her mind to surrender to any seductions he might attempt.

Aaron carried a basket from the back of the wagon as he walked over to take her other hand. "What can we do to put you at ease, Olivia? In this very moment, your comfort is our only concern."

Olivia smiled at him. "I'm quite comfortable with the two of you, strangely so considering how little time we've spent together. I'm just not yet completely accustomed to the loosened social acceptances in Port Steele. But please know how thrilled I am to be given this private tour of your beautiful landscape. And I find your company charming and immensely pleasurable."

"Shall we?" Jack swept his arm toward the hill. "Over the crest, you're in for a bit of a surprise."

Olivia curled each of her hands around their proffered arms and walked between them up the gently sloping hill.

At the top she gasped. A surprise indeed! The hill angled downward toward a picturesque ravine. A crystal clear stream followed a crooked path between the vines and brush. A large, smooth gray boulder sat like a table in the middle of the gently flowing water. The top of the rock was completely flat and large enough for all three of them to lounge on comfortably.

"Before we go down there, turn around," Aaron said.

Olivia turned around, and her jaw dropped in awe. From the top of the hill the view of the ocean was endless. Gray water, white capped waves and blue skies filled her vision. After her ship passage from the East Coast, she thought she had lost her love of the sea, but every bit of that love was reborn in this single moment. As high above the world as she felt on the top of this beautiful hill, the vastness of the sea reminded her how infinite the universe truly was.

The only thing that could possibly make this moment more perfect would be to feel strong arms around her body, smooth, heated skin against her own and to finally unleash the passions she struggled to hold in check. Olivia sighed. Oh, to be that free.

Jack and Aaron helped her down the steep decline toward the hidden ravine. At the edge of the stream both men took off their boots and rolled up their trouser legs. Olivia hesitated. Undressing even her feet in the presence of such appealing masculinity seemed utterly shameful. She searched her conscience and couldn't find an ounce of shame to cling too. Without another thought she began untying the laces of her boots. Moments later her boots and stockings lay on the grass next to Jack and Aaron's and her bare toes edged toward the clear stream water.

The icy water sent chills up her legs and she held her gathered skirts in fisted hands. She was steeling herself to take another step when Aaron swooped her into his arms and carried her over to the boulder.

Aaron's arms around her and the sun-warmed stone beneath her thighs chased away any chill that remained. Jack and Aaron climbed onto the rock next to her. Jack opened the basket he had taken from Aaron and began arranging an assortment of foods, a cask of water and a dark green bottle with a cork in the neck.

He held up the bottle. "A gift from one of my French vendors. And before you search your pockets for a thimble, remember you are in Washington Territory, not Boston. We shall drink it as the French intended."

Olivia's heart raced. She would be drunk for sure, and heaven help her if she let her inhibitions loose in the presence of these two men. "Surely, you wouldn't take advantage of a woman with alcohol." She licked the sudden dryness from her lips.

"I assure you, your virtue will remain intact. Your lips, however, may well become loosed."

His broad smile set her at ease. Aaron leaned in close. “You’re welcome to drink only the water if that is what you choose. But I think you’ll find the wine quite enjoyable.”

Olivia nodded decisively. “The wine, please. I have always found the French to be gentile in a roguish manner that appeals to me more than I should admit.”

Jack poured a half goblet for each of them while she began to unwrap and arrange the meats, cheeses and bread they’d brought. He handed her a glass. “Eat something first, my love, or the wine will go straight to your head.”

She took a tentative sip in spite of his warning. The liquid coated her tongue with a dry flavor she wasn’t certain she liked, but the instant warmth that eased into her limbs was delicious. “I’m quite certain that first taste went straight to my nerves. Now I will eat as you suggested to keep the rest from going to my head.”

Jack leaned close, his face only inches from hers. “If you don’t mind, I’d like my first taste of this bottle to be from your lips.”

Her eyes widened at his boldness, but her eyelids fluttered shut instantly when his soft mouth pressed gently against hers. She knew in that moment, the wine could not make her any drunker than Jack could himself.

He drew back slowly and smiled down at her. “Even sweeter than I dared hope. You are an amazing woman, Olivia Prescott. Perhaps you would like to let Aaron taste the wine on your lips as well.”

Her heart pounded. Surely this was terribly inappropriate. Had they brought her here to this hidden ravine to get her drunk on wine and share her between them? Her blood raced in her veins, and she pinched herself to wake from this dream. The pinch stung her skin, but she did not wake in her bed to find she had once again succumbed to the fantasy that crept up on her night after night. She regularly dreamed of two men satisfying her every desire. And since she’d moved to Port Steele and first laid eyes on Aaron and Jack, those men in her dreams had faces.

She drew the goblet to her lips again, letting the liquid fill her mouth and the warmth ease into her limbs once more. Then she turned to Aaron. "A taste for you, Mr. Lambert?"

His chest rose and fell, and his eyes searched hers as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her mouth. Olivia's entire body went weak. If Jack and Aaron did not live up to their word, her virtue would definitely not remain intact for long.

She fought to control her breath as Aaron eased down onto the rock next to her and reached for his goblet. He didn't utter a word, but what she read in his darkened eyes quickened her pulse.

"I fear the kisses have gone to my head more than the wine." She reached for a small loaf of bread and tore the end off, but she couldn't bring herself to take a bite.

Jack took her hand in his. "Tell us about yourself, Olivia. What brought you here to our shores?"

She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. She could not ruin this perfect day with a recount of her parents' murders, Lizzie's forced marriage, their ultimate escape from Boston, and the uncle who would do whatever it took to drag them back to live under his terms. Besides she would be surprised if they didn't know more about her family business than she cared for them to already, given her uncle's unsavory alliance with Winston Farrier which had almost cost Lizzie her marriage and her reputation. Luckily, Logan's love for Lizzie and his quick thinking had unraveled her uncle's scheme and turned their association with Winston into a lucrative business deal for the Gallaghers. No she didn't care to sully this beautiful day with any of that.

"I would be a terrible companion if I bored you both to tears after you brought me all the way out here and shared such a nice bottle of wine with me." She reached for the goblet again, but Jack's fingers curled around her wrist before she could raise the glass to her lips.

“Eat something, dear. It is not our intention to get you drunk. We actually have a proposition for you that will require sober consideration.”

Chapter 4

*Olivia's Journal, January 2, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

Oh, to still be drunk without a drop of wine in my veins. Surely if I abandoned my dear Jane Austen for the day and read only the great poets, I would understand every word they penned about love more clearly than ever before. I have floated through this entire day with my mind still back on that rock in the ravine.

Though only my lips were compromised with a kiss from each of the men, my body is no longer mine. I've wandered from one task to the next, and I don't recall my feet once touching the ground. I find this new emotional state equal parts liberating and confusing. Perhaps if my love was directed at only one man, I might find it easier to focus my attention. My mind drifts from Jack to Aaron and back again. There's barely room for any other thoughts, but I must gather my wits about me.

My dearests, Mr. Lambert and Mr. Bartlett, have gifted me with the most amazing opportunity, and I mustn't let them down.

* * * *

"I'm sure you'll find it to be ample in size," Jack said as he led Olivia through the rows of neatly displayed items inside the mercantile.

Olivia clasped her hands in anticipation and to hide the nerves that had taken hold the moment Jack and Aaron had arrived at the Gallaghers' home and asked her to accompany them into town.

Just outside the store, Aaron had been parlayed by a lumberman who mumbled Miles Petty's name in a tone that left little to be explained. Jack's reassuring hand at the base of her spine had guided her away from the ruckus. And while she didn't care to become caught up in any business that revolved around Miles Petty, she longed for Aaron's presence. Given her contractual obligation to one of the men in the Gallaghers' employ, she hated to lose a moment of the limited time she had with Jack or Aaron. She would have gladly waited there on the street, but Jack's steady hand on her back continued to guide her through the store and feed the flames that ravaged her from within.

"I would prefer to wait for Aaron, but I'm afraid the business matter he's dealing with may take awhile to resolve." Jack pushed open the door of the room at the back of the mercantile and held his arm out for Olivia to enter.

Inside the room, Olivia took one look and gasped. He hadn't exaggerated about the dimensions. Her muscles tensed in eager anticipation and her heart pounded.

"It's perfect!" She hurried to the far wall, easily envisioning bookshelves lining the perimeter, a desk beneath each of the small windows, and a table centered on the gleaming hardwood floor. And books! So many books all neatly arranged, the smell of the paper, the brush of the pages as they turned, the rough edges of the covers in her hands. She could imagine it all so thoroughly, her heart pounded even harder with excitement. "Mr. Bartlett, I could kiss you!"

She covered her mouth with her fingertips and blushed fire straight to the tips of her ears.

Jack Bartlett threw his head back and laughed. "That's an arrangement I wouldn't mind making, my dear."

Olivia cleared her throat. “I don’t know how to thank you. Donating a space like this in the store for a true public library is very generous.”

“This town has needed a library for a long time. We just never had anyone to oversee it.” Jack crossed the room and took her hands in his. “Make a list of items you’ll need to get it set up and where you’d like the shelves exactly as you imagine it in your charming mind. I’ll put my carpenter on it first thing. As for that kiss, I am happy to collect on such a tempting offer.”

“You are a generous man, Mr. Bartlett, with the most wicked tongue I’ve ever encountered.”

“You haven’t encountered it yet, my dear.”

Olivia’s mouth popped open.

Jack dragged her against his large body, his palm flattened low on her back, and his mouth came down on hers. His kiss was slow and controlled, soft and strong, everything she expected after their first encounter, and yet shocking all the way to her toes. She relaxed in his arms as his lips coaxed hers, moving more urgently until her mouth opened. She jumped when his tongue entered to caress hers in a glide of smooth friction that left her hungry for more. The taste of him was like liquor in her blood, heating her, relaxing her, making her giddy with abandon. She kissed him fervently, matching every stroke, every caress.

His hand came around the front of her dress and moved slowly along the side of her breast. She moaned softly. The sensations coursing through her body were more intense than anything she had ever imagined in her vivid fantasies.

“You are soft as a kitten and passionate as a minx, aren’t you, my dear Olivia? Tell me you don’t desire every pleasure I can give you.”

“I...” She couldn’t lie, not even to spare herself the embarrassment, not to him, not when he held her this way. “I do want it. Oh, you have no idea how...” She turned away. How could she allow herself to be seduced so easily? Less than a year in this town of

debauchery, and she had nary a moral left to cling to! “Thank you so much for entrusting me with the library. I won’t disappoint you. Now I really should be getting back to my sisters.”

Jack wound his finger around one of the curls that brushed her shoulder. “Your hair is lovely this way, but I want you to promise me you will wear it again the way you wore it when I met you.”

“Whatever for? I looked like a schoolteacher.”

He bent to nibble her neck. “Yes, and I want to be your student. Your very naughty student.”

Olivia shivered as his teeth and tongue sent chills of delight racing along her spine and surging through her body. “You are naughty indeed, Mr. Bartlett.”

“And I will relish whatever punishment you deem appropriate, Miss Prescott.” He punctuated his words with a sharp nip and quickly soothed the bite with his warm tongue.

“Mr. Bartlett...” Olivia drew in heavy, rapid breaths. She swallowed twice before she could form the words on her tongue. “I believe you should take me home now before I completely lose my virtue and shame myself further.”

“There is no shame between us, my love. I am not a man who steals the flowers of innocent women on a whim of uncontrolled libido. I do not care to seduce you for the sake of seduction. I’ve yet to meet a woman who intrigues my mind and awakens my body the way you do. I’ve searched all of New York City for you, my dear. And all the while, you were here.”

Olivia flattened her hands against his chest. “You flatter me senseless. But I’ve come here on agreement. I am contractually and morally indebted to the men who paid my passage, even more so, being they are my brothers now.”

“Contracts can be renegotiated. I am an honorable man. The Gallaghers are friends of mine, and I would never act as Miles Petty has acted, courting a woman contracted for someone other than myself.”

“Forgive me, Mr. Bartlett, but I fail to see the difference.”

He straightened to his full height, and placed a broad hand on each of her shoulders. “Would you be with such a man?”

“Not now that my head has cleared from the fog of your seductions. I despise Miles Petty. The man slithers into any room he enters.”

“And you think I am a snake as well?”

“No. I think you are a man accustomed to getting what you want. And I’m sure you’ve probably devised a plan to deflower me in the most honorable way possible.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I am not the only one with a wicked tongue, Miss Prescott. But you’ve read me well. Aaron and I have made arrangements with the Gallaghers to court you. If you choose to marry one of us, your husband shall reimburse your passage.”

Her heart pounded against her chest as if it were demanding escape. Only two men in Port Steele had drawn her attention, both had been unattainable in her mind, and now they had made arrangements to court her.

“If this is how you behave the first time we’re alone, I can’t imagine my virtue remaining intact until a wedding.”

“Neither Aaron nor I would marry a woman who did not excite us both in and out of the bedroom. We do not care to spend our evenings with a chilled bed any more than we wish to marry a woman with the skills of a harlot but the conversational abilities of a chipmunk.”

“And if you find me less intriguing in the bedroom than you imagine me to be?”

He lowered her hands back to her waist and pulled her against him. “If that is your fear, I suggest you do your best to keep me intrigued.”

Heat rose in her cheeks and her breasts, pressed against the hardness of his chest, ached with pleasure.

“If you desire me so, why invite Mr. Lambert to court me as well?”

He bent his face close to hers with a broad smile. “Soon you will see the humor in that question. Now, it’s time to intrigue me. Tell me your most daring desires. The ones that would bury you in shame if you shared them with another soul.” His breath was warm on her ear. He kissed the skin high on her neck and caught her earlobe between his teeth with a gentle tug that made her weep between the thighs. “Tell me, sweetheart. You’re safe with me. I can make your every dream come true. I want to pleasure you in ways you’ve never imagined.”

Her breath came quickly. She almost blurted out the truth, but she stopped herself. She couldn’t lie, but could she really tell him how inappropriate her fantasies had become?

His hand moved between them, covering the whole of her breast. Her knees went weak. “Sweet Olivia, I can give you everything you desire. If one of me isn’t enough, I can fulfill that fantasy, too.”

She stilled, losing her breath altogether before it came back in pants. Did she dare tell him that’s exactly what she wanted? Would he think her perverted and storm out to tell the town what a deviant she was?

“I saw the way your eyes lit up when I told you Aaron was smitten with you. What if he was kissing you now? What if we were both here with you, holding you between us, skin to skin? What if two men could pleasure you in ways one never could?

“Yes,” she murmured. “Yes, please!”

“That’s my girl. Oh, I knew you were my girl.” His mouth found hers again. The draw of his tongue pulled a cord that reached deep in her belly and left her trembling with desire for more. He turned her around and backed her toward the door where he scooped her into his arms and carried her through the store.

As they passed the main counter, Aaron’s head lifted.

Olivia’s face burned with shame. What Aaron Lambert must think seeing how quickly Jack had whittled down her defenses! Despite her embarrassment, she couldn’t help but let her imagination soar straight

to her fantasy. Could she really have both of them at once? She had never been with one man, and here she was ready to tangle with two. Excited curiosity gripped her more than fear.

Jack's arms were like steel cables beneath her knees and at the center of her back. With her arms laced around his neck, she felt as secure as a child being carried off to bed. She trusted him to bring her dreams to life in a way she had only dared imagine before.

"Would you care to join us upstairs?" Jack said to Aaron, "Our new librarian has some curiosities which must be addressed."

Aaron's chest rose and fell heavily beneath his suit coat. "It will be my pleasure."

Aaron's footsteps fell in rhythm behind them as Jack continued through the store to the staircase in the far right corner.

Jack leaned close to whisper in her ear. "Tonight is going to be the night you take possession of your every desire, sweet Olivia."

* * * *

Jack had never ached for a woman with such ferocity. Tonight would require every ounce of self-control he could muster to pleasure her gently, to rein in the fantasies he wanted to live out with her.

"Jack?" Her voice held the slightest hesitation, but the heaving of her chest and the fire in her eyes told him she was fighting a need of her own, one that had no doubt been too long in receiving fulfillment.

"Yes, love?"

"I know I must seem..." She licked her lips, her little pink tongue shooting fire straight to his cock. "I must seem easily convinced but..." She closed her eyes and buried her face in his chest. "I've never...I may not know what you expect of me."

He lowered her gently, letting her feet settle onto the floor at the bottom of the stairs and holding her about the waist until she had solid footing. He tilted her chin up so that he could look into her worried blue eyes and free her of any doubt.

“I expect only that you let me show you the depths of pleasure within your body. I will show you what I like as we go, but this isn’t a book to study. Making love is natural and will come as easily to you as breathing.” He kissed her again, taking his time to coax her tongue until she answered every stroke and to caress her body until she completely relaxed in his arms.

* * * *

Aaron waited until Jack had eased Olivia’s fears and released her from the kiss. He stepped forward and took her hand. “You’ve had less time to become acquainted with me, dear Olivia. But rest assured, I treasure you as intensely as Jack does. Together, we can offer you everything you could ever need.”

Her nod was hesitant, but a fire of excitement danced in her eyes.

“I’ve found you immensely attractive since I first saw you, Mr. Lambert. And yesterday at the ravine, you found a place in my heart. Your interest in me is more than I dared hope for.”

He kissed the back of her hand and turned her arm slowly to kiss the center of her palm then continued up to her wrist. A short gasp shot from her lips as his tongue caressed the delicate skin. He drew her closer, closing his hand about her narrow waist. He placed her hand at his neck and dipped to taste beyond her lips for the first time.

A hint of honey in her kiss danced on his tongue with the slightest trace of the fine Gallagher whiskey he and Jack had drank when they called on the Gallaghers to escort her into town for the evening. The taste was a gentle reminder of how he shared this beautiful woman with his closest friend and how long they had waited to find a single woman who excited them both the way she did.

He pulled her body closer to his, letting the feminine comfort of her slender curves soak all the way to his bones. He would do anything to hold her night after night, to discover her body inch by inch, and to learn exactly what it took to make her cry out his name.

With her tongue exploring his and offering all the sweetness she possessed, he made a silent promise to protect her at all costs, to show her more love than she had ever known, and to savor every moment of the evening that lay ahead.

He lifted his head slowly, fully aware of the heaviness in his cock and the softness of her curves against him. "Let us show you how much we have to give."

She nodded again, and her breath quickened. He took her arm in his and led her up the stairs.

* * * *

At the top of the stairs, Olivia paused. A large, ornate rug ran the length of a spacious landing. Three sets of mahogany double-doors stood closed. Gas sconces flickered on the walls, and the portrait of an attractive, but rather plain, woman hung above two wingback chairs.

Olivia stared at the woman and pushed her glasses up her nose to focus more clearly.

"You're a strong resemblance." Jack took her above the elbow.

The woman in the portrait had similar features to Olivia, the same blue eyes, glasses propped on her thin, straight nose, her hair in a matronly twist high on her head. But the neckline of her dress dipped provocatively low, creamy breasts rose from the rich, green silk of her dress, and the flicker of secrets shone in her eyes.

"Who is she?"

Jack massaged her bare shoulder. The tips of his long fingers kneaded the muscles at the base of her neck. "I found the portrait at a market in Paris. It called to me until I purchased it and has held me captive ever since."

"You don't think her plain?"

"I think she disguises her true nature and shares her passions only with the men lucky enough to unlock them."

She turned to Aaron. "And you? What do you think of her?"

“She is hanging here on the landing so that I can enjoy her, too.” Aaron gently guided her to the doors directly ahead. “Jack’s apartment is to the right. Mine is to the left. They both open to the rooms between them.”

Jack opened the double doors at the center of the landing, and both men waited for Olivia to step inside. The room was magnificent, a parlor like she’d been accustomed to in Boston filled with art and fine furniture. An oversized fireplace stood along the far wall, but a large four-poster bed partially blocked the view of the roaring fire. This grand room was a bedroom! Silk rugs covered the floors. Olivia stopped dead in her tracks and gathered her skirts in both hands.

“My boots! I can never quite get all the mud off.”

Aaron guided her across an expanse of uncovered hardwood to a wide upholstered settee. He eased her down. Each of the men knelt and took her by an ankle. They quickly unlaced her boots and dropped them to the floor. Jack’s palm slid up the inside of her calf and stopped to caress the tender skin behind her knee. Aaron pushed her skirts up to her thighs and rolled her stockings off her feet. She could barely breathe as she watched them undress her. She licked the dryness from her lips and shook her head to clear the dreamy fog that had settled in. This could not be happening. This simply did not happen!

“Relax, love.” Aaron massaged the arch of her foot and kissed the tips of her toes.

Jack’s palm slid to the inside of her thigh. “I’ll bet you are so wet for us, you feel perfectly ashamed right now.”

She nodded.

“Never, sweetheart. Never be ashamed of your reaction to us. We want to give you every pleasure under the sun.” He leaned to press his lips to her thigh, and moved upward until his head became buried in the folds of her skirt. He held her leg in both hands and moved his grip upward until one hand firmly held her hip and the other gently massaged the inner juncture of her thighs. The thin cotton of her

drawers was the only barrier between his touch and her most intimate of places. He pressed his fingers in gentle circles at the very top of her inner thigh. An inch to the left and his fingers would be exactly where she wanted them. She gasped at the thought. Yes! Yes, she wanted him to touch her between the legs to make her feel better than she could make herself feel.

“You want to be free of these clothes, don’t you?” Aaron moved up her other leg as he spoke.

She nodded. “Please. Oh, please, help me out of them.” Her skin practically crawled to be free of the layers of fabric against it. All she wanted touching her were the two men who knelt before her. Virtue and virginity be damned! She didn’t need a husband to bring the fantasies that plagued her to life. She needed these two gorgeous, sensual men, men who understood the dark wanderings of her mind.

Jack straightened her drawers and pulled her to her feet. They unwrapped her layer for layer until she stood before them in her lowest-scooped chemise and her drawers with the pretty scalloped eyelet edging. His jaw was tense, and desire flickered like a flame in his dark eyes.

“We have decided...” He looked to Aaron for confirmation. When Aaron nodded, he continued. “Tonight we will pleasure you thoroughly, but we will not take your virginity.”

Her heart pounded with an odd mixture of relief and grave disappointment.

Aaron took her hand. “We will save that until you are certain you can choose one of us to marry.”

“What will happen tonight? I thought...you seemed anxious to...” She eased herself back onto the settee. “More kisses then?” Disappointment lay heavily in her voice.

Jack laughed. “Kisses, yes. But my dear, you’ve never had kisses like these.” He pulled her to her feet again and drew the chemise over her head. The beaded peaks of her breasts stood rigid, and a rouge-colored flush of excitement had spread unevenly over her fair skin.

Jack cradled her left breast in his palm and bent toward her. She felt his breath on her heated skin and then the warm wet stroke of his tongue.

“Ohh!” She gripped the back of his hair to keep from losing her footing.

Aaron’s strong arm came around her. He kissed her lips, but just as she readied to taste his tongue against hers, he lowered his head to her other breast.

“Oh, my!” She grabbed the back of Aaron’s hair and lost her ability to stand completely. Had it not been for his arm around her, she would have landed unceremoniously on the settee. Both men moved their tongues against her nipples, sucking, kissing, and nipping in ways that made her shriek in surprised pain one moment and sigh the next. She twisted her hands in their hair and arched her back, offering her breasts for as much of the delicious pleasure as they would give her.

Jack’s hand cupped her bottom and gave her buttock a squeeze before sliding to the waist of her drawers. He worked the button free and the thin cotton fell down her thighs. Olivia looked down at the two dark heads pressed to her bosom. “Take your shirts off.”

Both men released her nipples immediately and looked up with lust-darkened eyes as black as a moonless sky.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jack said hoarsely.

He and Aaron dropped their jackets to the floor and soon had their shirts and ties in a crumpled heap at their feet. Their chests were magnificent and almost identical. Jack had thicker dark curls between his muscles and a thin trail of hair that traveled south from his navel and disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers. Aaron’s chest had less hair, but they both had small, flat nipples, slightly reddened and pebbled. She drew her tongue across Jack’s nipple and sucked briefly before turning to Aaron to do the same to him. She looked up, waiting for direction, uncertain who to pleasure first.

“I want to please you both,” she whispered.

Jack cradled her head in his hand. “You will, darling, you will. But first we have more of the kisses we want to give you.”

She eased herself down on the edge of the settee and arched her back in anticipation, but Jack coaxed her to recline as Aaron removed her drawers from her ankles and tossed them into the pile of clothing on the floor.

She lay still, completely naked and in eager anticipation of the promised kisses. Her breath came quickly and she clamped her knees together, embarrassed that the intimate space between her legs had grown swollen and wet with arousal. She clasped her breasts in her hands and rolled the nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

Aaron groaned and fell to his knees. “Damn if she won’t be the death of me, Jack. You were right about her, so very, very right.”

Jack’s low laugh rolled through his chest. “Once she learns the power she has over us, she shall own us, my friend.”

Olivia closed her eyes and rocked her head from side to side. “I’m at your mercy, and please...I want those kisses.”

Her eyes flew open in shock as Jack coaxed her thighs apart and lowered himself to his knees at the armless end of the settee.

She watched in fascination as Aaron covered one of her hands with his and dragged his tongue across the fingers of her other hand. His eyes rose to meet hers as he nipped at the rosy tip of her breast that peeked from between her knuckles. She went to move her hand out of the way, but he stopped her. “I like to see you touch yourself, love.”

Jack’s hands slid high against her inner thighs, spreading her legs further apart. She gasped. Her gaze shot to the end of the settee, but she squeezed her eyes shut tight.

“Watch,” Aaron urged. “Open your eyes, sweetheart, you don’t want to miss this.”

She opened her eyes slowly, peering over Aaron’s head and crying out as he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth. At the same

time, Jack bent his face to her most intimate parts. His lips closed around her sensitive nub and he began to suck.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Her hips came off the settee. She wrenched her hand from her breast and fisted it in Aaron’s hair. Jack kept her legs spread with his hands flat against her inner thighs. He continued to suck, his tongue massaging her clitoris. She screamed out and slammed her eyes shut as sensations she could have never imagined shot through her body like a million rays of sharp, dancing light. She fought against the hands that held her down but clung to Aaron for fear of flying straight to the ceiling.

Between her legs, Jack growled and lapped at the juices that poured from her body. When he looked up at her, his chin glistened and his eyes were black as pitch. “If that was your first orgasm, honey, we are in for the time of our lives.”

She tried to still her breath enough to speak. “Orgasm? I want another, but I fear it may kill me.”

Both men roared with laughter. Jack nodded to Aaron, and the two men switched positions. Jack kissed her lips before trailing kisses to her ear as Aaron’s hands ran up her legs.

“Tonight you will die a thousand deaths, and tomorrow you will beg for more,” Jack whispered.

“Can I kiss you the way you kissed me?” she asked, her mouth watering at the thought of the pleasure they could share. Before he could answer, Aaron’s lips and tongue closed around her newly discovered center of orgasm, and she nearly flew to the ceiling again.

Jack held her down with kisses as she reached to loosen his trousers. Her breasts flattened against the heated smoothness of his chest. Her tongue sucked at his hungrily, but there was something else she wanted to taste now, and she couldn’t get it in her mouth fast enough.

He helped her push his trousers and undergarments down his thighs. Olivia stared in wonder at the long, thick appendage that stood between his legs. She wrapped her hand around the smooth skin of his

shaft, watching in wonder as he sucked in a breath and covered her hand with his. He slowly guided her fist down to the base and back to the tip teaching her a rhythm that drew his breath in pants and ripped groans from his throat.

Aaron had slowed his movements between her legs. He matched each stroke of her hand along Jack's cock with a long, slow stroke of his tongue. She spread her legs wider for him, and her own mouth began to water for a taste of intimacy like she'd never known. She twisted around and bent her head toward her steadily moving hand. Jack pushed his fingers through her hair and lifted her face until she stared him in the eye. At the same time Aaron's attentions between her legs sparked the now familiar swirl of tingles that signaled the onset of another orgasm.

She bent toward Jack again. She wanted to taste the pleasure of Jack's cock on her tongue when the orgasm fired in her belly. He didn't stop her as she covered the broad tip of his shaft with her lips and began to suck. She lapped the satiny skin with her tongue, savoring the flavor of his sex as he guided her head, pushing her down slowly and drawing her up again, the same way he liked her to use her hand.

Aaron's grip on her inner thighs tightened. His mouth and tongue covered her pleasure button in a combination of licks and sucking that stole her breath. An orgasm shot through her as Jack's strangled groans grew louder and he tightened his grip on her hair. Her body soared, but her tongue wanted more. Her hunger for Jack intensified and a yearning to be filled engulfed the deep intimate space between her legs. She continued to pleasure Jack, sucking and sliding her lips along his cock despite her near inability to breathe, and just as she pulled her head back to cry out from the pleasure Aaron delivered her, Jack pushed his cock deep in her mouth. His hot, liquid release poured down her throat and coated the back of her tongue in a sweet, saltiness she'd never tasted before.

Olivia lay panting in Jack's lap, with only one thought on her mind. How quickly could she catch her breath and pleasure Aaron in the same way? Aaron didn't give her long to ponder the answer. He gently rolled her to her back and slid his naked body up hers. His erect cock grazed her sensitive clitoris and her hips rose eagerly to meet it.

He pinned her shoulder to the settee. "As much as I want to give us both that pleasure, we promised you it wouldn't happen tonight. Our heads are in no place to be altering our plans." He kissed her mouth before and teased her clitoris once more with the head of his cock before lifting himself off her. He grabbed her gently beneath the arms and slid her back on the settee until she reclined comfortably. Jack moved down to the end where Aaron had been and Aaron straddled her. One of his knees pressed against her hip but he kept his other foot on the floor. She reached for his cock as the breath settled in her lungs. She could see the strain of his shoulder muscles and the tenseness of his neck. His need to be pleased lit a fire in her belly.

She cupped the looser skin below his cock in one hand and felt the sac draw tighter. Two balls seemed to swell in her palm. She gave his cock a long, slow lick from base to tip before opening her mouth to take him in.

Aaron eased her head back against the settee and guided himself inside her mouth. His hips began to move, pumping his shaft into her again and again. She relaxed her lips and tongue giving him a soft, wet place to land as his rhythm quickened and he continued to move into her.

Jack swore once before shoving her legs apart and devouring her again. Both men moved quickly this time as if a new level of desperation had been reached. Olivia gripped Aaron's thighs as Jack's tongue focused on the opening of her vagina. He licked the sensitive edge of the hole, pressing the tip of his tongue into her again and again. She spread her legs, silently begging for more. She wanted his tongue and then his cock as deep into her as they could go. But no

matter how hard she pumped her hips or how desperate her moans and breaths came, they both continued to deliver the same wicked torture.

Just as Olivia was certain she couldn't survive another second without one of them deep inside her, Aaron slapped his palm against the settee and pumped his cock deep into her mouth. He shouted his release as it poured down her throat.

In the moments that followed as both men lay breathless beside her, she stared up at the ceiling. "Please tell me we aren't finished."

Chapter 5

*Olivia's Journal, January 3, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

I am a ruined woman. And I've never been filled with such joy in my life. Every muscle in my body is singing with ecstasy. My abdomen is aching from exertion, but the pain only brings a smile of remembrance to my lips. My arm is bruised from the pinches I've given it this morning to be sure it isn't all but a dream. I am head over heels in love, so delusional by the glory of it all that I can't even bring myself to consider the repercussions. I've given my heart to not one man but two, sealing my fate to never marry, for I could never vow my love to one and not the other. Should either of them not be in my life, my heart would ache with emptiness, and my body would yearn for the bliss it now knows.

* * * *

In Lizzie's dining room, Olivia stared down at her breakfast plate and caressed the book in her lap that Jack had loaned her. The rough edges of the leather spine danced beneath her fingertips as her mind relived every moment of the night before. One after the other, they taught her to bring them to orgasm with her mouth while she was receiving pleasure of her own. She put a hand in her lap and pressed hard against the tremors that shot between her legs when she remembered the sensations of their intimate kisses.

She had been so flushed with exertion, Jack and Aaron had lain with her in the large four-poster bed near the warmth and crackle of the fireplace while she rested and composed herself enough for the trip back to the Gallaghers'. For nearly two hours, she had felt the comfort of being snuggled between them as they shared tales of their travels, debated over their favorite authors, and told her of the early days in Port Steele before the mercantile and inn had been built.

Saying goodnight had nearly ripped her heart out, and it took all of her self control to sit between them on the ride home as if they had merely been attending to library matters all evening. They walked her to Lizzie's door at a perfectly indecent hour and spoke only of the library as they said their goodnights.

"You haven't taken a bite." Amelia's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Surely you're not pining for your dear library after spending all evening working your fingers to the bone."

Olivia let the book rest in her lap and picked up her fork. She poked her egg then lay the fork down again. "I've simply too much on my mind to eat. There's so much to do. If I got started right away, it would take weeks."

Amelia arched an eyebrow and lifted her tea cup. "Weeks of working at all hours of impropriety with two men who have made arrangements to court you?"

Olivia narrowed her eyes at her sister. "You know about that?"

Amelia leaned close. "Which shall it be? Mr. Bartlett and his wicked tongue or Mr. Lambert with hardly a tongue at all?"

"I assure you Mr. Lambert has a perfectly acceptable tongue." She blushed as another tingle of remembrance danced between her legs. "And I would prefer to keep these matters of courtship within the household. It would seem inappropriate for me to be about town with both of them at once, but the library may demand exactly that at times."

"And the library shall also demand that you race home like Cinderella?"

“Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Lambert are extremely busy men. Library matters will sometimes have to be addressed at their convenience, whatever the hour. I truly don’t mind.”

Amelia laughed. “I’m certain you don’t. And how is it again you know so much of Mr. Lambert’s tongue?”

Olivia swatted her arm. “How is it your tongue has not been fed to kittens yet? Your friendship with Hattie Red has ruined you thoroughly.”

Lizzie walked into the breakfast room, her skirts sweeping the floor, and took her seat at the table. “Speaking of Hattie, we are expected at the inn this morning to help her prepare for the first round of baby showers.”

“I had forgotten.” Disappointment flooded Olivia. She had hoped to spend as much time as possible making a list of items she would need for the library and sketching a layout for the bookshelves and desks that Jack could give to his carpenter.

Amelia leaned close. “Perhaps you should speak with Hattie yourself. She can teach you how to have a wicked tongue of your own.”

Heat prickled Olivia’s cheeks and neck. “What on earth has that woman told you!” She fanned herself, only half as aghast as she pretended to be. If Hattie could help her keep her men intrigued, perhaps she would be wise to find out what those techniques were.

Lizzie studied both of them over the rim of her cup. “Hattie is a wonderfully insightful woman, and the morals here are not what we’re accustomed to back East, but I would advise you both to find a husband before you try too many of Hattie’s...” She quirked her brow. “Secrets of the trade.”

Amelia giggled, and Olivia felt her face turn crimson.

“Is that how you keep Logan so smitten?” Amelia smiled broadly. “Have you gone to Hattie’s school of debauchery?”

Lizzie smiled. “You would be wise to please your husband in bed, and you would be wiser to keep the men who court you wanting.” She

set her cup down. “Now, if you’re both ready, we should be on our way.”

They had barely stood from the table when a knock sounded at the door. Logan, Gage, Andrew, and Noah had been at work for hours. Lizzie stiffened and, in a voice she’d used to order them around since she they were children, she said, “If it is Uncle Robert, go to your rooms and lock the doors. Do not come out until I tell you to myself.”

She picked up her skirts and hurried to the window, barely making a sound. Olivia let her eyes drift to the poker near the fireplace. Amelia nudged her shoulder. Olivia looked at the small revolver in her sister’s outstretched hand and her mouth flew open.

“Where did you get that?” She whispered.

“Hattie,” Amelia mouthed back.

Olivia pressed her hand to her chest. Had it really come to this? Were they arming themselves for protection from their own flesh and blood? She closed her eyes at the pain that followed. The brutal murder of their parents remained unsolved, but in her heart she knew who was responsible. Even if he had not pulled the trigger himself, no one else had anything to gain from their deaths.

Lizzie stepped back from the window and opened the door. Constance Kendall stepped inside and quickly began untying the hat strap beneath her chin. Olivia waved at Amelia to put the weapon away and released the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

Constance directed a tight smile at Lizzie but quickly locked eyes with Olivia. “Let’s not pretend this is a social call. Although I will take a cup of tea to shake off this horrid chill.”

“Amelia, would you please offer Connie a cup of tea?” Lizzie closed the door and took the hat and overcoat Constance held out to her.

Constance seated herself next to the fireplace and crossed her hands in her lap. Amelia carried a tea tray over and set it down unceremoniously on the small table next to their uninvited guest. Connie took a look at the tea service and turned up her nose. She

moved the cup aside and turned up the saucer to read the imprint on the bottom. "When I marry, I'll be certain my husband can afford the expense of decent china."

Lizzie sat down in the chair across from her. "Not every eye has been trained in the value of antiquities, so you have no reason to be embarrassed of your ignorance."

Constance narrowed her eyes and turned away from the tea without serving herself. "I've come to let you know, Olivia, that I will be volunteering my time in the library. I have already spoken with Mr. Lambert, and he said that you would be appreciative of the assistance."

Olivia tensed. She wasn't sure which bothered her more, the fact that Constance obviously had something up her velvet sleeve or that the conniving wench had called on Aaron. "That's very generous of you, Connie. I will have the library ready in few weeks, and I will be happy to work out a schedule for you then."

"Don't be silly, Olivia. I told Mr. Lambert I would start immediately. He's expecting me this very afternoon." She waved a dismissive hand. "After we are done with this bore of a baby shower."

Olivia bit her tongue to keep from verbally pinning Constance to the wall and getting to the bottom of her scheme. Perhaps it would be better to play along for a little while, just long enough to discover the true motive and quash it effectively.

Amelia eased into the chair next to Constance and stared at her wide-eyed with pure innocence painted on her face. "Oh, Connie, you poor dear, you do realize you'll be subjecting yourself to more ridicule by that razor-tongued brute, Mr. Bartlett. I really don't know how you could put yourself through such an ordeal again. The other evening must have been dreadfully humiliating for you."

Constance's cheeks reddened, but she smiled serenely. "Sweet Amelia, I will simply ignore that horrible man. I pity the woman who ends up betrothed to him." She gathered her skirts and rose from her seat. "I should be going. I need to stop by the mercantile on my way

back. I was so excited about the library I completely forgot to ask Mr. Lambert about ordering a corset, and I'm afraid I'll need to be measured."

Olivia clamped her mouth tight and fisted her hands in her skirt. She said nothing as Constance donned her hat and coat and Lizzie closed the door behind her.

"So she's found out the Gallaghers have agreed to allow Mr. Lambert and Mr. Bartlett court you." Lizzie shook her head. "She certainly plans to use the proximity of the library to focus her attentions solely on Mr. Lambert given her slim chances of winning Mr. Bartlett's affections." Lizzie looked at Olivia sternly. "Olivia, dear, there's no need for you to worry about her ploy. I'm certain she has little likelihood of seducing Mr. Lambert while he harbors an interest in you. Any man who succumbs to her charms would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb. And Mr. Lambert appears to have none of those shortcomings."

Olivia's stomach twisted. She couldn't marry both Jack and Aaron. If she were to marry at all, she would have to choose one. If Constance married Aaron and she married Jack, she would be living next to that scheming woman in the apartments over the mercantile. Not only that, but she would die of jealousy the first time she watched Aaron escort Constance up that staircase at the back of the store.

Amelia carried the tea service to the table and began clearing the breakfast dishes. "Of course she would set her sights on Mr. Lambert. Mr. Bartlett has proven to be a tougher target." She put her hands on her hips. "That leaves only one thing for you to do, Liv. Marry Mr. Lambert and his perfectly acceptable tongue."

* * * *

The aging innkeeper's voluptuous bosoms spilled from her yellow silk dress, and the bright fabric appeared even louder next to her loosely-pinned red curls. Hattie's arm was like a pillow beneath

Olivia's hand, and her perfume hung heavily around her. The innkeeper had hooked the arms of Olivia and Amelia the minute they hung their coats inside her door and quickly steered them to the back of her establishment. She ensured their privacy by asking Lizzie to supervise the presentation of the sweets that were to be served.

"Since when do you care how food is arranged on a platter?" Olivia asked. "What is this that Lizzie can't hear?"

Hattie pursed her red lips together and shook her head, she refused to say a word until she opened the door to her private parlor, ushered the girls in, and then closed the door behind them.

"You have the revolver I gave you?" Hattie asked.

Amelia released a heavy sigh. "I almost used it on Constance this morning."

Hattie chuckled hard enough to shake her breasts. "I've been tempted myself." She crossed the room and poured whiskey into a cut crystal glass. "Your uncle played poker at the saloon last night. He didn't care much for my pair of Jacks or for the heel of my boot when he put his fat hand on my backside." She drained a good portion of the whiskey and set the glass down with a thud. "Here's what you girls need to know. I've already told Logan, but he's made me swear not to say a word to Lizzie. He said she's worried sick about the two of you as it is. Your uncle got into a discussion with Miles Petty. Shortly after I got home, Miles showed up here and spoke with Constance. This morning she rushed out before breakfast and made a beeline for the mercantile."

"Perhaps marriage to Aaron isn't on her mind. Perhaps she's working on a scheme with Miles instead." Olivia allowed herself a tendril of relief despite the reminder that her uncle was too close for comfort.

Hattie snorted. "She will marry the first fat purse she can seduce, and Miles will help her do it."

“Why would Miles Petty send her to Mr. Lambert?” Amelia asked. “Miles has been almost scandalous with her since we stepped off the dock.”

“Miles doesn’t do anything that he doesn’t think will make his money clip fatter. A wife tends to have the opposite effect on a man’s assets. He has no intention of marrying Constance.” Hattie pointed a finger at Olivia. “Watch her like a hawk while you’re over at the mercantile. Whatever she and Miles have going on, your uncle’s got his hands in it. If you didn’t have Jack and Aaron to protect you, I’d give you a gun, too.”

“I suppose we should help Lizzie with the party preparation.” Amelia hugged Hattie and whispered something in her ear that Olivia couldn’t hear. Hattie’s chest shook with laughter.

Olivia started to follow Amelia out the door, but Hattie caught her arm again. As Amelia sailed out of the room, Hattie said, “I hear you want a few lessons in lovemaking.”

The fire of embarrassment spread across Olivia’s face and down her chest. “I...I...” She ducked her head and closed her eyes. Her ears might burn clear off her head, but if she lost this opportunity to learn how to give her men more than they expected, she knew she would never have the nerve to ask Hattie again. She didn’t trust her voice, so she simply nodded.

Hattie shut the door again and walked back to her whiskey bottle. She poured another glass and slipped it into Olivia’s hand. “Drink up, dear. I’m about to tell you what every man wishes his wife knew.”

Chapter 6

*Olivia's Journal, January 4, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

I can't be sure which was yesterday's bigger irritation, the lack of help Constance proved to be in the library or the way she kept finding excuses to interrupt Aaron from his bookkeeping with her overt flirtations. I received my just rewards when my dear Mr. Lambert came to escort me home and asked if he could call on me tonight while Jack took care of a business matter in Seattle. Constance looked as if she might skin him alive. She drew her skirts up in a huff and stomped unescorted across the street to the inn, nearly burying her ankles in mud as she went. If Amelia had been there to see it, she wouldn't have been able to contain her laughter, and I would have certainly lost my composure as well. Unfortunately, I'm afraid this will only make matters worse for me if I can't marry Mr. Lambert, and he chooses Constance to be his wife. As much as I adore Aaron, I can't imagine not marrying Jack. And likewise, as much as I would love to be Jack's wife, I can't imagine not marrying Aaron. Eventually I will have to choose one, or more likely, bid farewell to them both because I simply cannot make a choice that would rip my heart apart so completely. Perhaps it is my fate to create a treasury of memories to carry forever in my heart after my time with them has ended.

* * * *

“Take your seat, Mr. Lambert.” Olivia circled Aaron, looking through the glasses that had slipped low on her nose. She let her hands glide across his shoulders as she walked slowly behind the armless chair she had placed in the center of the room facing away from the door. When she came around to the front again, she lifted his chin in her hand. “You’ve been naughty, and you must be punished.”

Aaron swallowed hard. His chest heaved beneath his starched white work shirt. “Yes, ma’am. I have. I’ve been thinking of nothing but how to undress you all evening.”

Olivia leaned close to his ear and lowered her voice. “I know just how to manage terribly naughty men like you.” She let the tip of her tongue slip out and just barely graze his earlobe.

He groaned. “Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled at his response and bit her lip. She had never realized men would enjoy such games or that she could possibly hold so much sexual power over such an intelligent, successful man as the one who sat awaiting her instruction. Her breasts ached for his attention and she wanted more than anything to sit on his lap and let him kiss her breathless, but the anticipation that had begun to build inside her was satisfying in an oddly indefinable way, and she wanted to see how long he would allow her complete control.

Behind her, a fire crackled in hearth at the far end of the large parlor bedroom and the crisp scent of his soap rose up from his skin. Olivia circled to his back again and leaned forward to scratch her fingernails lightly over his chest. Her dress dipped low, revealing modest cleavage and the delicate rise of her small breasts.

He turned his head so that his cheek lay on her bosom, skin to skin, and closed his eyes. “Your breasts torment me. I could barely walk the streets with you tonight knowing what lay beneath your coat.”

“You want to give me more of your kisses, don’t you?” She pushed her hands down to his abdomen, letting her fingers scratch the crisp cotton of his shirt and feel the masculine steel of his body

beneath the fabric. She drew her hands up again slowly as he nodded and craned his neck to kiss the top of her breasts. She stood up quickly.

“What makes you think a naughty boy like you would be allowed such a treat?”

“I’ll be good.” His voice was full of breath and promise, but a wicked flame leapt in his eyes.

She leaned close again and lowered her voice seductively. “I will be better.”

He reached back and clasped her head in his hands. He drew her open mouth squarely to his lips. His tongue found hers in a long stroke of delicious friction, and she responded automatically. His kiss drained every ounce of tension from her muscles and lit a slow burning fire in her womb. She started around to the front of the chair, ready to fall into his lap and spend the rest of the night pleasing him again and again. But she caught herself and pushed up to her full height.

“You will have to be punished for that, Mr. Lambert.” She moved around in front of him and stood so close her legs were between his open knees. Her skirts swallowed the lower half of his legs. She reached between his thighs and grasped the tented fabric of his trousers in her hand. His thick penis throbbed against her palm, and her mouth watered, remembering the feel of its silky skin beneath her tongue. She squeezed once, wrenching a heavy breath from his lungs. “You want my kisses, too, don’t you?”

He nodded and reached for her.

She caught his broad forearms and pushed them down onto his thighs. Reaching back, she slipped the large, decorative button at the top of her dress loose and eased the fabric low on her shoulders. “I have a surprise for you,” she whispered. She slid her fingertips beneath the low scooped neckline of her dress and lowered the fabric slowly. Beneath the navy silk, she wore a low corset and no chemise,

something that had given her tremors of anticipation when she dressed for the evening.

“It seems I’ve been a bit naughty today, too, and I fear I will only become naughtier.” She edged the corset down enough to give him a peek at her nipples.

His eyes widened, and he reached for her again, but she caught his hands and pushed them back to his thighs.

“Watch closely, my love.” She gave the bottom of her corset a firm jerk and let her breasts sit atop the boning, displayed in full view for Aaron’s hungry eyes.

He sucked in a staggered breath and licked his lips. “You are the most seductive woman I’ve ever met.”

Only days ago, such flattery would have sounded like a lie to her ears, but she had come to believe how much Aaron and Jack admired her and that she was sensual and not remotely plain in their eyes. She leaned forward, her palms holding his forearms firmly in place. “If you promise to be very, very good, you may have a taste.”

“Tell me what I must do to hold you in my arms, my sweet Olivia.” He slumped against the back of the chair as if he were completely and helplessly at her mercy.

Olivia’s heart pounded. She relished the control, but she knew she was quickly coming to the point where she would give him free rein. Soon she would back down and let him exert the strength and tension coiled within the muscles he was working hard to contain. She leaned close and dragged a rosy nipple across his bottom lip. Aaron waited until she reached the corner of his mouth and started back again before he broke free of her grip and grabbed her hips. He held her to him as he covered one breast with his palm and sucked the other into his mouth.

“Oh!” He had flipped the game so completely she could do nothing but succumb to him.

Just as she screamed, the door flew open. Jack froze in the threshold. A broad smile stretched slowly across his face. "My timing could not have been better."

Aaron sucked deeply and teased her nipple with his teeth before drawing back and looking up at her. He spoke to Jack without turning around. "Our dear, sweet Olivia has been absolutely scandalous this evening, running about town half-naked beneath her dress. What do you think we should do about that?"

Olivia's heart pounded, and her mouth went dry as Jack crossed the room toward them, tossing his overcoat and hat onto one of the wingback chairs near the door. "I know exactly what must be done. And she's going to love every minute of it."

* * * *

"Who will you give it to?" Jack's knees sank into the mattress next to Olivia's hip. Aaron waited for her answer on the other side of her.

Her blue eyes were nearly black with lust and flitted from him to Aaron like butterflies that didn't know where to land. She'd worn her hair up like he'd asked, but several ringlets had come loose in their foreplay. Several ebony locks clung to the fair skin of her neck and her rosy cheeks. She lay as bare as the day she was born, her head propped on pillows, her chest still heaving from the orgasm she'd had on his tongue.

Jack had been fantasizing about this very scene all day. He'd planned to spend the evening in Seattle visiting with an old friend after he attended to business, but with Olivia on his mind, he'd caught the first ship crossing Bachelor Bay. He reached behind him and retrieved the silk sash he'd taken from her dress.

He flattened his hand on her soft belly. Her warm skin trembled beneath his touch, and her hips came up slightly off the bed. She

needed more, and he was certain she wasn't even sure what it was she ached for.

"Would you like to find out what it's like to truly make love? Would you like to see what it is we haven't shown you yet?"

Her teeth grazed her bottom lip, and she nodded before her eyes moved over to Aaron again. A thin line creased her brow, and Jack wanted to kiss it away, to ease her mind of whatever it was that troubled her.

Aaron stroked her arm and looked over at Jack. "We should let her choose now."

Jack lifted Olivia's hand. Her delicate fingers curled around his palm and the floral scent of her perfume sang in his nose. The trust in her eyes and the rosy blush that colored her fair skin undid something deep inside him. He swallowed the flood of emotion that welled in his chest. She was the woman he had searched for on both American coasts and abroad. She was intelligent, honest even when it may not have served her, fully trained in the social graces, and lovely in a way that took his breath away. She kept her sensual nature tucked away from prying eyes, but behind closed doors, she wasn't afraid to give or receive pleasure. She was eager to learn the secrets of her body and theirs, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life making those discoveries with her.

"Who would you like to be the first to make love to you?" Jack squeezed her hand, hoping she would answer the way he wanted her to, but knowing she wouldn't have an easy time answering at all.

Her perfect pink lips opened then closed again. For three long breaths there was only silence in the room, and then she began to rock her head slowly from side to side. Unshed tears pooled in her eyes, and a frown skewed her features.

"How could I ever choose? I want you both." She looked from him to Aaron and then back again. "Equally. I don't know how to separate one from the other."

Jack drew in a breath of relief and drew the sash from behind his back. “That’s exactly what I had hoped you’d say. I have a solution.”

* * * *

“Everything is more sensual in the dark.” Olivia could almost taste the sexual tension between them on her tongue as she lay in the huge bed between Jack and Aaron. Their skin felt smoother beneath her hands, their kisses wetter and hotter against her neck, her mouth, her breasts. The silk that covered her eyes heightened her hearing and her sense of smell. The low rumble of ragged breath and yearning drew her own breath out faster. The mattress shifted beneath her as the men moved. Hands covered her body, making every place they touched intimate. This was the fantasy she had dreamed for years. Hands and bodies moving together. She didn’t know who was touching her where or whose teeth nipped at her shoulder or whose cock was in her hand or between her lips. And she’d never enjoyed anything more in her life.

The hands held on tighter. The strokes against her skin became more urgent. Restrained strength tensed already hard, masculine muscles. Two cocks throbbed and strained beneath her touch. Breaths came faster and harder. A knee pushed her thighs apart. A rigid belly pressed against the softer skin of hers, and then the silkiest of heated skin slid over her clitoris and lower, spreading the folds of her most intimate place. The wide head hovered at the entrance to her pussy, pressing gently.

She held her breath. A broad hand caressed her breast. Lips moved against hers. A tongue dipped into her mouth at the same time the pressure between her legs turned into a sting, and then the most glorious of sensations as a cock slid deep into her. A strangled groan filled her ears and rang out across the room. She had no idea which one of them had entered her, but she could feel both of them close. Sensations like none she could have ever imagined radiated from

within her body, and her hips moved. She wrapped her leg around a thick thigh, and the coarse hair rubbed against her skin. She fed on the tongue in her mouth. The cock inside of her slowly began to withdraw. Aching to be filled again, she locked her leg tight around the big thigh and lifted her hips higher. She dug her nails into two muscled arms.

The rhythm that followed left her breathless. Every movement took her higher on a plane of bliss than she'd ever gone before. She turned her head away from the kiss, gasping for breath. The physical sensations reached fevered proportions, and she felt as if she'd left her body. At one point, she saw the white-capped waves on the bay beyond the window beneath her as if she were soaring above the water.

"Don't stop!" Something stronger than anything she'd ever felt had begun to build deep within her, and she was terrified of losing it. "Please, don't stop."

She was filled again and again with deep, long strokes that brought her closer and closer to the dark unknown lurking just beyond reach. And then with one stroke, the darkness was unleashed. It bubbled up, growing and expanding until it burst into a thousand blinding suns. The aftershocks rolled through her body in waves, leaving her spent and limp and unable to move even her tongue to soothe the dryness of her lips.

* * * *

"I think we should call the doctor." Amelia removed her hand from Olivia's forehead and stared over Olivia's head at her reflection in the mirror on the small dressing table. She pressed the back of her hand to Olivia's cheek. "You're positively afire!"

"I'm fine." Olivia pushed her sister's hand away and continued to twist her hair into her usual bedtime braid. She couldn't meet her own eyes in the mirror, and she avoided Amelia's reflected stare.

Amelia propped one hand on her hip and leaned forward to whisper in Olivia's ear. "Tell me all about it!"

Olivia dropped the hair in her hands and opened her mouth to lie but couldn't find the words on her tongue. She held back the wide grin that threatened to spread across her face and pressed both hands to her heart. "It is simply the most amazing occurrence a person can experience." She shook her head slowly and slumped against Amelia's hip. "There aren't words that could possibly do it justice."

"So you've decided then? You'll marry Mr. Lambert?" Amelia's eyes sparkled. "I can't imagine Mr. Bartlett's ego will take that decision lightly."

Olivia wrinkled her brow in confusion. A long moment passed before Amelia's assumption made sense. Aaron had escorted her out for the evening. Amelia had no way of knowing Jack had been with them, and she couldn't possibly have imagined what had occurred. She began to confirm Amelia's assumption but again could not bring herself to lie.

Amelia covered her mouth with her hand and her eyes widened. "Liv, you wouldn't..."

Heat crept up Olivia's face. "I don't know. I don't know how I will choose between them."

"How perfectly scandalous!" Amelia tugged Olivia's hand and led her over to sit on the bench at the end of the bed. She sat down herself, but clung to Olivia with a bruising grip as she dug into her skirt pocket.

Olivia braced herself for Amelia's onslaught of inappropriate questions.

Instead, Amelia sighed and focused her gaze on the far wall. "I had so hoped for some good news tonight. Today has been absolutely dreadful." She pressed a thick, folded paper into Olivia's palm. "Hattie gave this to me. She found it on the floor in the inn after Uncle Robert and Miles Petty met with Constance in the parlor."

Olivia unfolded the paper, but before she began to read the neatly penned script, her eyes hovered on the signature of Jules D. Murdock at the bottom. The name seemed familiar, but she couldn't recall why.

Olivia quickly read the agreement between Robert Prescott and Jules D. Murdock.

Upon the marriage of Amelia Prescott to Jules D. Murdock and the receipt of the deed to the Prescott residence at 354 Hilltop Lane, Boston, Massachusetts, all debts owed to Jules D. Murdock by Robert Prescott will be considered paid in full.

"Where have I heard of Jules D. Murdock?" Olivia searched her memory again. "Have you shown this to Lizzie?"

Amelia shook her head. "I fear she might use that fire poker."

"He wants to exchange you and our house in Boston for repayment of his debts. The audacity! And why on earth would he call on Constance with Miles Petty?"

Chapter 7

*Olivia's Journal, January 5, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

Last night, sleep was not to be. After hours of weighing our options, Amelia and I have decided we will not share our discovery of Uncle Robert's scheme with Lizzie. I will discuss the legality of such an arrangement with Aaron and Jack. Our uncle cannot force Amelia to return to Boston, nor will he ever coerce Lizzie into handing him the deed to any of our properties. Despite the severity of our family situation, I cannot prevent my mind from drifting into realms of elation when I remember the feel of silk covering my eyes and...

* * * *

Olivia crossed her ankles and stretched like a cat in the chair by the warm hearth. Amelia had not yet emerged from her room, and Lizzie had gone out early with Logan and Gage. Olivia had nothing but time on her hands until Jack arrived to escort her to the library. Only the crackle of the fire and the soft patter of rain on the roof accompanied her thoughts. She couldn't concentrate on the book in her lap. She could barely recall the title, for the story she imagined in her own mind was much more compelling than any she'd ever read. She spun chapter after chapter of travel and conversation and lovemaking, and the characters were as intimately familiar as three people could be. Her lips tingled from imagined kisses. Her heart was

full with more love than she'd ever known, and even the dreary Washington Territory sky seemed brighter, rain and all.

The stomp of boots on the porch interrupted her reverie. She glanced at the clock above the mantel. Jack was nearly two hours early, but not a moment too soon! She hurried to the door and flung it open, realizing her mistake only after she stared directly into her uncle's eyes. His thick, unruly eyebrows rose in pleasant surprise, and his flat lips spread into a self-satisfied smirk.

"Where's your gatekeeper?" Robert Prescott pushed through the door like he owned the place.

Olivia looked back to the poker leaning next to the hearth and opened her mouth to speak.

"Don't bother with your lies." He moved closer. "I know she isn't here. I came to speak to you. Perhaps you will understand the gravity of the situation a little better than Elizabeth seems to."

Olivia struggled with how much she should reveal about what they had learned. If he felt cornered, he may act with the desperation of a man who had nothing to lose. If she feigned ignorance, perhaps he would threaten her the way he had threatened Lizzie, and she would have time to figure out how to best be rid of him for good. She turned her head toward the rustle of skirts and gasped. Amelia stood in the hallway, the small revolver clasped between her two trembling hands.

"Go back to Boston, and leave us alone." Amelia's voice was full of steel, and her eyes flashed fire.

A strong, beefy hand wrapped around Olivia's arm and Robert Prescott snatched her toward him. She stumbled to keep her balance and nearly gagged on the scent of stale whiskey and sweat that poisoned the air surrounding him. She struggled to free herself of his grasp, but the cold, hard rod of a gun pressed into her neck, and she froze.

The tremor in Amelia's hands took over her arms, and tears sprang to her eyes as she stared down the uncle who had torn their family apart. Olivia silently willed Amelia to hold her tongue.

"Put down the gun, Amelia, or your passage back to Boston will be spent in mourning for your dear sister."

Amelia kept her gun trained on him. Her arms shook so violently if she hit him, it would be purely by dumb luck.

"Do as he says. He just wants to speak with me for a moment."

Amelia bit down on her bottom lip and tears spilled from her eyes. "I'm not returning to Boston without you and Lizzie."

"Of course not," Olivia said. "I'm sure our uncle can be a reasonable man." She inclined her head as much as she dared with the gun pressed to her throat. "Come on, put the gun away. There's been enough bloodshed in this family."

With that, Amelia's dam burst. Tears poured freely down her cheeks. The reminder of how their parents had been murdered was enough to send a pain straight to the center of Olivia's heart. She had cried herself to sleep many nights imagining the fear her mother and father must have faced when they realized their lives were about to be taken, and she knew Amelia had lived those same moments in her mind.

Amelia lowered her arm and slumped against the wall. The gun fell from her hand. Olivia squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the shot. The clatter of the gun against the floor hit her nerves like a canon, but the silence that followed sent a rush of cool relief through her with enough force that her knees buckled.

Their uncle held her arm tight enough to prevent her fall and lowered his weapon with a sigh of sour breath. Olivia turned to him trembling with anger and spent nerves. "Have you not done enough to this family?" she said through clenched teeth. "Tell me what it will take to have you out of our lives, and I will see that it is done."

His flat lips spread across his face, and a flicker of victory gleamed in his eye. "I knew you would be the reasonable one."

He dropped her arm completely and stalked across the floor to pick up the revolver Amelia had dropped. She scrambled for it and cradled it like a child to her chest.

“There’s no need for guns.” Olivia hurried to Amelia’s side. “Go lie down. Let me see to this business with Uncle Robert before Lizzie returns.” She leaned close to Amelia’s ear. “If Logan finds him here...” She didn’t have to finish. Amelia nodded. They both knew what would happen if Logan or any of his brothers discovered him in their home. If shots were exchanged, Lizzie could lose her husband, and neither of them would take a chance like that.

Amelia turned her tear-filled eyes on Olivia.

Olivia laid her hand along Amelia’s cheek. “Put the gun away, and lie down. I’ll handle this.”

Amelia shot a quick glare at her uncle before lifting her skirts and hurrying down the hall.

Olivia waited until Amelia’s bedroom door clicked shut before she turned on her uncle. “How dare you come here making demands of us? You have no legal claim to anything that we own, and you have never bothered with us out of family duty or affection.”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her close enough the stench of him almost made her gag. “Your brother-in-law has more rivals than you may think. I would hate to see your dear Elizabeth get caught in the middle of any unfortunate accidents. Especially after the horrible fate that befell your parents.” He lowered his voice. “And what kind of mother hen could she be to you and Amelia if she wasn’t alive?”

Olivia wrenched her wrist free and curled her fists so tight her fingernails bit into her palms. “If you’re threatening to harm Lizzie—”

He jerked her arm and dragged her so close his lips brushed her ear. “If I were you, I’d make sure the deed to the Boston properties and sweet young Amelia are both in my possession when I set sail. If they aren’t, you will be the only niece I have left. And you will never marry either of those suitors you’re running about shamelessly with.”

He dropped her arm and jerked his vest down with both hands. “Good day, Olivia. I trust you will do what you need to do. The ship pulls out of Port Steele in two days.”

Olivia bolted the door shut and braced her back against the thick plank of wood that separated her from her uncle’s retreating form.

His threat rang in her ear, and a chill that had absolutely nothing to do with the cold winter air sank deep into her bones. She closed her eyes to block out the images of her parents’ final moments that her uncle had painted in her mind and tried instead to focus on the matter at hand. If he only wanted the deed, she may be able to convince Lizzie to let him have the property, and they could be rid of him for good. But she and Lizzie would never hand Amelia over to that man, and according to the note he’d dropped in Hattie’s inn, it didn’t seem as if the property alone would be enough to satisfy his debt.

* * * *

Olivia pulled three more books from the box on the floor and entered them into her inventory log. Her hands shook, making it nearly impossible to pen her usually neat script. She was grateful to have the library to herself while her thoughts spun from one inadequate plan to the next to keep her uncle from capturing Amelia and stealing their inheritance. Constance had not yet made her morning jaunt from the inn across the street. Jack and Aaron were meeting with the red-faced, ill-tempered owner of a Port Gamble sawmill who had been waiting at the door of the mercantile when she and Jack arrived. Since the minute Jack had ushered the sawmill owner through the door and Aaron met them at the back of the store, the man had been shouting about a debtor and demanding to know if the man who owed him had any money in his savings account.

Aaron and Jack’s voices were harder to hear, but from the bits and pieces of the conversation that drifted all the way over to the library, Olivia could tell they were doing their best to diffuse the situation

diplomatically and help the business owner recoup what belonged to him. Despite the tremor that held her in its grip, a wave of pride washed over her. The people of Port Steele, Port Gamble, and all the other little establishments along the coast of Bachelor Bay depended on and trusted the men she loved.

The door to the mercantile opened just as the irate sawmill owner shouted, "If Miles Petty doesn't pay me every dime he owes me by the end of the month, he'll have uncut timber up to his eyeballs. I'm not doing another minute's work that I'm not paid for!"

Constance's eyebrows shot up, but she quickly made her way to the library. Through the open door, Olivia watched her approach and saw Jack escort the sawmill owner to the street. Olivia held back a smile. If they were going in search of Miles Petty, she wouldn't want to be anywhere nearby when they found him.

Constance's wide skirts brushed the doorway as she entered the library. Many of the women had given up most of their petticoats for practicality, but on occasion, Constance fought common sense and mud in the name of fashion. Her brown wool gown had stains from the street near the hemline but the floral stitching on the fabric camouflaged most of them.

"I've had absolutely the most interesting of mornings." She lifted her chin in the stance of a woman who had a secret that was about to eat her alive if she didn't let it out.

"How fortunate for you. Could you alphabetize the second shelf, please?" Olivia continued entering the titles into her log.

The door to the mercantile opened again, and Jack entered the store alone.

Olivia's stomach did a slow roll, and her heart swelled with love. With discreet touches and constant reminders of the intimacy they had shared last evening, Jack had made it relatively easy for her to hold her tongue on the matter of her uncle while he escorted her to the library. She hadn't bothered to seek his counsel. With the threat to Lizzie on the table, it mattered little if Robert Prescott's agreement

with Jules D. Murdoch was illegal. She needed to find some way to bargain with her uncle that took Amelia out of the equation. While she didn't need Jack and Aaron's legal advice, she had decided to consult with them. Both men had plenty of experience working out business deals, and their input would be invaluable. Under ordinary circumstances, shame would prevent her from asking either of them to become involved in such a messy private affair. This was a family matter which ideally should be sorted out within the family, but she couldn't approach Logan as easily. He loved Lizzie too much to remain rational, and Robert Prescott wielded a gun too readily to not be a threat to Logan's life.

"Excuse me." Olivia stood. "I need to speak with Mr. Bartlett concerning library business."

Constance mumbled something about working her fingers to the bone as Olivia made her way through the door.

Olivia hurried over to the long customer counter at the back of the store. Her heart pounded with every step. Since losing her innocence, she had only had the few minutes alone with Jack when he'd escorted her to the library, and she hadn't had a single moment with Aaron. As she watched them now, their dark heads bent over the ledgers, their broad shoulders beneath the fine fabric of their tailored suits, her stomach curled with eager anticipation and her mouth hungered for kisses she knew would have to wait.

Jack and Aaron stared at the ledgers Aaron had spread in front of him, their voices muffled in private conversation. Olivia approached quietly, hesitant to interrupt but eager to see them both. What she wouldn't give to sneak upstairs and feel their strong arms around her, hear their low whispers in her ear.

As soon as she drew close enough to hear their conversation, she stopped in her tracks.

"She will have to choose which of us to marry," Jack said. "The choice must be made quickly. We can't go on like this much longer. We both need a wife."

Olivia's feet refused to move another step. Her heart lodged deep in her throat, and a crushing weight fell upon her chest. How could she possibly choose? And if she did marry one of them, who would the other one marry?

Olivia stood stunned as the men moved on to discuss a business matter. Hurried footsteps drew near, and Constance brushed past her. "Mr. Lambert? I hate to be a bother, but when did you say my corsets might arrive? I swear, if Hattie doesn't begin preparing edible food for us, my waist will disappear completely." She planted both hands on her hips while sucking in a deep breath that narrowed her waist and pushed her bosoms up several inches. She turned to the side to give Aaron a better view of her figure. "I may need to be measured again."

Aaron studied her with curiosity.

Laughter rumbled from Jack's chest. "Miss Kendall, you're the most brazen woman I've ever met." His eyes glittered, and Olivia saw a possibility she didn't want to believe. Perhaps Jack found Constance intriguing. Though he had been brutal with her when they met in the inn, maybe he had begun to find her forthright nature charming, or at least tolerable.

Olivia remained frozen to the floor. An ache settled deep into her bones. Would Aaron also be willing to marry Constance?

Aaron took the hand Constance extended and kissed it with perfunctory politeness. "I expect to receive the shipment in about two weeks. Surely, Hattie won't starve you before then."

Jack's gaze shifted over Constance's shoulder and landed on Olivia. "Good morning, love. What can I help you with?"

His smile poured heat from Olivia's heart straight to her feet, but not even his handsome face or the warmth of his greeting could pierce the cloud of sadness that filled her. She struggled to open her throat.

"Good morning." She smiled at Jack and then Aaron, but then forced her attention onto Constance. "Connie, we have books to sort. Could you assist me in the library, please?"

Olivia made her way back across the store. She no longer needed advice on how to handle the situation with her uncle. The solution to her dilemma had become clear. The idea that had begun to take shape in her mind may kill her, but the alternative was worse than death.

* * * *

Olivia ran a fingertip along the strong tendon of Jack's neck and then bent to trail kisses along the same path. The taste of his skin beneath her tongue opened a hunger in her soul. Kneeling on the bed behind her, Aaron brushed her hair from her shoulder and nipped at a tender spot below her ear. A shiver of delight trickled down her spine, momentarily easing the ache in her chest.

She had never felt so much love in her heart, and she had never felt so loved. Four strong hands stroked her body with an intimate, gentle touch that harnessed the heat and desire she felt pulsing beneath her lovers' skin. Aaron's hands came around to cradle her breasts, and a low groan escaped from his throat. Olivia turned to kiss him, to taste the passion of his tongue, but Jack cupped his hand behind her head and drew her mouth to his.

Together, the three of them made the perfect combination. She never wanted for anything, and they both let her know how much she pleased them. Aaron's hands slid over her ribs, down to her waist, and came to rest on her hips. Her knees slid across the sheets, and she broke from Jack's kiss as Aaron pulled her lower body toward him. She arched her back, propping her bottom up, giving him the perfect angle to give her what she wanted. What she needed.

Jack eased down onto the mattress and spread his legs. His big cock jutted from his lap only an inch from her lips. Her mouth watered for a taste of the velvety smooth skin and the dew of excitement that pooled from the little slit at the top.

"Jack, you should see this." Aaron's hands spread across her ass, rubbing sensuous circles in her skin, spreading her cheeks, making

her pussy weep with anticipation. “God, she’s the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Olivia ran her hand over the wiry hair on Jack’s thigh and wrapped her fingers around his cock. The thick head of Aaron’s cock brushed her inner thigh, and she automatically pushed back, seeking the heaven that came from having him inside her.

“Oh she’s eager tonight.” Aaron laughed and massaged her bottom harder as Olivia moved, urging his cock closer to the wet opening between her legs.

“I think we should try something new.” Jack twisted his hand in her hair and sucked in a breath as she let her tongue slide across the head of his cock.

She drew the smooth knob into her mouth and sucked once before Jack tugged her hair hard enough to lift her off him.

Olivia’s muscles clenched and she pushed back against Aaron again. Her bottom landed on his abdomen. His hard shaft slid between her slick nether lips and nudged her throbbing clit. She moved forward and reached between her legs to guide him inside her. Jack pulled his cock back and out of reach, wrenching a moan of frustration from her throat.

“We’re going about it a little different tonight, sweetheart,” he said.

Disappointment sank her heart. She wanted it again just the way she’d had it before. She wanted Jack’s wide cock stretching her mouth and Aaron’s pumping into her until she couldn’t breathe, until she lost complete and utter control. And then she wanted to switch it around and taste herself on Aaron’s cock while Jack held her hips in his big hands and drove himself home again and again.

“No, please,” she begged. “I want you inside me again. I want both of you inside me again.”

Aaron reached between her thighs and stroked her clit with the flat of his finger. When he found her most sensitive spot, she gasped, and

he rubbed tight little circles that left her panting and pleading for his dick more than ever.

“Please, please, please!” she cried and moved back against him. “Please, let me feel you inside me.”

The fat head of Aaron’s cock stretched the opening of her wet hole while the constant circular vibrations of his finger continued to jerk the breath from her lungs in short, quick pants.

“I’m going in once, sweetheart, but then we’re going to teach you something new.” His voice was strained. His grip on her hip tightened. She nodded and dove for Jack’s cock again, wanting to taste him against her tongue when Aaron entered her.

Aaron filled her, stretched her, made her feel physically whole. She readied for the slow torture of his withdrawal, hoping he hadn’t meant what he said about “going in once.” Instead of the continuous movement she expected, he seated himself deep inside her and began to massage her bottom again. This time his strokes spread her cheeks and held them apart. Above her, low growls erupted from Jack’s chest as she sucked and stroked his cock, slow and firm, the way she’d learned he liked it best.

Aaron reached around her waist to stroke her clit before sliding his fingers lower, coating them in the juices that soaked her swollen lips. She moved against his hand, grinding herself deeper into his crotch, but he withdrew his fingers and pulled out of her far enough to put space between them. Whatever she had expected, it was not the feel of his slick fingers between the cheeks of her bottom. Tingles struck the instant he caressed her tight, puckered little hole, and her head instinctively jerked up. Jack twisted his fingers in her hair, holding her in place as he began to slowly pump his cock in and out of her mouth. His short, hard breaths told her he was close to release.

“Relax, sweetheart. Just relax and trust us.” Aaron’s voice was tight with lust, and his fingers continued to work the tension from her bottom. “Good girl,” he said as she let go of the apprehension and gave into the pleasure of his touch.

She tensed up again just slightly as the tip of his finger intruded her most private space and a slight sting replaced the tingles. His voice soothed her again, and as she relaxed, he entered her, stretching her in such a delightful way her knees nearly gave out beneath her. Jack cupped her chin and pulled his cock from her mouth. His thumb stroked her cheek, and the fire that jumped in his eyes made her heart pound. She tightened her grip on his cock and began to stroke it, but he stilled her hand.

“If I don’t stop you now, you’ll miss out on our big surprise.”

Aaron’s cock began a slow retraction, and she ached for it more with every inch. Jack lay back and pulled her on top of him, spreading her legs over his thighs and letting his big cock rest against her hungry pussy.

Aaron leaned over her back. He inserted a second finger, stretching her tight rear hole. “Do you like that?” She flinched, then nodded quickly as he entered her slowly, and the sensation of newly excited nerves burst through her body and drew her nipples tight.

Jack took her mouth in a kiss as Aaron withdrew his fingers, and the smooth, hot skin of his fat cock slid between her butt cheeks. She felt the pressure as he pressed the head slowly against her opening, taking his time to gain entry. Her breath burned in her lungs despite Jack’s attempts to keep her kissing him. Aaron entered her tight rear hole in a long, slow, steady stroke that widened her eyes and made her pussy cry for even more attention than before.

Jack broke the kiss, breathing heavy. “Relax. Get used to the new sensation, and when you’re ready to have me inside you, too, all you have to do is say the word.” He lifted his hips, sliding his cock further between her slick, swollen nether lips, making his intention clear.

She gasped as he nudged her clit, and Aaron began another deep, stroke into her bottom. “Now. I want you now.” She wanted nothing more than to have them both deep inside her at the same time. These men she couldn’t choose between, these men she wanted equally. She wanted them both, now. All the time.

Jack guided his big cock into her, giving her a moment to adjust to the double penetration before he began to move. Aaron stilled too. And then in unison they began to withdraw. Within a couple of strokes they found a rhythm that had her crying out with each entry and moaning for more with each withdrawal.

The room filled with her cries and theirs. Their lovemaking had never been so vocal, so intense. She had never felt so intimately connected to both of them. Her nipples burrowed into the wiry hair of Jack's chest, and the back of her thighs tingled from the soft abrasion of Aaron's hairy legs. She loved the contrast of her feminine body and their masculine features. And with both of them moving with her at once, there wasn't an inch of her skin that wasn't attended to.

As an orgasm began to build in her belly, her heart lurched. She fought against the squeeze of pain in her chest, but there was no way she could fend off the heartbreak that would follow. As much as she loved these men and as unforgettable as these nights in their bed would be, she knew their time together would soon end.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as the orgasm tore through her body with an intensity she'd yet to experience. She savored every stroke, every breath, every swirling wave of pleasure. Then she collapsed onto Jack's chest and did her best to disguise her sobs as grateful, heavy breaths.

"Olivia?" Both men spoke her name in unison.

Jack lifted her face from his chest, and Aaron leaned close to her shoulder. "What's wrong, love? Did we hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I..." She couldn't tell them the truth, but she couldn't bring herself to lie. "I've never felt such love, and I fear its end will come."

Aaron planted gentle kisses on her shoulder, and Jack pressed his lips into her hair.

"Sweetheart," Jack whispered, "We are only just beginning."

Aaron nodded in agreement.

They held her between their hulking, warm bodies and made her promises she knew she would not allow either of them to keep.

Chapter 8

*Olivia's Journal, January 6, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

My heart is torn to pieces, but I have no choice. Picking either Aaron or Jack to become my husband would be like choosing which of my eyes to blind. If either were not a part of me, I could never recover from the loss. The presence of one wouldn't make me more whole than the presence of the other. I sealed my fate the day I fell in love with two men. I will not choose between them, and I cannot stay here in Port Steele and watch either of the men I love marry another. After giving my heart so thoroughly to both, I am certain I will never find such love again. I do not care to look for it. If I am ever to marry, the marriage would be but a cage, and I would be the bird within, never to soar again. It would be selfish of me to allow Amelia to return with Uncle Robert. I will go in her place. For no matter whom I am forced to marry, I will not be able to give him a heart I no longer own. My dear sister may still find a love that she can hold on to. I just wish I could come up with a plan that didn't require me to sacrifice my integrity.

* * * *

Olivia paused with her hand against the door of the saloon. The deed to their home in Boston shifted beneath her corset. Her hands still trembled from the theft of it. She had never stolen anything in her life, and Lizzie was the last person she would ever steal from. Guilt

weighed down her shoulders. Lizzie had done everything she could to protect them from their uncle's wrath, but she was their sister, not their keeper. Lizzie had gotten them out of Boston, and she had found a place where they could leave the bad memories behind and begin afresh. Now their uncle wanted to steal that opportunity from Amelia, and it was Olivia's turn to carry the burden as Lizzie had.

A roar of male voices sounded from within the saloon, and Olivia checked the streets behind her. She had never been about in Port Steele unescorted before. Even with the women Gallagher Lumber had provided to the town, the male population far exceeded the number of females. The majority of men here were massive in stature and rough-natured, definitely not the company a lady would wander the streets alone with. Lizzie would not approve of her outing, especially with Robert Prescott present. Jack and Aaron would not approve either. Her heart squeezed, knowing she would disappoint them both. She fought back the sadness. How could she have fallen so completely in love with two men? It was too late to ponder the question. No answer would cause her to abandon the love of either of them. She would hold it in her heart forever.

She pushed the door open and stepped into the dimly lit drinking establishment. Men sat around a table in the back holding cards in their hands and cigars between their lips. Several of them looked her way and then quickly back to the cards they held. A few muttered unpleasanties that made her stand a little straighter and suck in a sharp breath.

In the far corner, Robert Prescott sat with his back to the door. Across from him, Miles Petty studied Olivia for a long minute before saying something she couldn't hear but that made her uncle turn around in his seat.

Olivia swallowed the lump in her throat and started toward their table. Behind the bar, a man in his shirtsleeves mopped a glass with a cloth. "We don't allow ladies in here."

Olivia lifted her chin. Hattie frequented the saloon, but apparently no one expected Hattie to follow the same constrictions as the women from Boston. "I've business with my uncle. I'll only be a moment."

Miles nodded to the bartender. "We'll keep an eye on her."

The bartender set his glass down and picked up another. He didn't seem pleased, but he didn't argue further.

Olivia stopped just beyond her uncle's reach. "I need a moment with you privately."

Without standing, Robert Prescott pulled out the seat next to him. "Miles is aware of our little predicament. You can speak freely in front of him."

Olivia remained standing. "I have the documents you want, and I will give them to you with one concession."

"You're not in much of a position for bargaining." He raked his fat fingers along his cheek and narrowed his eyes. "What type of concession are you asking for?"

"You must take me back to Boston instead of Amelia."

"I've found a suitor for Amelia. I don't think you'll suit his requirements." He dragged his eyes from her face to her boots and back up again, pausing on her chest for emphasis.

"You will take me, or you will not get the deed."

"Elizabeth will not risk the consequence of withholding the deed from me."

"Lizzie no longer has the deed. And you will either meet my concessions or sail back to Boston empty-handed." Her voice didn't waver, but her insides rattled like the maracas they sold near the train depot in Mexico. She had been tempted to purchase one before they boarded the train that would carry them across South America and to the ship they had to catch to make their voyage up the western coast to Port Steele.

Robert Prescott leaned back in his chair and grabbed his lapels in his beefy hands. "I understand you have suitors here. What makes you so eager to leave?"

“My sister’s protection is more important to me than my own future.”

Miles leaned forward. “Consider her offer. Keeping her sister here for me to look after,” he paused to raise his brows and give Robert a knowing look, “might sweeten our deal a little.”

Olivia narrowed her eyes at him, but kept a tone of sugar and innocence in her voice. “What sort of deal could Amelia possibly be helpful for?”

Robert Prescott’s chair scraped the floor as he stood. His round frame completely blocked Miles from Olivia’s view. “A tavern is no place for a lady such as yourself.” The sneer on his face, implicated his lack of sincerity. “I’ll escort you home.”

“I shall be safer on my own.” She gathered her skirts. “I trust we have a deal.”

“If you hand over the deed, you can board the ship in Amelia’s place. If you try any tomfoolery...” He leaned close enough she had to catch her breath to ward off the stench of him. “Your dear Lizzie will say her goodbyes to both of you from your gravesides.”

* * * *

“Hurry before Lizzie wakes.” Olivia piled another armload of her belongings into the small trunk that lay open on her bed.

The midnight moon played peek-a-boo through the window as clouds sailed across the sky. The wind howled and rustled the tops of the tall timbers surrounding the house. Lizzie and Logan had gone to bed early with that look they got in their eyes sometimes that made Olivia believe every fairytale she’d ever read. Gage had said his goodnights only minutes later, and both of the master bedroom doors at the end of the hall closed for the night.

As of late, Lizzie had developed a habit of slipping out of her room in the wee hours of morning to make a cup of tea and sit by the fire. It was the same habit she’d gotten into just before they left

Boston. In Boston, Olivia had caught her next to the fire holding an advertisement for brides that the Gallaghers had posted in the local paper. Lately, she had been sipping her late night tea with a fire poker in her free hand. Olivia knew what was weighing on her sister's mind, but this time, Lizzie wouldn't have to find the solution for them. In a few short hours, Amelia and Lizzie would be free of their uncle's demands.

Amelia swiped at the tears pouring down her cheeks and placed a silver brush set in one corner of the trunk. She grabbed Olivia's wrist just as Olivia turned away to pick up the folded petticoats from the bench at the foot of her bed. "You can't do this, Liv. There has to be another way."

Olivia shook her head. "This is as much for me as it is for you. I've told you I can't choose a husband after falling in love with both of them, and I can't live with the heartbreak of seeing the men I love married to other women for the rest of my life. I must leave here, and if I go in this manner, you will be free to marry whomever you choose." She pulled Amelia in for a hug and rubbed a slow circle on her sister's back. "Trust me, this is best for both of us."

Chapter 9

*Olivia's Journal, January 7, 1865
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

My hands tremble as I write this. I'm afraid this entry will not even be legible by the light of day, but I must pass the time, or the minutes that drag on will draw the very breath from me, and I will be too dead to save Amelia from the unfortunate marriage that awaits her in Boston. There is nothing to do now but wait for our wretched uncle to arrive. Lizzie woke as she has been doing, so Amelia was forced to dry her eyes and go sit with her so that she may cause a distraction if my escape fails to be as stealthy as I've planned it to be. Logan, Gage, Andrew, and Noah will all leave for the lumber yard a couple of hours before sunrise. The plan is to give the men a half hour to make their way away from the house, and then I will slip out my window. When I miss breakfast Amelia will assure Lizzie it is nothing more than a headache I complained of before bed that is keeping me in my room. By the time Lizzie becomes concerned enough to discover I'm not in my room, the ship will be setting off across the bay. It hurts not to be able to say goodbye to my dear sister, Lizzie, and my loves Jack and Aaron, but it is the only way.

* * * *

Two burly men hefted Olivia's trunk from the back of the wagon. In the pre-dawn darkness, she could just make out the scar that ran

along the smaller man's jaw and the scent of stale whiskey mixed with the salty air that blew off the bay.

At the end of the pier, a large ship sat unmoving as small white caps broke across its hull and rolled toward the shore. Bachelor Bay was as dark as the sky above it, and Olivia's stomach turned as she remembered the sway of the ocean on her passage from back East. But seasickness would be easier to handle than the pain in her heart. She glanced back at the row of businesses lining the main street of Port Steele. Her gaze came to rest on the mercantile, and she closed her eyes to hold back the tears.

Robert Prescott grabbed her elbow and gave her a firm yank. She pulled her bonnet forward to hide her face from anyone they might pass as they made their way toward the ship. The shadows of crates and pilings crept across the dock like the pudgy fingers of death. She glanced down at her uncle's fat fingers wrapped around her elbow and knew her life was over. She had handed her soul to the devil, and every step she took landed a little closer to hell. The boardwalk cracked and groaned beneath their feet, and the cold breeze off the water prickled the skin on the back of her neck.

Her heart ached for everyone she was leaving behind and for the love of two men she would never know again. If the ship sank to the bottom of the ocean, she doubted the cold water could drown her pain.

At the end of the dock, Olivia lifted her skirts and ascended the ship's ramp. She dared not look back toward the row of businesses along the main street a second time. The hollow pain in her chest weighed more than the crates being shoved up ramps by the burly dock crew. Fog had begun rolling in off the water, thick and gray, cold and wet against her skin. The fog enveloped everything around her like an omen of what was to come. She let the damp chill seep into her bones and held it inside like a blockade against the warmth of false hopes. She could only pray that not only would Amelia be spared a marriage that was not of her choosing, but that she would

find a husband that she could love. Olivia would find her contentment in her sisters' happiness and whatever distractions she could find to occupy her time in Boston. Joy of the heart was not meant to be hers.

* * * *

Jack cupped his morning coffee in his hand and let the warmth of the mug ease the chill from his bones. He glanced back toward the open door of his bedroom and grunted at the memory of waking up to an empty bed. The time had come to put an end to the nonsense. He and Aaron would have Olivia choose between them at dinner. Warmth spread through his chest. He would do anything to make her his, to love and care for her for the rest of his life. And he knew Aaron felt the same.

Rapid pounding landed against the door to the mercantile, rattling the windows. Aaron's footsteps fell on the landing between their rooms and moved quickly down the stairs. Jack set his cup down and hurried to follow.

Aaron twisted the key in the lock just as Jack came to a stop at his side.

"Ladies, what can we do for you?" Jack tugged the bottom of his vest. He'd left his coat upstairs, and Aaron stood next to him, similarly dressed.

"I've sent for Logan and Gage, but I fear they won't make it to the dock before the ship sails." Lizzie Gallagher's flushed face stared up at him. Her hands fisted at her sides. "We have to get her off that ship!"

Aaron stepped forward, taking Amelia by the hand and gently helping her inside. "You mean Olivia, I presume?"

At the mention of Olivia's name, the look on Lizzie Gallagher's face spoke more loudly than it had before. Jack's gut twisted. He took Lizzie by the arm. "Tell us what has happened on the way to the dock."

He kept his long strides under control as best he could, knowing the women were practically jogging to keep up, but if Olivia was on a ship that was about to set sail, he wasn't about to waste a minute getting her off it.

"What makes you think she's on the ship?" Aaron's voice was strained, and Jack knew he was having just as hard a time with the pace they were making toward the dock.

The sound of the ship's engines roared in Jack's ears, and his heart pounded in his chest. Would she run away from them without saying goodbye?

Lizzie stopped and bent over double. Jack had to force himself not to throw her over his shoulder and run the rest of the way to the dock. She put her hand up to catch him by the arm as if he might try to leave her there on the sidewalk. "I'm sorry," she said. Behind her, Amelia's breath came in heavy pants. "We've run all the way from our house to the dock where they shooed us away like flies and then to your place. I have to catch my breath."

Jack bit back the response on his tongue. "Tell us what we need to know, and Aaron and I will go get her."

Lizzie stood. She looked from him to Aaron and squared her shoulders. "I suspect the two of you have been...sharing...my sister."

Jack stiffened, but before he could respond, she continued.

"I understand the dynamics of such a relationship better than you may think. My husbands..." She emphasized the plural and looked to each of them for confirmation. "...and I are well versed in such things, but my sisters have not been aware of the true nature of my marriage. Amelia has just told me Olivia feared she must choose between the two of you. If that is your intent, you have broken her heart. If that is not your intent, you have not been clear with her, and now she has climbed aboard the ship with our uncle to marry some horrid creature in Boston as a repayment for our uncle's debt. She sacrificed herself in place of Amelia because she couldn't bear the thought of living without the both of you."

Jack murmured a swear and took off for the dock, leaving the women standing there. He ran as if the devil were on his heels. How had they not made it clear to her the union of all three of them would be permanent? The only choice she would need to make would be whose name to take and who would serve as her husband on legal documents. Aaron's footsteps fell close behind his, and both of them doubled their speed as the ship's engine roared louder and the ship's horn blasted through the fog.

"They're pulling out!" Aaron shouted over his shoulder. "What in the hell have we done?"

* * * *

Olivia sank onto her narrow bed in the tiny cabin that adjoined her uncle's suite and squeezed her trembling hands as the ship's horn ripped through her nerves. She didn't even try to stop the hot tears that flowed down her cheeks. There would be plenty of time to bury her emotions and force her head up high. Right now, she needed to cry.

Teardrops clouded her glasses, and she removed them to wipe them dry. As she rubbed her handkerchief over the lens, her mouth dropped open. *Jules D. Murdock!* She remembered where she had heard the name of the person her uncle was indebted to.

She rose off the bed, fury burning all the way to the tops of her ears. She crossed the room and pounded her fist against the door that separated her cabin from her uncle's suite. There was no answer. He was probably at the bar or topside, watching the ship pull away from port. She let out a scream of fury. That underhanded devil of a man was smarter than she had given him credit for.

She tugged on the door to his suite, but it was locked. She turned to open the door to her cabin, but it wouldn't budge. He had locked her in! She turned around quickly. There had to be a way out, and she had to find it. There wasn't a second to spare.

Olivia worked her laces and the trappings of her clothing quickly. Minutes later, stripped to her drawers, chemise, and corset, she stepped her stocking feet over the heap of clothes in the middle of the floor and slid her trunk over to the small window of her cabin. Perspiration pricked at her armpits. She had been duped, and if she didn't get off this ship, her uncle's manipulations would be far worse than she had imagined they might be. He had schemed for Amelia to find the note Constance "dropped" in the lobby. Jules D. Murdock was dead. Constance had received news of her Godfather's passing when the ship set sail out of New York. She had shed the requisite crocodile tears and bowed beneath the condolences of her shipmates, but Olivia had not missed the gleam of satisfaction in her eyes when she heard the news. That evening, when she thought no one was looking, Constance had spat upon the folded note the ship's captain had given her and thrown it into the sea. Olivia had watched from the window of her cabin and wondered how horrible a human being must be to elicit such hatred.

It was fitting that Robert Prescott had used Jules D. Murdock in his scheme to coerce the deed and a bride for one of his cronies out of his nieces. If he had taken the deed and one of them by force, he risked prosecution, but if one of them went willingly and handed over the deed with her own thieving hands, he had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Nausea rose in Olivia's stomach. She had given him the home her parents had provided for them, the home Lizzie had fought so hard to hold on to, and she had opened the door wide open for Constance to worm her way into Aaron's heart. She climbed on top of the trunk and gave the window a shove. The glass refused to budge. She looked around quickly, feeling the ship pick up steam across the choppy water. She pulled the chamber pot from beneath her bed, thankful it was made of some utilitarian metal and was not a decorative ceramic piece. She wound her wool skirt around her hand and arm and slammed the pot against the glass. The first swing made a jagged

crack. The third knocked large shards of glass free. She cleared the rest as efficiently as she could and used her silver hairbrush to sweep the smaller pieces from around the window before hefting herself through the narrow opening.

For the first time in her adult life, she was grateful for her smallish breasts and slender, curve-less frame. She squeezed through and dangled precariously over the deck below. She held her breath and lowered herself as far as she could before she closed her eyes, murmured a prayer, and dropped the last couple of feet.

The landing was anything but graceful. Standing, she jerked her foot off a piece of glass as bright red drops of blood fell to the deck. Without taking the time to worry with the pain, she hurried to the railing and flung herself into the frigid water of Bachelor Bay. She would rather die than return to Boston and the fate that awaited her there.

* * * *

“Did you see that?” Aaron yelled over the wind that whipped over the open bow of the skiff he and Jack had commandeered. “I think she jumped!”

Jack ran to the front of the boat, leaning to peer through the patchy fog in the direction of Aaron’s outstretched arm.

He had to hold himself back from jumping in after her. As slow as the skiff seemed to be going in the wake of the departing passenger ship, the smaller boat was cutting through the water faster than he could swim. He waved his arms at the captain and motioned for him to steer the boat slightly starboard. “Faster, my friend! Faster!”

The captain nodded. But to Jack, the small boat seemed to be sitting still. He was ready to crawl out of his skin, and next to him, he could feel the tension coiled just as tightly in Aaron.

“We have to get to her in time,” Aaron said in voice so low and serious it sent a chill down Jack’s spine.

“We’ll get her if I have to part this damn bay with my bare hands and run the rest of the way.”

The words had barely left his lips when he caught a glimpse of white linen billowing up on the crest of a wave. Olivia was struggling to keep her head above water and her pale skin was purple with cold.

Jack and Aaron both jumped, cutting through the freezing water with long strokes fueled by a strength Jack knew came from pure will. He would not lose her. They had waited their entire lives to find a woman they could both love. She was everything he had hoped for and more, and he knew Aaron felt precisely the same.

Jack reached her first, throwing an arm around her waist just as she began to sink below the swell of a wave. Aaron hooked one arm beneath her shoulder. Jack did the same on her other side and together they hauled her back to the skiff. The captain hung over the side, ready to pull her aboard. It ripped a hole in Jack’s heart to feel her pulled from his grip even long enough to be put aboard the boat.

He and Aaron quickly followed. The captain shouted for the crew to head for shore and bring up blankets from his cabin. Jack and Aaron didn’t wait for the blankets. They lay on the deck, holding Olivia between them, warming her with their own cold bodies, rubbing the chill from her skin, whispering words of love and relief, and begging her to respond.

Jack stared down at her blue lips, barely able to hold back the flood of emotion that threatened to rip every shred of masculine strength from him. He glanced at Aaron and had to turn away from the gleam of tears he saw in his oldest friend’s eyes. They couldn’t lose her, not now, not now that they had her back in their arms.

Jack didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until Olivia coughed water from her lungs and her body began to tremor. His chest heaved, dragging cold, wet air into his burning lungs.

“Liv,” Aaron said close to her ear, his chest pressed into her back, his hand rubbing hard along her hip to warm the skin beneath her thin

undergarments. “Don’t ever leave us again. How do you expect your husbands to live without you?”

Olivia’s eyes fluttered. Her lips trembled with cold, but her forehead creased in confusion. She looked up at Jack, her blue eyes filled with questions. “Did he say husbands?”

Jack nodded. “Our love, did you honestly think either of us would walk away from you? Have we not made our intent and our love for you clear enough?”

She shook her head. “You said I had to choose. I heard you.”

Two of the crewmen hurried toward them, thick wool blankets in their outstretched hands. Jack helped Olivia to her feet while Aaron held a blanket around her, hiding her from the eyes of the crewmen while Jack worked the wet clothing from her body. He wrapped her in the blanket Aaron held and took her shoulders in his own trembling hands.

He lowered his voice so that only she and Aaron could hear. “You do have to choose. You have to choose which of us will have the honor of giving you our name, and which of us will be your legally wed husband. But if you will have us, you will be wed to the both of us, until death do us part.” He shook as the last words left his mouth, and he realized how close they had come to being parted before they could even exchange vows.

Aaron handed Jack a blanket and leaned close to Olivia’s ear. “Marry us, Olivia. Both of us. Don’t make us wait another day to wake up with you in our arms.”

Tears flowed down Olivia’s pale face. Jack rubbed them away with the pads of his thumbs and kissed her trembling lips.

She drew back, nodding and laughing. “We can do this? We can really do this? Please say yes because I could never choose one of you over the other in my heart.”

Jack felt his smile stretch across his face. “We can really do this. Your sister Lizzie has a similar arrangement with Logan and Gage.

Her marriage to Logan is only half of the husband contract she agreed to.”

Olivia’s mouth popped open, and then the light of understanding sparked in her eyes. “Well, a lot of things make more sense now. How could I have not realized...”

She leaned back against Aaron’s chest and reached to pull Jack to her. “I think for the rest of this boat ride you two better do everything you can to keep me warm. I’ve read of hypothermia, and it’s a dreadful condition. And when we get home...”

The way she said “home” filled Jack’s chest with pride. Home. Finally, he and Aaron had a home. He leaned close again, guarding their secret from the ears of the concerned crewmen that hovered nearby. “When we get you home, we’ll make certain there’s not an inch of skin on your beautiful body that isn’t burning brighter than the Caribbean sun. And then we’re going to march you over to the Justice of the Peace, and you can tell him which of your husbands’ names to write in his record books.”

She fainted, her body falling limp against Aaron. Jack jumped to catch her until he saw her lips move against Aaron’s neck and heard the sigh of relief and desire shoot from his mouth. The faint was for show. She wanted to kiss Aaron, too, but the crewmen had already seen Jack kiss her.

Jack grinned. “You, my clever little dear, are going to handle your husband contract quite well.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Grace is an author you've probably read before. She's changed her name to keep you guessing and to bring you stories you would never expect from her. Someday she will write from a sunlit cottage that has been overtaken by the woody vines and lavender blossoms of wisteria. She'll take her laptop out to the worn brick courtyard at the back of the house and listen to waves crash on the nearby beach. If they're in season she'll nibble fresh kumquats off the potted bush next to her overgrown herb garden. If she's really lucky, the birds will sing to her while her imagination takes flight. And when you curl up with one of her books, she'll take you on naughty journeys that will warm your blood, make your breath come in heated pants, and leave you completely satisfied... but still wanting more.



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