

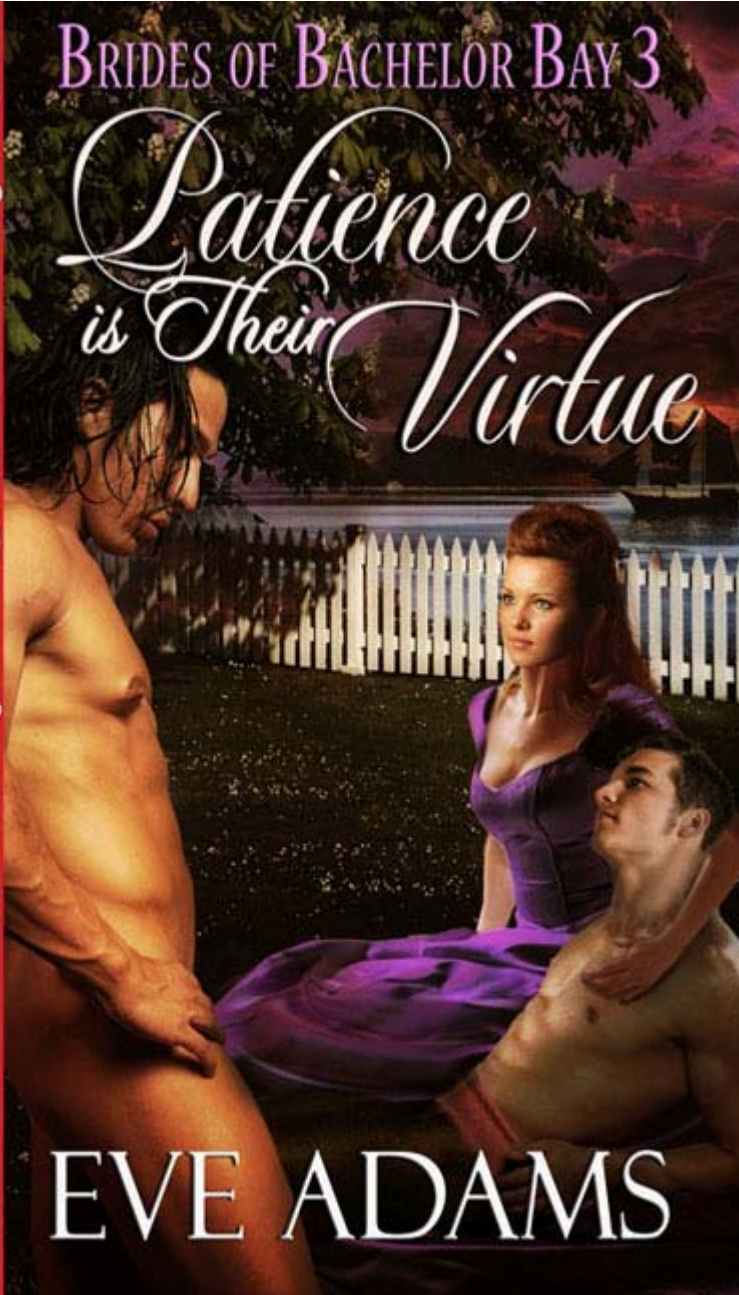
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*Ménage Everlasting*

BRIDES OF BACHELOR BAY 3

*Patience  
is Their  
Virtue*

EVE ADAMS



### Brides of Bachelor Bay 3

## Patience is Their Virtue

Patience Weber has no intention of marrying any of the bachelors and instead uses the passage to the Washington Territory to escape her penniless life in Boston. She never intended to catch the eye of Adam Steele and his mysterious manservant, Raven. When she does, her secret is blown and the brothers who paid for her passage insist on repayment. With no way to repay the debt she's incurred, Adam makes her an offer she has no choice but to accept—marry him, live in the house he shares with his brother, and he'll pay off her debt. She agrees and discovers that Adam shares more than the house with his brother. The brothers learn that falling in love with Patience is their virtue.

In an era where land is as unsettled as the times, these brave brides fight for their right to live and love—always in threes.

**Genre:** Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre

**Length:** 43,000 words

# **PATIENCE IS THEIR VIRTUE**

## ***Brides of Bachelor Bay 3***

**Eve Adams**

**MENAGE EVERLASTING**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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# **DEDICATION**

To anyone willing to take a chance on his or her future.  
Sometimes the best outcomes are based solely on how far you are  
willing to go.

# PATIENCE IS THEIR VIRTUE

*Brides of Bachelor Bay 3*

**EVE ADAMS**  
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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

*Patience's Journal, Sunday, March 26, 1865*

*Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*Ever since arriving in a place they call Bachelor Bay, I've stayed out of sight and only attended socials when I'm certain no one will notice me. No one seems to give me a second glance, for which I'm grateful. I can't have anyone here find out what I'm hiding from, for if they did, I'd be branded and sent to the streets for certain. I stand in the corner, in the shadows, as I watch the brides dance with the men. Oh, my. Even as I write this I must fan myself. The men here...they are all so big. Larger than life! My toes tap to the plinking of the piano, wishing desperately that I could be out there, dancing like the rest of them. But I'm not a bride. I'm not one of them. For that, I must be more than careful, for if any of them found the true reason I escaped Boston, I'd be on the next boat back for certain.*

\* \* \* \*

Adam Steele whistled as he strolled down Main Street's wooden sidewalk. Despite what some said about him and his moral character, there was no denying he deserved his title of mayor of the town sporting his name. The money he'd put into Port Steele had provided for a remarkable amount of needed improvements and gave Adam the upper hand in his dealings with the businessmen.

Bringing the brides to Port Steele had turned a tired little bay into a thriving port. He couldn't be more proud. He only wished he would

have thought of it first instead of the jolly straight-lacers, the Gallaghers. That way, he could have had a hand in the decisions made in regards to the women. But, since over half of them had already found a husband and the single men still outnumbered the single women almost five to one, he may just have to get to work on bringing over another round of brides to auction off between the Gallaghers and their ruthless cousins, the Pettys.

After checking his pocket watch, he quickened his step. It was almost high noon, and she always worked in the garden at noon on Sundays. He loved the way the sun glistened off her thick red waves, the way her freckled cheeks warmed with color as she busied herself amongst the greens, the way she made his entire body tight and his skin way too sensitive whenever he saw her.

“Good day, Mr. Steele.”

Adam nodded at the passerby. Jason? Justin? Joseph? He couldn’t remember, nor did he care.

“Do try to keep up, Raven.” Adam made the comment to his manservant loud enough for the passerby to hear.

Raven audibly growled. “Yes, sir.”

“Care for a cut, Mr. Steele?”

“Not today.” Adam smiled politely at the town’s barber. The rotund man sat in front of his shop, puffing on his pipe and taking in the first rays of sun any of them had seen in close to a month. March always brought precarious weather, and having the sun out only made this day even better.

The ground had thawed from the effects of winter, leaving everything soggy and the roads in serious need of repair. No doubt he’d have to address that at the next town hall meeting.

Finally, Hattie Red’s inn came into his view. Adam stepped off the walkway and sank up to the ankles of his boots in the mud from the thawed streets. He tossed a glance back at Raven.

“These are my favorite shoes. Perhaps after you wash them, you wouldn’t mind polishing them up.”

Raven narrowed his dark gaze. “Yes, sir.” Once they were both safely out of earshot, he added, “Right after I shove them up your ass.”

Adam grinned and shrugged. “Why can’t I have a little fun?”

“At my expense?”

“You’re taking it too seriously. When we came to this unyielding rock, we both agreed to this.”

“What? To humiliate me?”

“Quit being so dramatic, Raven. You are full Sioux.”

“No shit? And I thought I just tanned very well.”

Adam narrowed his gaze at his brother. “Tease if you will, but no one is going to allow an Indian to be in any position of power. I don’t carry the traits as obviously as you.”

“Yet you also have our father’s blood running through your veins. Appearance should not mark the man. His actions should.” He eyed Adam knowingly.

Adam stepped out of the mud and onto the grassy area he’d worn a path in ever since spotting the mouthwatering redhead for the very first time. Raven followed him and stopped in the shadows along with Adam so they could watch the woman without being discovered.

“Let me guess, you’re angry at me for allowing that extra shipment with the Pettys last week. The truth of the matter is, they pay better. If it weren’t for the Gallaghers bringing over those brides to keep their men here, they’d be penniless by now.”

“You should treat them fairly.”

“My dear brother, there is nothing fair about business.”

“The Gallaghers and Pettys are family.”

“They aren’t *our* family.”

“But they are to each other. Families shouldn’t fight the way they do. They should at least treat each other fairly.”

“Is that a personal insult? I treat you fairly.”

“You treat me like a manservant,” Raven countered in a growl and set his jaw as he focused his attention on the backyard of the inn.

“Because you are.” When Raven slowly scraped that heated look across his brother’s face, Adam put up his hands in surrender, knowing all too well that he’d pushed Raven too far. “In public only. You know very well that I’ll clean my own shoes.”

“Perhaps you should clean mine as well.”

“I’ll make you lick the mud off and then beat you with them first. You may be older, but I’m meaner.”

The corner of Raven’s lips curled up into a grin.

They waited in silence, both watching the backyard garden. After an eternity of waiting, Adam checked his pocket watch and said, “She’s late.”

“Maybe she actually went to church.”

Adam chuckled softly. “This woman doesn’t attend the socials. She is rarely seen in town. I haven’t even seen her at any of the plethora of weddings held over this past year. I somehow doubt she’d be present at something as public as church.”

“Which tells us what?”

They exchanged glances and said in unison, “She’s hiding something.”

\* \* \* \*

Patience Weber waited until the last of the carriages pulled away from the inn, all occupants seemingly focused on confessing, and then repenting, their sins. She, on the other hand, would rather relish in her sins than have them forgiven.

Once the last carriage disappeared down the muddy streets of Port Steele, Patience stole a glance around before running out into the garden behind the giant inn housing all the remaining brides-to-be. Hattie Red’s inn had the most incredible back lot for a garden. No one seemed the wiser as Patience groomed and cared for the tender seeds until they grew into ripe greens.

But Patience knew better. At meals, she’d caught Hattie watching

her more than once, studying her as if trying to read her thoughts.

It had been a good run, but Patience knew when to say when. For close to a full year, she'd lived under the protection of Hattie's roof, keeping to herself and making sure no man noticed her, let alone came to call.

And for what? How much longer could she possibly do this?

Patience pushed her guilt to the back of her mind. Little seedlings, reaching for the shy sun, had begun to poke out of the earth in their eager need to grow. She gently brushed their dirt aside to assist them in their quest, all the while pride swelling in her chest from knowing that she'd raised them from nothing but seeds.

She pulled up her skirts and carefully stepped around the baby seedlings, using the surrounding fence for support.

That's when she first felt them.

Jerking to a stop, she stiffened and whipped around when heat prickled her neck, crawling around her flesh and coiling tightly as it attacked her nipples. The tingling sensation grew to an uncomfortable burn as it descended downward, this time centering between her legs. What an odd reaction.

That's when she first saw them.

Two massive figures stood in the shadows, watching her. *Men*.

Her heart painfully skipped a beat. Why would anyone be watching her? She'd been so careful.

She should run. Hide. Something to get away from them. But she already knew it was too late and, frankly, she was tired of running, tired of hiding. She'd successfully avoided every man's attention for so long. Too long.

Watching in the background as bride after bride took her husband, to have and to hold until death do them part, weighed heavy on Patience's mind. She wanted that. She wanted to dress in a beautiful gown and stand up in front of the entire town as she proudly took her husband's name. She wanted to feel her body ripen with a child at least a dozen times.

She wanted it all—the fairy tale.

*This time.*

Lizzie Gallagher had it all. Her sister, Olivia, did as well. So many brides had found their happily ever after here.

Would Patience Weber?

She glanced back at the men veiled in mystery. Instead of being overcome with fright, sharp pangs of longing shot through her, fisting her womb and heating her vagina. Why would complete strangers, hidden in shadow no less, have such an overwhelming effect on her?

She faced them and placed both hands on the fence. She tilted her head as she tried to focus on them, but the buildings flanking them hid them too well.

What did they want? Why were they just standing there?

Should she say something? Would that seem too forward? She couldn't very well yell across the way for them to join her, and she couldn't be brazen enough to approach them.

Or could she?

The entire town shut down when everyone attended church. She only spotted a few people out. If she walked through the gate and pretended to work the laces of her boot, just maybe they'd find the gesture an invitation.

With a deep breath for encouragement, Patience pushed the gate open. The whine of the rusty springs protesting against the movement washed heated chills up her spine. She took a step forward and then stopped when the distinctive sound of material ripping held her still.

She whipped around to see her skirts wrapped around one of the loose fence boards, the nail now sticking through a hole in the fabric. Closing her eyes, she muttered a very unladylike curse.

Kneeling down, she pulled at her skirts, but when they only ripped more, she cursed again. This couldn't be happening. These were her last good skirts, and she didn't have any money to go buy material for more.

The nail glistened in the sun, teasing her, proving to her that it had

a nice, firm hold on her skirts and had no intention of letting them go. She tried to unwrap the material but that only resulted in more tears.

“No nail taunts me,” she told it and gave her skirts a firm yank. The nail, fearing her wrath, released, and she stumbled back. She would have fallen straight on her backside if the tree hadn’t stopped her.

She turned and had to crane her neck as her gaze traveled up the front of a mountain of a man with shoulders large enough to block out the sun. His perfectly groomed black hair emphasized his strong, almost savage features. High cheekbones, a rigid, square jaw, and a fierce glimmer in his eyes. *Oh, his eyes.* The color of the darkest chocolate, they made her heart thump in her chest until the entire world spun around them. Her mouth watered at the delicious sight.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

Patience, abruptly coming to her senses, jumped out of the man’s arms as if he’d just burned her. In a way he had. Violent heat from his touch oozed up from wherever their bodies met and slapped her cheeks before tingling across her skin in waves.

Not knowing what else to do, she found a sudden interest in the style of her hair and patted at it to make sure the pins were still in place. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Once she stepped back, she took in the rest of him. He was a giant. At five foot seven, she held her own, but this man dwarfed her. Snug black trousers hugged his well-defined legs. Even beneath his suit coat, his massive shoulders held her attention.

She sucked in her bottom lip and bit down to stop herself from audibly moaning. Those snug bottoms cupped the bulge between his legs and drove a furious blush racing across her face.

What was the matter with her? She acted no better than a woman of ill repute. She should be ashamed of herself.

But she wasn’t and couldn’t even begin to explain why.

“It looks like you have a nasty hole.”

Her jaw fell open. “I beg your pardon!”

The man's glorious lips curled into the whisper of a grin as he pointed at the rip. "Your skirts, ma'am. I'm only referring to your skirts."

The heat of her embarrassment caught fire, and she closed her eyes to ward off the shake in her voice. "Of course."

"At least you weren't wearing your Sunday best."

Patience lowered her gaze and waited for the wave of humiliation to pass. These really were her Sunday best. And Monday. And every other day of the week. "At least."

"May I have the pleasure of knowing your name?"

She thought about lying, but she'd never been gifted at telling stories. It would, no doubt, backfire on her. "Patience Weber."

The man took her hand and brought it up to his mouth. He didn't falter when he brushed his lips across knuckles darkened by dirt. "Mmm. Earthy."

The feel of his breath tickled her hand and bolted up her arm. Blisters of chills sprouted up all over her flesh and caught her off guard. She didn't want to pull away and he didn't make any effort to, so they stood there, staring at each other, his hand holding hers, until another giant appeared next to him and cast a shadow over her. She jerked her hand back as she glanced up at him.

A gasp escaped her before she could stop herself. He was even bigger than the first man. Straight, midnight-black hair fell loose around his square shoulders. His deeply tanned face, so arrogant with its fierce features, only emphasized his eyes.

Patience did a double take. They had the same eyes. Beautiful, dark, sensuous. When he took a step toward her, she staggered back. "W-Who—"

"This is Raven." The first man set his jaw and thinned his lips as he glared at the darker man. "He's my manservant. Raven, meet Patience Weber."

Raven narrowed his gaze but didn't remove it from her. He gave her a single polite nod before stepping back and standing behind the



first man, but not without first releasing a very audible, very intense growl that had every cell in Patience's body humming.

"Pleased to meet you." *Pleased, indeed.* He was like candy for her eyes. His skin, the color of dark caramel, only enticed her more and made her mouth water.

The first man spoke. "Forgive me if this seems forward, but do you currently have a suitor?"

*Oh, no.* Should she lie and say yes? That would stop him from getting any closer, and from that dark, wicked look in those eyes, he intended on getting very close.

"Suitor. Yes, yes, I do."

The man spiked an ebony brow and turned to Raven. "It seems I'm too late." When he turned and rested that powerful gaze back on her, Patience held her breath. "Or perhaps he is more of some healthy competition. What's his name? I'm sure I know him."

"I'm sure you don't."

"It isn't that big of a town, Miss Weber."

Enough. She couldn't afford to lose her head now, not when she had made it almost a year without anyone noticing her. She headed in the opposite direction, hoping to make it past the protection of the gate without another accosting from the nail.

She reached the safety of the gate and pushed through before glancing behind her. Just as she feared, they both watched her with intent, with a primal hunger that loomed in their equally dark gazes.

"I wish you good day, gentlemen."

"Not so fast."

Not wanting to seem rude, she paused at the gate when she really wanted to run back into the house and hide under her covers until they both went away. She didn't appreciate the way her body responded to them, the way her nipples tightened, the way an angry throbbing pulsed between her legs, drenching her drawers.

"A name, Miss Weber."

*Think.* "John." There had to be several Johns in the town. It was,

after all, a common name.

Amusement danced in his gaze as he regarded her. "Does John have a last name?"

"Not that it's any of your business."

"Oh, but it is."

"And why is that?"

"If I'm to kill a man over you, I'd like to make sure I have his name correct on his tombstone." He winked and added, "If it comes to that."

Shock plunged through her body. "Surely, you can't be serious."

Raven spoke up. "Oh, I assure you, he most definitely is."

"Thank you, Raven. Now, Miss Weber, his last name, if you please."

"John."

"That was his first name," Raven pointed out, clearly amused at her frustration.

"Son. His name is John Johnson." Oh, she hoped she hadn't just gotten some stranger in trouble with this man. Or worse, with his own wife. Patience swallowed thickly. "And we are madly in love. Wildly in love. He'll be asking for my hand any day."

He darted a quick glance to Raven, who had the same amused curl in his lips, before snapping attention to her. "John Johnson. Are you sure about that?"

"Most definitely. Don't you believe me?"

"Not at all," he crooned.

For the second time since meeting him, her mouth fell open. "How dare you call me a liar right to my face."

"Would you rather I do it behind your back?"

He had a point. She snapped her mouth shut as her answer.

"Miss Weber, there are only two reasons for you to lie about dear John Johnson. One, you really do have a suitor and his identity must remain hidden for a number of scandalous reasons. Or two, you don't like me and instead of honoring me with the truth, you find it easier to

lie. Which is it?"

Patience pinned her glare to him with determined precision. There were so many other reasons to lie, reasons she wouldn't dare give. "Good day, sir."

And, as if his rudeness hadn't been enough, the ruthless stranger had the gall to smile and smile wide. "Good day, Miss Weber. I'll see you at the next social gathering."

Like hell he would.

## Chapter 2

*Patience's Journal, Saturday, April 1, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*Hattie is holding another dance tonight and for the first time, I'm excited to attend. Amelia Prescott was gracious enough to loan me a brilliant green dress that, I must admit, fits perfectly. The rain has returned, and the women in the house have all fallen into a melancholy. At least the anticipation of another dance seems to have lifted everyone's spirits. I can't stop thinking about that handsome stranger and his delectable manservant, Raven. Why the stranger never gave me his name puzzles me and makes me believe he did so purposely. Just what is he hiding? Could it be anything worse than my secret?*

\* \* \* \*

Patience pinched at her cheeks and bit at her lips to give herself more color. Constance Kendall scurried around the dance hall, fussing with the ladies to make sure they all looked their best. As the acting voice for half of the brides, Constance pretended to take her role very seriously. But Patience knew better. She loved the attention. Nothing more.

She hated sharing a room with the likes of Constance. She kept Patience up night after night filling her ears with gossip she claimed she'd heard from Lucy, another bride living at Hattie's Inn until she married. Patience knew better. Lucy had a heart of gold and would

never say the mean, spiteful things falling from Constance's lips. No, what she had to say came straight from her cold, black heart.

"Emily! Stop eating already. You barely fit into your dress as it is." Constance threw a fit and stomped over to the traumatized woman. She slapped the finger sandwich out of Emily's hands. "You certainly won't attract a husband if you have spinach in your teeth. Go brush again."

With tears in her eyes, Emily hurried out of the room, her face in her hands. Patience shook her head as she narrowed her gaze on Constance. *What a wretched woman.* She favored that scoundrel, Miles Petty. Everyone knew it from the way her pretty green eyes lit up whenever the man paid a visit to the inn. Patience had only met him once, but that was enough. The man gave new meaning to reprehensible. More than once, Patience had caught his roaming gaze tracing her frame. She made it a point to keep her distance when she knew Mr. Petty was paying Constance a call.

Constance had mentioned the town mayor, Adam Steele, but Patience had never seen him. If he was anything like Miles Petty, Patience would rather it stay that way.

"I wish she would just marry already," Amelia Prescott said under her breath as she walked up and stood next to Patience. With blonde hair and bold blue eyes, Amelia could have her pick of any of the men, and typically did at the dances. Why she hadn't settled on a husband yet had Patience bewildered.

"As do I. Then I'd get the room to myself." Patience smiled at Amelia, who giggled in return.

"I couldn't imagine sharing a room with her. You must have the patience of a saint."

"That is my name."

Amelia giggled again, this time covering her mouth with her hand. "I must say, it pleases me to no end that you've finally decided to come out of your shell."

"I'll still remain in the corner, I'm sure."

Amelia rolled those pretty blue eyes that captivated every man in Port Steele. “You are perfectly wrong. The dress looks divine on you. No man will be able to resist.”

Patience glanced down at the green cotton. It must have cost more than what one of the men made in a week. “I’m scared to move in it.”

“Oh, please.” Amelia hooked Patience’s arm with hers and patted her hand. “Lizzie didn’t mind. Since she has the same color hair as you, a fiery red that seems to have come straight from the sun, we both thought it perfect for you. This green matches her eyes brilliantly. Because yours are gray—or are they a pale blue? Never mind that. Did I tell you she has asked for you to keep it?”

“I couldn’t,” Patience said. She’d never owned anything this nice in her life.

“Nonsense. Lizzie insisted, and you know her. Once she gets something in her mind, there is no convincing her otherwise.”

“Must run in the family.”

Amelia laughed at the comment. “I should hope that is the only thing we have in common. My sisters—both of them—were too quick to marry, if you ask me. They should have enjoyed a few more courtships.”

“Do you not approve of their choices in husbands?”

Amelia quickly shook her head and widened her eyes. “Oh, heavens no. I adore their husbands.”

Patience glanced down at the dress again and sighed. She’d want to wear it every hour of every day. “The next time you see Lizzie, will you thank her for me?”

“Of course. She said this was no dress for a married woman since it shows too much cleavage.” She leaned closer and whispered behind a cupped hand, “But that’s what turns the men’s heads.”

Patience laughed. Amelia’s mind moved swifter than a high wind.

“Do you suppose there’ll be some new men here tonight? I’m growing weary of dancing with the same men over and over.”

“Perhaps you should settle on one,” Patience offered.

Suddenly Amelia's pretty lips turned to a frown as she batted those large eyes at Patience. "And spoil all the fun?"

They both laughed.

The first of the men arrived and flooded the dance hall, all grinning and eager to fill the dance cards of the women there. More than one searched the room until his ready gaze settled on Amelia.

"I must go. Promise me that you'll dance tonight."

"We'll see." Patience smiled as she watched the crowd of men swallow Amelia. Oh, if she only had the energy Amelia had. She was only two years younger than Patience. Surely two years wouldn't drain a woman of all her energy.

But Patience felt tired. Tired of hiding. Tired of being alone. Simply tired.

Constance suddenly popped up next to her, and Patience knew the woman had to have been standing behind them, listening in on their conversation.

"Hello, Patience."

"Constance." She kept her voice cool, polite, but nothing more. They'd roomed together since arriving in Port Steele, and Patience knew way too much about her to call her a friend.

"What brought on this sudden desire to be a joiner? There are no seeds or dirt here."

*Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that.* Patience hid her irritation behind a frozen smile. "I felt it high time I come and see what all the fuss is about at these dances."

Constance ruffled just like a bird would if petted the wrong way. "Well, I really wish you would have told me."

"Why is that?"

"I would have been able to help you make yourself more presentable. Honestly, Patti. You have dirt under your nails."

Patience's fervor wilted, as did her smile. When Constance saw her reaction, she smiled in triumph. And with that, Constance Kendall bounced away, a bright look in her evil eyes as she, no doubt, perused

the crowd for Miles Petty.

Patience turned away from the ever-growing crowd and drew in breath after breath. With a quick glance down at her hands, she spotted the dirt beneath her nails. She'd scrubbed for what seemed like hours until her hands almost bled, and still she couldn't get them clean.

What kind of wife would she make? She couldn't even clean up for a simple dance. Defeated, she swallowed hard until the lump hovering right at her throat fell back into the pit of her stomach.

She'd wait until the first song. When the dance floor came alive with men leading the women, all with joyous smiles on their faces, she'd slip out the door before anyone noticed her.

"Adam, darling!" Constance's shrill voice grated on Patience's nerves as the annoying woman cried out with mock delight. Could Constance Kendall be any more of an act?

At least Patience would get to meet the illustrious Adam Steele. She swung around to catch a glimpse.

And froze.

Every muscle in her frame stiffened, every joint locked in place. It was him, the man from outside the garden. Patience shook her head in disbelief. He couldn't be one in the same. From what she understood, Adam Steele was a ruthless cad of a man who paid no mind to anyone but himself.

He looked up, and their gazes collided. Everything around them faded to a blur. Those dark eyes that had haunted her dreams this past week stared back at her, swallowing her whole, leaving her gasping in her shock.

"I'm thrilled you came to call." Constance went on, completely oblivious of the air thickening between Adam and Patience. "I was just saying—"

"I'm sure you were," Adam cut her off as he passed her by, not once pulling his gaze from Patience. By the time he reached her, she felt faint, like she'd been the one chopping up the distance between



them instead of remaining frozen in place.

“I was hoping to find you here.”

“Mr. Steele,” she greeted in polite detachment. What she wouldn’t give for a fan to cool herself down. It had to be well over one hundred degrees in the room.

The first of the songs started up, and the dance floor filled with enthusiastic dancers. Adam turned and stood next to her, facing the dance floor, and folded his hands behind him.

“Lively tune,” he said as he tapped his foot.

“Indeed.” She stopped tapping hers.

“Is John Johnson here tonight?”

She looked at him and narrowed her gaze when she spotted his grin. Seeing no need to keep up the lie since he clearly never believed it in the first place, she came clean. “There is no John Johnson.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “Are there any other suitors, make-believe or otherwise?”

“Not at this time.”

“Then I take it your dance card is free?”

“Yes, but I don’t see—”

He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her out onto the dance floor, twirling her in perfect time with the music. He held her scandalously close to him and paid no mind to the way everyone else in the room kept stealing glances at them.

“You look beautiful tonight, Miss Weber.”

Patience swelled with pride. “Please, call me Patience. Or Patti.”

With a grin and a twirl, he nodded. “Only if you call me Adam.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” His wicked hands roamed to the small of her back and even threatened to travel further south.

“You’re the mayor.”

“And, as your mayor, I’m asking you to call me Adam.”

“Why are you pursuing me, Mr. Steele? Constance clearly favors you. She is—”

“Not the one I want,” he finished and twirled her again. When they settled into step, he continued. “I have a confession.”

“And that is?”

He moved closer and Patience didn’t know whether to push him away or pull him closer. His breath tickled her neck and ear as he spoke, washing generous chills across her skin.

“That day we met wasn’t the first time I’d seen you.”

*No!* She’d been so careful. Where did she make her mistake?  
“Oh?”

“I’ve been watching you tend to the garden for some time.”

She stilled. “For how long?”

“Since you pulled the first weed.”

That should have unsettled her, knowing this man had been spying on her for nearly a full month. Instead, she felt flattered and warm all over. “I don’t know how to reply to that.”

The music came to an end, and she stepped out of his arms. They held each other in their gazes until the next song started. He held out his hand, but she shook her head. With a shrug, he led her off the dance floor and over to two vacant chairs.

After they sat, he turned to her. “Tell me something. How is it that I’ve never seen you around town with the other brides? Believe me, I’ve looked.”

“Why were you looking for me?” she asked in return and to avoid answering his question.

“I wanted to see what you looked like in something other than the rags you wear while tending to your garden. I can see now that you clean up very nicely.” His roguish gaze raked over her body and left her panting.

She jumped to her feet, offended at his words, almost as much as she was unsettled by her reaction to them. “You rounder.”

Adam stood and put his hands up. “What did I say?”

If they weren’t in a public setting, she’d teach him a thing or two on how to treat a lady. Growing up the youngest of six children—all

boys except for her—she knew how to defend herself against the likes of this man. Her brothers had taught her well.

“Is there a problem?” Logan Gallagher appeared between them, his ever-watchful gaze bouncing between Adam and Patience.

Oh, no. Not one of the Gallaghers. She’d done so well at avoiding them. “Uh, nothing, Mr. Gallagher.”

Logan lifted his brow. “Nonsense. You are clearly upset, which doesn’t surprise me, considering your present company.”

Adam audibly growled. “Care to elaborate, Gallagher?”

“No, I do not.” Logan grinned and added, “Mayor.”

Interesting. The two men didn’t appear to care much for each other, Patience noted. She decided to play on that. Maybe having Logan Gallagher upset enough with Adam Steele would pull his attention from her.

“This man just said the most awful thing to me.”

Surprise flashed in Adam’s dark eyes and hardened his expression. “Like hell.”

“Watch your language around the ladies, Mr. Steele.” Logan crossed his arms in front of him.

“I paid you a compliment, Miss Weber.”

She lifted her chin in defiance, refusing to back down or accept his words as true. “You insulted my appearance.”

“Quite the opposite,” he retorted. “I told you that you cleaned up nicely.”

“Implying that any other day my appearance is unacceptable.”

“If you have issues with your appearance on any other day, that’s your problem, not mine. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Nice?” She stared back at him incredulously. “If this is you being nice, you aren’t very good at it. In fact, I find it rather offensive.”

He snarled as he glared at her. “You have no idea what offensive is, lady.”

“Enough,” Logan stated and turned to Adam. “Perhaps you’d like to dance with Constance. She clearly favors you.”

Casting Logan a thundering look that burned with anger, Adam shook his head and clenched his teeth until his jaw turned white. "I don't want Constance. That woman follows me around like a bitch in heat."

Heat slapped Patience's cheeks at his loose tongue. Logan bit back a smirk and shook his head to clear his amusement from his expression.

"Language, Mr. Steele."

Adam turned to her, softening his expression as his gaze roamed over her body. She took a breath to protest, but then stopped when her nipples spiked beneath the fabric of her dress and gave her away. If he noticed, he didn't make it apparent.

"Please accept my apologies, Miss Weber. It seems you draw out both the best and worst in me."

"It seems," she agreed.

"Perhaps another dance will put me back on my best behavior."

That charming smile weakened her defenses. The wicked gleam in his eye both scared and intrigued her.

"I'm afraid I must pass. All of this turmoil has given me a headache. I need to lie down."

Disappointment shadowed his eyes, and he pulled his lips into a frown. "Until next time, then." He walked away, not bothering to so much as glance Constance Kendall's way. He nodded at Hattie and disappeared out the front doors.

Constance whipped her attention to Patience and narrowed her eyes into a glare.

"Looks like you have an admirer," Logan said, pulling her attention back to him.

That's what she was afraid of. Having the mayor pursuing her would be too public. Having Logan Gallagher standing next to her, talking to her for the first time since her arrival in Port Steele, proved that.

"What did you say your name was again?" Logan prodded.

She thought about lying, but considering where that got her the last time she lied, she didn't bother. "Patience Weber, sir."

"And you are one of the brides?"

She gulped and lied right to his face. "Yes, sir."

"I don't recall seeing you at the welcome dinner, or at any of the other dances."

"There were so many women, Mr. Gallagher. I'm sure you've simply overlooked me."

He turned to her and lost all expression. "I've made it a point to at least learn all the names, if not the faces, of the brides my brothers and I have paid to make passage to Port Steele. I don't recall a Patience Weber on the ship's manifest. Did you sign a contract?"

*Oh, no.* She couldn't breathe and eyed the front doors, planning her escape. "Why else would I be here?"

"Good question and one I haven't quite figured out."

He clearly didn't have the contracts with him, so Patience used that to her advantage. "I assure you, Mr. Gallagher. When you get to your office and search through the contracts, you will find mine along with the others."

Logan set his jaw. "That would be seemingly difficult since the contracts are still in Boston." He eyed her carefully. "What was the name of the scribe you met to sign your contract?"

She remembered the women talk about the man and could describe him perfectly, all the way down the stains on his teeth and patch over his eye. "Mr. Ruppel. Frightening little man if you ask me. I refused to be alone with the man."

"There were others in the room with you and him, you say?"

"Several."

Logan nodded. "It would be difficult for the man to distinguish you from the other woman, then."

"Quite difficult."

"Miss Weber, I have a very perceptive wife, and I'm not all that naïve. If I ask Lizzie, she'll know off the top of her head whether you

are one of the brides who came over on the ship with the rest.”

Before she could stop herself, her widened gaze flew up to his. She licked her lips nervously and darted her gaze back down. *Think, Patience.* “Ask your wife, then. I did come over on the ship with the others.”

At least that much was the truth.

“And you came to marry one of my men?”

Uh-oh. She couldn’t very well lie to this man’s face. “Why else would I have taken the journey?”

“Why else, indeed.” He nodded at his brother Andrew as he grinned and nodded back. “I’ll leave you to retire, Miss Weber, and look forward to talking with you again.”

She tried to smile but gave up, knowing she’d have until daybreak to pack what little she had and be on the next ship out of Port Steele.

## Chapter 3

*Patience's Journal, Sunday, April 2, 1865*

*Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*I'm packing while I write this. I don't have much, but what I do have I plan to take with me. Logan Gallagher is already suspicious of me, and for that alone, I must go. I plan to slip away while the rest of the town is at church so no one will notice my departure. My dearest friend, Amelia, has snuck away from the dance to help me pack and, I fear, try and talk me out of leaving Port Steele. If I had reason to stay, I would. However, with no money, no place to live, and no way to repay the debt I surely owe the Gallaghers, I have no choice but to leave—before Amelia finds a way for me to stay.*

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sure if you talk to Logan, explain your situation, he'll understand," Amelia Prescott pleaded with Patience. "He's a very reasonable man. My sister wouldn't have married him otherwise."

Patience placed the ribbons she used to tie up her hair into her bag for the third time. As soon as she did, Amelia pulled them back out, as she'd done with everything else. What should have taken her minutes to pack had taken her close to an hour.

"I appreciate your concern. I really do. However, even if Mr. Gallagher is as understanding as you say, I can't possibly pay him back. It would take me until I'm old and frail to work off my debt."

Amelia grabbed the hairbrush out of the bag. "What makes you

think he'll ask you to pay off any debt?"

"Because he's a businessman."

"He's a gentleman first."

Patience looked at her but said nothing. When it came to business, men were one of two things—gentlemen or businessmen. They weren't one in the same, and a gentleman rarely stayed in business for too long. She placed the ribbons back in the bag.

"It's best this way."

"For whom?" Amelia pouted as she pulled the ribbons out of the bag once again.

"Am, please. I must pack."

Amelia stood and released a jaw-popping yawn. "I suppose there isn't a thing I can do to convince you to stay." She batted those brilliant blue eyes of hers at Patience. "Is there?"

"The only thing that could possibly save me at this point is—"

"A husband!" Amelia exclaimed and clapped her hands together.

Patience shook her head. "No, that isn't what I was going to say."

Amelia's eyes shined with determination. "Of course. It's positively perfect."

"No, it's not."

"Oh, and I have the perfect man for my perfect plan."

"Am, this is insanity."

But she'd already made up her mind. Patience saw the resolution in her excited expression. "His name is John."

Wonderful. There really was a John. Wouldn't Adam Steele love that. "You aren't listening."

"Imagine the look on Constance Kendall's face when another bride marries before her. She'll be beside herself with jealousy. Oh, Patti. This is simply perfect."

Patience's first attempt at marriage resulted in disaster. Before her husband deserted her for a woman from the South, he'd paraded his indiscretions right there for her and the entire town of Boston to see. She'd been a fool to stay with him for as long as she had. "I don't



want a husband, Am.”

“Oh, pishposh. Of course you do.”

Patience shook her head and gave up. Once Amelia Prescott started on something, it would take the power of God to stop her. She’d just have to make sure she slipped out before Amelia brought John to call.

“Am, I’m tired. Could we continue this argument tomorrow?”  
*When I won’t be around to protest.*

With a nod and smile, Amelia kissed Patience on the cheek and went to the door. “I’m traveling to Seattle in the morning with my sister Olivia and her husband.”

“Which one?”

They both shared knowing smiles.

“Both, I believe. Liv and I will be doing some shopping while Aaron and Jack tend to business. It seems Aaron Lambert is planning to open a bank here in Port Steele. Isn’t that splendid? We really are pioneers, and I’m thrilled that you’ll be staying in Port Steele, Patience Weber. You are one of my very dearest friends, and it would just break my heart to lose you.”

Amelia closed the door behind her, and Patience sank down on her bed before her knees gave out. As if she didn’t have enough emotions twisting around inside, now she had guilt on top of the others.

\* \* \* \*

“Really, Logan, you must let me have my manservant show you how to make a good cup of coffee. This is dreadful.” Adam Steele set his cup and saucer down on the desk in front of him.

Logan Gallagher glared at him with those intense brown eyes of his. They may have the men who work for him scared, but it took more than a stern look to sway Adam.

“Why are you here, Adam? Because I know you wouldn’t make a

special trip just to insult my wife's coffee."

"I don't know about that." Gage Gallagher stood behind his brother and crisply crossed his arms.

Raven audibly growled behind Adam. The tension between the Gallaghers and the Steeles thickened. Finally, Andrew, the most composed and charming of the Gallaghers, spoke up.

"Who was that woman you were dancing with last night? She was quite beautiful. I don't recall seeing her before."

*Quite beautiful, indeed.* Adam remained relaxed in his chair although he really wanted to straighten and make sure Andrew knew that Patience Weber was no longer accepting suitors. No, Patience Weber was spoken for.

By him.

"I'm not here to discuss my choice in women," he snarled.

Logan narrowed his gaze. "Then why are you here?"

"Constance Kendall."

Logan's lips curled into a crooked grin. "If you're here to ask permission to marry her, by all means, take her. She's a nuisance."

"I'd rather marry my manservant than that insufferable woman. When she isn't following me around, she's got Miles Petty in her sights. Hell, I think she follows me around just to make him jealous."

"Aren't you two like peas in a pod?" Logan set his jaw at the mention of his cousin's name. The Pettys and Gallaghers got along about as well as a dry forest and an open flame, and their hatred for each other burned as hot.

"Are you interested in why I've come or not?" Adam didn't have time for their snide comments. He had plenty of people in line to bark insults at him. He didn't need to sit here and take it from these men. "I'm sure the Pettys would appreciate my offer."

Andrew, always the peacemaker, nodded. "It's all in good fun, Mr. Steele. Please, go on."

But before he could, the devil woman herself stormed into the room, looking mad enough to spit nails. She skidded to a stop, and

bright color flooded her cheeks as soon as she spotted Adam sitting there. Behind her, Miles Petty casually strolled in and leisurely leaned up against the threshold frame, looking more smug than normal.

“Good morning, Miss Kendall.” Logan greeted pleasantly before stealing a glance at Adam, who raised his brow in return. Logan gave him a single nod in understanding.

“I wish it were, Mr. Gallagher.” She darted her nervous gaze between Miles and Adam, clearly upset with having them both in the same room.

*How interesting.* Just what was the wretched woman up to now?

“I’m afraid I have some rather troubling news.”

Logan leaned back in his chair and seemed annoyed at her distress, as did the rest of the Gallaghers. “And that would be?”

Constance cast a dismayed glance Adam’s way and held it there. “I felt, as the elected representative for the remaining brides, that I simply must bring something to your attention. Last night, at the dance, I saw a woman there I barely recognized.”

“I find that difficult to believe.” Elizabeth Gallagher glided into the room, looking as proper and beautiful as ever. Logan was a very lucky man to have placed a ring on her finger. Gage stood at attention as well as Logan, and Adam hid his smile. It was no secret that Logan and Gage shared everything, including a wife.

“Lizzie,” Constance greeted in forced pleasantry. “I didn’t realize you still had a say in the brides’ welfare.”

“Until the brides say otherwise, I will stand up to you and everyone else I feel are leading them down the wrong path.”

Constance dropped her jaw, and Adam hid his smirk. He knew he liked the Gallaghers’ wife for a reason.

Logan straightened in his chair. “We are in the middle of a business meeting, Miss Kendall. Speak your business.”

She looked at Adam again, but this time something else flashed in those deep green eyes. It wasn’t distress. It was malicious determination. “There is no record of a Patience Weber on the ship’s

manifest.”

The three Gallagher brothers in the room all stiffened, as did the rest of the occupants of the room—except Constance and Miles, of course. Adam watched them both carefully. They’d exchanged several quick glances. Miles was calm, too calm, and although a gifted actress, the gleam in Constance’s eye gave her away.

Logan turned to Lizzie. “You know her, don’t you?”

Lizzie thinned her lips at Constance. “Yes, I know Patti.”

“And she came over on the ship with you?”

“That she did.”

Satisfied with his wife’s answer, Logan turned to Constance. “I’m afraid you must be mistaken, Miss Kendall.”

“I assure you,” Miles said as he stepped forward. “She’s not.” He pulled out the ship’s manifest and dropped it down on the desk under Logan’s nose.

“How did you get your filthy hands on this?”

Miles spiked his dirty blond brow as his cold gray eyes shined. “It’s a matter of public record, cousin.”

“Logan?” Lizzie asked in a small voice after he’d spent several tense moments reading through the manifest.

Logan shook his head. “She’s not here.” He glanced up at Gage. “There’s no record of her.”

“Let me see that.” Gage took the manifest and read the open page then flipped a few pages before and then after, carefully reading each name. He then set the manifest on the desk. When Andrew went to grab it, Gage muttered, “Don’t bother. Logan is right. She’s not there.”

“Then how did she come to be on that ship?” Andrew asked.

“A stowaway,” Constance practically cried, her expression a cross between disturbed and delighted. “Patience Weber is not a Bachelor Bride.”

## Chapter 4

*Patience's Journal, Sunday, April 2, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*Just my luck. No ships were scheduled to leave port today, so I'm forced to remain in Port Steele another day. I'm sure shipping will resume tomorrow, and I'll be on the first boat no matter the destination, even if it is Boston. The wayward man I used to call my husband is surely living somewhere down South, along with all of the other traitors who have changed sides. Whether the others abandoned their loyalty to the North over a woman is not my business. The fact that I wasn't enough to keep my husband loyal, to me or to the North, is more than sufficient to weigh on my mind night and day without introducing additional strains on my already overwrought nerves.*

\* \* \* \*

A knock on the door startled Patience, and she slammed her journal shut before shoving it under her mattress. She jerked her hands to her lap just as Constance Kendall waltzed into the room with an even more exceptional smugness to her than normal.

"Good morning, Constance."

"Oh, it will be." She beamed at Patience, her green eyes glimmering with spiteful intent. "Mr. Gallagher is downstairs to see you."

*Oh, no.* That was not good. Why would any of the Gallaghers want to see her?

“Which one?”

“Why, all of them! But it is Logan who is most, shall we say, intent on speaking with you.”

That was definitely not good. Patience couldn’t deny him or the others. After all, they paid for her room and board. “Are they meeting with all the brides?”

“Just you.” Her overabundance of glee couldn’t be a good thing. Constance Kendall only grew excited over two things--when Miles Petty came to visit, or when she was about to dig her claws into one of the brides who didn’t blindly follow her every misguided word.

“Splendid,” Patience said and stood. She had to find a way out of the inn without going through the parlor. The window opened to the rose trellis. It was most unladylike, but she didn’t have a choice. She had to escape before the Gallaghers put her into a life of servitude to repay the debt of her living at the inn without any intention of marrying one of their men.

“Just let me gather my thoughts. I’ll be down in a moment.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that won’t do. They specifically told me to not return without you.”

Of course they did.

She knew when to say when. Logan Gallagher had caught her last night at the dance. She was a fool to think she could have gotten away with living amongst the brides without a contract.

Damn Adam for noticing her at the dance. And damn her for wanting him to.

With a sigh that solidified her decision, she followed Constance into the parlor where not only the Gallaghers sat waiting, but the one man she vowed to never speak to again.

Adam Steele.

His dark eyes gleamed as he stood when she walked into the room and did wicked things to her resolve. “Miss Weber. Always a pleasure to see you.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Mr. Steele. I can’t say I share that

sentiment.”

“Now, don’t you two start back in,” Logan ordered. “Miss Weber, would you please have a seat?”

*And give them all an advantage over her? Not in this lifetime.* No man had an advantage over Patience Weber, not any longer. “I’d prefer to stand, thank you.”

Constance huffed behind her. “Positively deplorable.”

That did it. If she was about to enter into a life of servitude where she’d be forced to hold her tongue against this woman, she had to at least tell her exactly what she thought of her once.

“Constance Margaret Kendall, from the day we stepped off that boat, you have been nothing but a mean, spiteful biddy whose sole intent is to make others suffer so you feel better about yourself. Every acquaintance you’ve made here was to further your place with the brides as well as the men. You have the integrity of a pile of dirt and the wit to match.”

By the time Patience’s tirade faded and her tongue fell limp, she was panting. Constance’s cheeks reddened as she set her jaw. Those vicious green eyes darkened on her. Although Constance Kendall’s beauty rivaled Amelia Prescott’s, the woman had never looked uglier than at that moment.

“Here, here.” Adam pulled Patience over to the chair next to him, leading her with his hand on the small of her back. He helped her into her seat and gave her a wink that only she saw. “I see I’ve made the right choice. Any woman willing to give Constance Kendall a piece of her mind is definitely the woman for me.”

She ignored the delicious chills that washed up her spine from his touch, too occupied with his words. “For you?”

“Miss Weber,” Logan started in. “It’s been brought to our attention that your name wasn’t on the ship’s manifest.”

Patience didn’t deny it. Instead, she lowered her gaze to her lap.

“Was that a mistake?”

She shook her head. They’d all find out soon enough when the

contracts arrived. Frankly, it shocked her that they hadn't already arrived.

Logan went on. "We paid passage for twenty-three brides. Gage checked with Hattie. It seems that with you here, we have twenty-four."

Andrew spoke up. "We could just have her sign a contract now."

No way in hell would she agree to marry a man simply in agreement to pay her way here.

No way.

"You've put us in a rather precarious situation, Miss Weber."

She closed her eyes as she waited for the news that would change her life. Would he make her a servant in his own home? Work for Hattie? It didn't matter. Whatever verdict he delivered would be better than having to work in Seattle at a house of ill repute. That would be her only other choice if they kicked her out.

"Do you have anything to say?" Andrew Gallagher asked.

She shook her head.

"So you don't deny it?"

Finally she brought her gaze up and rested it on Andrew. "Why deny the truth?"

Logan brought the attention back to him as he spoke, but he didn't look at Patience. His eyes had rested on Adam. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Adam gave him a single, curt nod. "I can have my coach here within the hour."

"Not until you marry," Gage said. "It isn't proper to have a single woman living under the same roof as a single man. I won't have rumors starting."

*Marry?* Patience jerked her gaze back and forth between Adam and Gage.

"And you are willing to repay her debt?" Gage kept his watchful blue gaze on Adam.

"I am."



“Then I suppose it’s settled.”

Patience jumped to her feet and backed away as comprehension slowly sank into her brain. “You—you promised me to this man?”

Logan nodded. “That we did.”

“You had no right.”

This time Noah spoke up. “You have no contract with us. You’ve been living on our expense for almost a year without any intent on marrying one of our men. You owe us a considerable sum in repayment, Miss Weber.”

“I’ll repay you,” she offered, not bothering to cover the desperation in her shaking voice. She’d rather live a life of servitude than marry Adam Steele.

“How?”

“I’ll work, night and day. I’ll wash dishes. Clean floors. I’m quite good at gardening. If given the ground, I can provide enough fresh vegetables for the entire town. Just please,” she pleaded, her lower lip quivering as her eyes flooded with burning tears. “Please don’t make me do this.”

“Mr. Steele has offered to repay your debt in its entirety.”

She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, but she felt the burn of his glare nonetheless. “At what cost to me? My freedom?”

Andrew, always the peacemaker, stepped forward. “You owe more than you could possibly work off. At two dollars a week, which is what we pay the rest of the help, there is no way you’ll be able to ever pay us back. At least this way, you won’t be married to a life of servitude.”

She darted an angry, heated glare to Adam. “Won’t I?”

Adam shook his head. “No, you won’t. Quite the contrary. I need a wife, and from the looks of things, you need a husband, if for no other reason than to keep you out of trouble.”

She thrust out her chin, having no intention of going along with this madness. “And paying for your bride is the only way you can secure matrimony?”

"I suppose I could follow in your graceful footsteps and lie."

"How dare you! I had no choice!"

"And you have no choice now."

Her anger made her pant as she fought to catch her breath. Why did this man infuriate her so? And why then was she always struggling to take a breath when he stood next to her? "I most certainly do."

He spiked that arrogant ebony brow. "And that is?"

"I could always travel to Seattle and find work there."

Logan shook his head. "Sorry, Miss Weber. Until your debt is paid, you do not leave Port Steele. And we expect immediate repayment."

"But you can't."

Gage lowered his gaze and released a sigh. "You've left us no choice."

"Then allow me to sign a contract and become one of the brides. I swear to you, I'll marry."

Logan looked at her, the determination in his dark gaze telling her he wouldn't be backing down anytime soon. "That's what we are offering you now."

"But the rest of the brides have more time. Please, offer me at least that."

The Gallagher brothers all exchanged glances.

Adam brought his hand up. "Enough. I've given you my terms. The offer expires as soon as I lose my temper, and, by damned, I'm close now."

"Miss Weber," Logan said. "You could do far worse than a marriage to the town's most prominent man."

"Offer me a contract," she whispered, desperate to find anything else but marriage to a man she hated. Logan shook his head. "That is not the offer. You will either marry Mr. Steele and have him repay your debt, or you will go to jail for stealing from us."

"Please make the right choice," Andrew said softly.

Her shoulders slumped as desolation overtook her. She melted down into the chair and stared at the splintered wood floor. This couldn't be happening. She had no choice. It was either marry Adam Steele or...What? What else could she possibly do?

"So it's decided?" Logan asked. "You agree to this arrangement?"

She couldn't bring herself to say it, so she gave him a single nod. "I hate you," she whispered to Adam. "I hate that you are forcing my hand."

She watched his eyes darken as they narrowed in on her. But something else flickered in that gaze, something that surprised her. Emotion, thick and full of sorrow, softened his expression. He stood and approached her, a steady throb in his gaze that had her heart pounding in time with it.

"I do wish you'd watch that sharp tongue of yours, my dear. As my wife, it is your duty to uphold the perfect image of the ideal woman."

"I'm not your wife yet." She hoped the hiss in her voice conveyed how she felt about this arrangement. "I will speak my mind, whether you approve of it or not."

Adam released her hand and marched to the threshold of the parlor before turning to address the room. "I will return within the hour, at which time I fully expect Miss Weber's bags to be packed and her waiting for me. Logan, see that the reverend is here upon my return. I've already wasted enough time on this. Good day."

Patience covered her face with her hands as the first of her sobs exploded. The front door slammed, announcing her future husband's departure.

\* \* \* \*

*What an inglorious bastard.*

He'd seen his brother perform some of the most reprehensible acts as a ruthless businessman, but the way he'd just treated his future wife

was inexcusable.

Raven glanced up at the sky as gray clouds rolled in. Port Steele's hint at spring had come to an end. Soon the rain would return and with it, mud, mud, and more mud. He missed the plains of the Dakotas. It rained, but only enough to feed the land and keep it lush. The rain here seemed unending and did nothing more than drown the land instead of nourish it.

Raven cleared his throat.

Adam thinned his lips and set his jaw, the stubborn bastard. "I don't want to talk about it."

Raven then growled.

"Don't judge me, brother. She pushed me too far."

Raven shook his head. He knew better than to say anything. When Adam got in one of his moods, he held entire conversations with himself.

"What I'm offering is far better than any life she'd get with any other man in this or any of the surrounding towns. Why can't she see that?" He stopped and motioned at the inn with one hand while shoving his other hand deep in his pocket. "She's being completely unreasonable. Forced her hand? Ha! I could have let her go into a life of servitude, but I didn't. And why is that?"

"Because you love her."

Adam took a breath to protest but stopped short as his shoulders slumped. He blinked at Raven, over and over, as Raven watched those words sink in.

"Because I love her," Adam repeated, clearly stunned at the epiphany.

"Why don't I return to the inn and help Miss Weber pack? I may be able to straighten out this mess you've created with her."

"Me? I didn't do anything more than offer her a new life."

"And I will do my best to help her see it that way."

Beaten, Adam gave him a quick nod. "You were always better at comforting our lovers than me. Should I take my time returning?"

“That would be best.”

With a sigh, Adam dragged his feet as he walked away.

Raven spun around and marched back to the inn and didn’t slow until he reached up and knocked on the front door.

Hattie Red threw open the door, her gaze sharp and exact as she drew in a breath, the burn in her unyielding eyes clear. She was about to unleash. As soon as she saw Raven, she softened and smiled through painted lips as red as her scarlet hair. “Raven. I was expecting it to be your beast of a brother.”

Raven widened his eyes and looked around. No one knew about Adam and Raven’s kinship except Hattie, as far as he knew. If anyone else found out, Adam would be ruined and they’d both be run out of town.

“Don’t worry, handsome. Patti is upstairs in her room crying her eyes out, and it’s only Logan and Gage who are still here. Noah and Andrew left to fetch the reverend.”

“What if one of them heard you?”

She waved off his comment with her pudgy hands. “When those two get to talking business, nothing else in the world exists. Come in. Let me get you something to warm your blood.”

“I came to see Miss Weber.”

“Call her Patti. Everyone else does.”

“When she asks me to call her Patti, I will.”

Hattie batted her overly painted eyes at him. “You were always the gentleman of the family. I’ll get her for you.” Hattie walked up the stairs, leaving Raven standing in the entryway alone.

He overheard Logan and Gage talking in the parlor and casually walked over to the wall, leaning in to hear them better.

Gage spoke. “If something like that passed here in Port Steele, it would be the beginning of the end. What right do they have to say who can and cannot be within the city limits?”

Logan snorted. “Why do you think I brought it up? I don’t believe Adam Steele will allow something like that to pass here. Doing so

would prohibit his shadow from accompanying him to town.”

Raven frowned. What could they possibly be discussing?

“Personally, I like Raven better than his employer. It wouldn’t be right to stop him from entering the town simply because he’s Indian. Logan, we have to do something.”

Raven stilled, the blood in his veins cooling as comprehension sank into his brain. There was an ordinance to stop people from entering the city limits, simply based on his or her heritage? Who would pass such an absurd idea?

“Agreed,” Logan said. “I’ll make it a point to take this up with Adam at the next council meeting. Knowing that corrupt judge, he’s already paid off half the town to vote for the ordinance. It’s best to stop this before it starts. I don’t believe any man should be branded simply due to the color of his skin or the blood running through his veins.” Raven knew there was a reason why he liked the Gallaghers. A noise caught his attention, and he straightened as he swung his gaze toward the stairs. Patience Weber appeared at the top of the stairs, her pretty pale eyes red from crying. The skin surrounding them was puffy, but she smiled politely despite the pain clearly swirling in her expression.

She stilled and straightened. “I was told I had an hour.”

“I came back to assist.”

“I don’t need your help.”

Hattie gave her an audible sniff to show her disapproval. “Patti, I suggest you show this man kindness. It isn’t his doing that you find yourself in this situation.”

Tears swelled in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She didn’t even bother to wipe them away.

Damn, those tears bit into him, each and every one of them. With every tear Patience shed, his heart pinched, his gut twisted, and he wanted to hurt his brother for making her hurt. It tore at his control to see her in such pain.

“I’ve already packed.”

“Then perhaps we may sit and enjoy each other’s company until Mr. Steele returns.”

Her hesitation told him that she didn’t want to, but a quick glance at how Hattie thrust out her chin at her and Patience gave Raven a reluctant nod.

“Take him into the dining room, Patti. There’s too much commotion around here with all of the girls getting ready for church.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Patience glided down the stairs, wearing the same ragged dress she had on that day in the garden. The rip in the hem had a mismatched patch covering it that looked like it hadn’t been sewn all the way on.

“You look well,” Raven complimented wryly once they entered the privacy of the dining room. He waited until she sat and then took a seat next to her, close enough to smell her mouthwatering scent, a cross between sunshine and promises.

Patience laughed and wiped at her cheeks. “I look a mess.”

He turned so his obvious arousal for her didn’t show. Just sitting this close to her had his cock growing, his britches constricting uncomfortably, his balls tightening with want. When she pulled her bottom lip in between her teeth and bit down, he swallowed a groan.

“I’m sorry you aren’t pleased with this arrangement. It isn’t Mr. Steele’s intent.”

Her pretty blue-gray eyes flashed with anger. “Whether it was his intent or not, that is the way I feel.”

*Oh, yeah. She was pissed.* “Perhaps if you looked at the situation differently.”

“No need. I see it for what it is.”

“And what is that?”

“My hand is being forced into a loveless marriage. I’ve been traded off like a bag of flour.”

He quirked his lips and shook his head. “I can assure you that is not in any way the truth, Miss Weber. First off, this will not be a loveless marriage. Mr. Steele cares a great deal for you, or he would

not have made the offer he did. Secondly, you look nothing like a bag of flour.”

She colored beautifully. “Thank you, but I’m not worthy of such a compliment.”

“You most certainly are. Forgive my forwardness, but you, Patience Weber, are a very beautiful woman. We are looking forward to having you join us.”

She whipped her head up and narrowed her all-too-perceptive gaze on him. “We? Us?”

*Shit. Shit.* How was he going to recover from that comment? “I live there as well.”

“Oh.”

Did he detect a hint of disappointment? *Interesting.* Raven leaned forward and decided to see if the glitter in her brilliant eyes meant what he hoped it meant.

He reached up and hooked a curled finger under her chin so that their gazes met. She didn’t pull away. Hell, she didn’t even shy away. She met his gaze with an intensity all her own, and the determination in her eyes made him painfully hard.

“Tell me something,” he started, his voice low and thick with lust. “Have you ever kissed a man?”

She colored. “That’s a rather forward question, Raven.”

“I’m a rather forward man, Miss Weber.”

“Patti, please.”

He leaned closer. “Have you kissed a man before, Patti?”

Her gaze lowered as she muttered, “Yes.”

That didn’t slow or deter him. He moved closer yet. “Show me.”

“Raven, I don’t think—”

“Don’t think,” he cut in. “Just feel. Allow me to kiss you, Patti. Let me prove to you that this marriage will not be a loveless one.”

“But won’t Adam be upset?”

He grinned. “Quite the contrary. As his manservant there are certain obligations I must tend to. Some of them are more pleasant



than others.”

She licked her lips and her breath whispered with his. “This is highly improper.”

“That it is. Do you want me to stop?”

Visibly swallowing, she then shook her head.

He took that as the invitation he needed and slid his lips over hers.

Rather than fight him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and scooted closer to him. When she moaned, he pressed his tongue against the seam of her lips and parted them. Their tongues met and danced, and this time, the moan came from him.

He ended the kiss with playful nips at her lower lip. When he pulled back, he nodded in appreciation at the lovely color that had consumed her cheeks.

She blinked her eyes open and looked at him. All at once, she jumped to her feet and stumbled back. “W–What do you think you’re doing?”

Raven remained seated and even eased back in his chair. *Oh, yes.* This woman burned hot beneath her cool exterior. He tasted it in her kiss. Would she be willing to share that passion? Would she be open to the idea of sharing her love with two men?

“I was told to make sure you were ready,” he answered with more than a hint of humor in his voice. “I believe you are.”

“Ready for what?”

He smiled as his answer.

## Chapter 5

*Amelia Prescott's Journal, Sunday, April 2, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*I've just heard what I thought was the most ridiculous gossip at church. My dearest friend, Patience Weber, has gone and secretly married one of the, if not the town's most prominent bachelor. They didn't appear to be on the best of terms when I spied them together at the dance. Last night Patti wanted to leave, and now she's married! I plan to pay her a visit and demand she tell me every detail leading up to her matrimony, no matter how sordid. My sisters tell me that I have to give her time to adjust to her new life before I intrude. The wait will surely kill me!*

\* \* \* \*

Guilt ate at Patience's conscience. She couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. What kind of woman kisses a man, and then less than an hour later marries another? Raven stood right next to Adam, his hands folded in front of him, seemingly content with her marrying another man when they clearly shared something.

What would Adam say when she told him? And she *would* tell him. She wasn't the type of woman to share something as intimate as a kiss and not tell her husband.

But he wasn't her husband at the time. Did that even matter?

Patience groaned as she paced inside the study. She'd already traced all of the books lining the walls and no surprise, there wasn't a

single book to pique her interest. Raven had disappeared somewhere with Adam, and they had yet to return.

She wanted it over with. Why prolong it? She'd done exactly what her cheating rounder of a husband had done—she'd not only had feelings for another, she'd acted on them. Lord Almighty. What did that say about her?

That didn't matter. In all truth, she hadn't kissed him because he had a rugged arrogance about him that held her breathless. She hadn't kissed him because she wanted to know if a man with such a mysterious heritage tasted different.

She'd kissed him in the hopes he'd run back and tell Adam, and the wedding would be off.

The double doors slid open, and she skidded to a stop, her heart in her throat. Raven walked in, followed by Adam.

Time stopped as the men stilled, both sets of eyes intent on holding her captive. She breathed in deeply, trying to find some sense of the sudden rush of liquid between her legs. Why would the sight of them pull such a reaction from her?

"There you are," Adam stated in a husky, soft voice. "Good. I had hoped we could share this time together without interruption."

The tone, so tender and almost timid, sent a rush of emotion flooding through her. Those eyes, those dark, beautiful eyes, softened as he gave her a small, awkward smile.

"Shall I set up in the room?" Raven peaked his ebony brow.

"No. I think we'll be more comfortable in here."

Raven gave him a single nod and took the large basket in his hands with him as he walked over to the front of the fireplace. "I'll make us a fire."

Patience watched him while he built the fire, the muscles in his back flexing and relaxing as he worked the wood.

"I know you think marriage to me is a punishment worse than death, but I swear to you, I'll put no one above you." Adam chopped up the distance between them with long, muscular legs and slowed as

he walked behind her. When he lifted some of her red waves from her neck, she shuddered but remained in place. His breath, so hot and wet as he stepped closer to her, brushed across her skin, and chills peppered her flesh.

Oh, dear Lord. His hard chest pressed against her back, and she leaned against him. She wanted to protest, to convince herself that, as a lady, she should show some sense of propriety. But this man, this perfect, striking man, had placed a ring on her finger. A wife was supposed to please her husband.

“Is that so?”

His lips trailed heated kisses across her exposed neck, and she closed her eyes as the rate of her breathing increased. “From the first day I met you, I knew.”

His hand had come around and ran along the flat of her tummy, pulling her in tighter to him. She cleared her throat to try and steady her voice as he released the buttons holding her top in place. “What did you know?”

“That we belonged together.”

*Oh, no. How unfair.* He shouldn’t be this charming, and she shouldn’t be falling for his words of endearment. “We barely know each other, Adam.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing, my love. Our hearts know each other.”

“H–How is that possible?” He’d moved his mouth up to the tender spot behind her ear as his hands diligently worked at her buttons. When he nipped at her lobe and then licked it to cool the heat from his teeth, she shuddered as sharp chills ripped through her, tightening her nipples and shredding her self-control.

“You don’t believe me? Look at the way your body responds to my touch.” Brazenly, he brushed the pad of his thumb across a protruding nipple, tenting the fabric of her top.

Shouldn’t she at least try and deny it? But with the way her body continued to betray her, he’d only catch her in another lie. She sucked

in a breath when he pinched her nipple, sending another rush of blistering juices to coat the tender flesh between her legs.

“Let me prove it to you. Let me love you the way a husband should love his wife.”

“But Raven is in the room.” She arched against him and closed her eyes.

“That’s the idea.”

She jerked upright, her eyes wide, as Raven stood in front of her, barely a breath between them. His dark gaze glimmered with a hunger that she felt as well.

“Raven, I—I haven’t told him.”

“I have,” Raven admitted as he framed her face in his large hands. Behind her, Adam slid her top over her shoulders, down her arms, and released it to cascade to the floor. He then removed her camisole, leaving her naked on the top. Raven worked at her skirts, unfastening each one and sliding them over her hips.

“He knows?” She pushed around to face Adam. The ardent need darkening his gaze rivaled Raven’s. “You know?”

“My love, Raven and I share everything.”

She swallowed thickly. “Everything?”

“Everything,” Raven repeated.

“Including your women?”

Adam chuckled, low and deep. “*Especially* our women.”

Shock plunged through her body. That shouldn’t excite her. That shouldn’t tighten her nipples and flood her pussy with blistering juices. She knew what they were doing and knew she should at least make an attempt to protest.

Did she want to? Adam’s gaze burned into her, leaving a trail of heat wherever it scraped, and Raven’s ate her alive. Their combined look had the power to destroy whatever self-control she’d managed to muster up.

Adam brought his hands up and framed her face, giving her the feeling of warmth and safety in his touch. “One word, sweet

Patience.”

“All you have to do is say no, Patti.” Raven ran his fingers over her shoulders before following the same path with his lips and tongue. He licked across her flesh as the hardness of his chest pressed against her back.

“But I wish you wouldn’t.” Adam’s lips glided across her jaw. She tilted her head back and granted him access to move down her neck.

“This is wrong.” Even as she said it, she didn’t believe her own words. She wanted this, all of this. She wanted to feel Raven’s hands roam her body. She wanted to feel Adam’s lips capture hers and take complete control.

“Your body betrays your words.” Behind her, Raven pressed ever closer, sandwiching her between him and Adam. She rested her head on Raven’s shoulder when his hands came around and cupped her breasts.

“H–How so?”

Raven pinched her taut nipples and nipped at her shoulder, drawing a moan from her as her knees wobbled. Slowly, ever so slowly, Adam pulled her drawers down, leaving her in nothing but her slippers. She didn’t even own a pair of stockings and waited for someone as properly dressed as Adam Steele to point it out.

But he didn’t. Instead he dropped to his knees, scattering kisses across her flat tummy, down her hips, along her inner thigh as he lifted one of her legs and draped it over his shoulder. She flinched as Adam’s wicked tongue dove deep between her dew-covered curls.

“Oh, dear God!” she cried as every rational thought floated from her mind. Pleasure ripped through her body with every lash of his tongue, every flick against the sensitive nerves resting there.

When her knees gave out, Raven held her up, whispering to her and feasting on her neck. Adam licked at her pussy, his tongue sliding in and out of her narrow slit, and she cried out when a tidal wave of sensation washed over her.

She shuddered as Adam devoured her flesh, driving her mad in his intensity. And then he bent down and inserted his tongue into the depths of her entrance with one powerful thrust.

And she shattered.

Patience reached down and weaved her fingers into his hair, holding him there and rocking her hips as a blistering climax smashed into her, splintering her bones and leaving her weak and limp.

“So sweet, Patti.” Adam lapped at the juices, greedily sucking up every last drop and pulling wave after wave of pleasure from her. Raven tugged at her nipples in time with Adam’s tongue, the two becoming one in perfect unison. “You taste better than I could have possibly imagined.”

“Perhaps a second opinion is in order,” she whispered brazenly, not sure what had gotten into her, only knowing that it felt good, felt right.

Adam rocked back and glanced up at her, his gaze dark and twinkling with ardent desire. “I love a woman who isn’t afraid to tell me what she wants.”

The men switched positions. She blinked down at Raven and gasped to see him naked as the day he was born. Slamming her eyes shut, she then tried to turn away, but when she felt Adam’s bared, hard cock at her lower back, she gasped again as her eyes flew open.

Raven, sweet, wicked Raven, ran his finger up and down the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh with one hand and eased the other up and down the large shaft of his rigid cock. His gaze gleamed as he looked up at her. He then bent down and ran his tongue up the length of her thigh before gently brushing it across her syrupy curls.

What Raven did was nothing compared to what Adam had started to do with his hand. He’d brought it down between her legs and probed a finger at her entrance. Raven assaulted her nerves, flicking his tongue and sucking on her flesh. Adam slid a slickened finger up, penetrating her without hesitation as she fought to remain upright.

“Do you like that?” Adam whispered in her ear, his voice thick,

full of hunger.

“Uh-huh.” She licked her lips and leaned against him.

“How about this?” He withdrew one finger, only to replace it with two so gently she almost didn’t feel it amidst the thrashing of Raven’s tongue.

The climax coiled around her womb, slithering inside her and tightening like a boa constrictor. The harder Adam thrust, in perfect time with Raven’s tongue, the tauter the tension attacking her senses grew. Higher and higher the tension grew until she rocked in time with thrusts of fingers, of tongues, and lost control once again.

She convulsed as the orgasm crashed down, robbing her of her sanity and sending a wave of blistering juices gushing down her channel. Raven licked and sucked as he consumed her entire being.

And then she collapsed against Adam’s chest. He lifted her into his arms and kissed her completely, dancing his tongue with hers as he walked her over to the doors. When she realized they were leaving the room, she stiffened and started to struggle.

“All the doors are locked,” he explained, sensing her tension.

“And the staff do not work on Sundays,” Raven added. He moved ahead of them, hurrying up the stairs, his cock almost purple and bobbing in front of him. He opened the first door on the left and disappeared inside.

Adam carried her into the room and laid her down on the bed beside Raven, where he’d already stretched out. He rolled over and took her lips with his in a hot, destructive kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and moved to her side to meet his mouth.

When Adam lay down behind her, she shivered. She felt them, their strength, their bond with each other, and how that bond was about to extend to her.

“Turn and look at me, Patti.”

She did, staring into eyes so dark they were almost black. They sparkled as he smiled, making her smile in return. She then whimpered when she felt Raven’s hands on her backside, caressing



her, spreading her. Adam kissed her deeply just as she felt the flick of Raven's tongue across her back hole.

"Know that everything we do is for you. Only for you. You are my wife now." He kissed her again.

Raven licked her backside, flicking and dancing his tongue, concentrating on the hole. And then, without warning, he pushed through the barrier with that wicked tongue of his.

She screamed into Adam's mouth. The sensation of Raven's mouth playing with her most forbidden hole, along with the realization that she, Patience Evelyn Weber, was being loved by two men, brought a new sense of urgency to the surface. She went wild, clawing at Adam as she pressed against Raven's tongue, begging for more penetration.

"I think she's ready," Adam groaned and bit at her lips. "Patti, sweetheart, look at me."

She did.

"We are going to love you together. Always together. Do you understand?"

She didn't understand at all, but none of that mattered. Behind her, Raven drove his tongue deeper into her rear and had her panting. "Oh, please, don't stop."

But he did. Adam flattened out on his back and pulled her on top of him. "Spread your legs. One on either side of me. That's it. This is going to burn, baby. But I promise you, you'll never want us any other way."

She felt the head of something blunt and entirely too large press against her back hole. Tensing, she widened her eyes as she looked at Adam.

"I'm frightened."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm here. I'm right here. Always." His lips covered hers as Raven's cock pushed through her rear hole in a slow, steady drive. It burned, oh, dear God, how it burned. But it felt better than she could have ever imagined.

She clawed at Adam as Raven worked his erection into her. Adam reached down and fingered the dewy folds of her pussy. She wanted to scream at the pressure of having Raven's heavy cock filling her back entrance without abandon, retreating and then thrusting back in slow, deliberate strokes.

"Oh, God, oh, Adam, oh, Raven," she cried and reached for her husband. "Adam, hold me. Oh, please. Just hold me. Don't ever let me go."

"Patti, my sweet, lovely wife." Adam rocked his hips up, and the head of his cock nudged against the entrance to her pussy.

Patience went still. She couldn't take both of them at the same time. They'd surely rip her in two. "Adam, it's too much."

He didn't slow as he pushed into her, stretching her flesh until she cried out as the pleasure that bordered pain took over.

"That's it, my baby. Take me. Take us both. Let us love you." Adam's eyes dilated until his blackened gaze disappeared behind his lids. Raven rubbed his calloused hands along her hips as he continued to keep a deliberate pace with slow, steady strokes.

Raven groaned behind her, his hips working back and forth as he stroked inside her backside, out, and then back in again, just a little deeper. "Patti, you are perfect. Absolutely perfect."

They increased their tempo in perfect unison, one an extension of the other, and the intense spiral consuming her, twisting inside her, curled tighter and tighter, driving her higher and higher.

Adam thrust in deep and she exploded. Her pussy clamped down, and she threw her head back, screaming in unbridled ecstasy. She pumped her hips, riding the waves of her orgasm, and screamed again as both men drove into her hard and fast in coordinated strokes that had all three crying out in their combined drive for release.

Raven shouted as he drove his life into her. At the same time, Adam stared deep into her eyes as he climaxed, spurting his hot semen deep inside her, his flesh dissolving into hers as they became one.

\* \* \* \*

Raven made no noise as he slipped into the darkened study, but Adam felt him enter. It had to be the full Indian in him to be able to slip in and out of rooms without notice. Adam never did inherit that trait from their father.

Swirling the amber liquid in his glass, Adam stared at the way the fire danced against the whiskey, illuminating it in his hand. He lifted it and took a long pull.

“Is she asleep?”

“Yes.” Raven silently sat down in the chair opposite Adam’s and stared at the fire. “If you would have stayed in the room, you would have known that.”

Adam ignored the jab of guilt. He should have, damn it. She was his wife, not just another one of their lovers. She was the woman he’d be spending the rest of his life with.

He took another drink off his whiskey and watched the fire lick and consume the logs, much in the same manner they did with Patience only hours ago.

“Why do you do this?” Raven stared at him, shaking his head.

“I’ll thank you to not judge me.”

“To hell with that. You aren’t in public, so drop the goddamn propriety act.”

Adam sighed and stared at the shadows dancing on the ceiling, his imagination conjuring up images of him and Patience wrapped in each other’s arms, both sound asleep, dreaming of the rest of their lives together.

He’d never regretted not staying with a lover of theirs until tonight.

“She’s going to be beside herself if she wakes up alone,” Raven pointed out.

Adam stood and threw the rest of his whiskey back, swallowing

over and over as the burn damn near brought tears to his eyes. He set his glass down on the table and turned to leave. "So lay with her. Do what you always do and take care of our lover. I'll do what I always do and transform back into the ruthless man everyone loves to loathe."

Raven stood as well, his dark brow furrowed in obvious disapproval. "She isn't just another lover, and you very well know that. She is your wife, Adam."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, more to Patience than to his brother, who wouldn't give a damn about his apology. The protection he'd built around his heart stacked back up, brick by brick. He couldn't allow himself to get close to Patience. It hurt too damn bad.

Son of a bitch. He hated that he couldn't have a lover without the memory of his late wife invading his senses. The fear of experiencing that pain again, a pain so deep it nearly destroyed him, always held him back.

"She isn't her."

"This has nothing to do with that," Adam lied.

"The hell it doesn't. Mina is gone, brother. Do not allow her ghost to haunt you now."

"I loved her, Raven."

"As did I. But she is no longer of this world. You have a new wife now. Mina would approve of her."

"Perhaps." It hurt to talk about her, even now, almost ten years after the fever took her. "I must retire. I have too much on my mind."

"You should have only one thing on your mind, brother, and that is being with your new bride. Do you have any idea how frightened she must be?"

"Frightened? Ha! That one? She may be many things, but she is hardly frightened."

Raven approached and his expression softened. "She is in a foreign house, married to a man she barely knows."

"She's fine. After what we shared tonight, she knows she's safe

here.”

“Bullshit. We satisfied a physical need tonight. You think fucking her somehow put her at ease? If anything, it only increased her unease. You’d be wise to find your way back into her bed before she stirs and finds herself alone. Take her, my brother, let her know that she is safe in your arms.”

Adam shook his head. He would never allow anyone to rely on him for safety, not ever again. He snapped his brow into a frown and glared down at the floor.

“Adam, please.”

He looked at his brother, and the vision of the horrors they’d faced as children came flooding back. Raven had done what he could to protect them, but as a full Sioux, he could only do so much. He would have taken on the entire world to protect his little brother. No one wanted the half-breed. Not accepted by his mother’s family. Not accepted by his father’s tribe. Not accepted at all.

Adam had learned over the years to distance himself from everything and everyone just to protect himself and ultimately, to protect Raven. His mother had died giving birth to him, which should have been his first indication of what his life would be like. His father never forgave him for that, not even with his last breath.

After they lost their father, everything changed. At twelve, he barely knew what it meant to be a man, yet as both his worlds rejected him, he had no choice but to learn and learn fast.

As adults, Adam reversed their roles and took care of his big brother since society’s bias against the Indians only grew as they did. Luckily, Adam inherited his light complexion from his mother. It would take a keen eye, such as Hattie Red’s, to see any Indian in him.

He closed his eyes and attempted to conjure up Mina’s image. Ah, Mina. A full Sioux, she was the only one aside from his brother who truly accepted him. It troubled him that he couldn’t see her in his memories. Instead he saw a lovely woman with pale gray-blue eyes and striking red waves. He opened his eyes.

“What would you have me do?”

“Release her memory.”

“I can’t, Raven. I–I just can’t.”

“If that is your decision,” Raven said with reluctance. “But I refuse to allow a memory to rule my actions. Patti is real, Adam, and she’s here. She is your wife, and I see love growing in her eyes. I pray you finally bury Mina and start to live again. Good night.”

The thought of Raven curling up with Patience Steele clawed at Adam’s gut like a feral beast. And yet he couldn’t bring himself to go to her. He could be her lover, her provider, and would never stray from her bed.

But having her rely on him for anything more than that scared the living shit out of him. He couldn’t save his first wife when the fever hit. He’d let her down and couldn’t do a damn thing as he stood by and allowed that fever to slowly rob her of life.

If he let Patience down, he’d never survive. If she looked at him with even a hint of the disapproval everyone else in his life looked at him with, it would surely kill him.

## Chapter 6

*Patience's Journal, Monday, April 3, 1865*

*Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*I woke up alone this morning and am so furious with both Adam and Raven that my hands are shaking as I write this. How dare they do this to me after what we shared! Is this what I agreed to when I married Adam? A life of loneliness outside of the bedroom? I have not one but two men who devote their efforts to me, but clearly only on their terms. I suppose I should have expected as much. I am a wife once again, and I have certain obligations to my husband, obligations I intend to follow through with...*

\* \* \* \*

Patience peeked her head out and looked up and down the hall before stepping out of her room and into the long, narrow hallway. Doors lined both walls and seemed to go on forever before meeting the giant window at the end of the hall. Her feet sank into the expensive red carpet lining the center of the hall, with shining hardwood floors flanking it.

Careful to keep her slippers from making any noise, she crept down the winding staircase and halted, her heart thumping wildly in her chest as the front door opened.

Adam walked in, followed by Raven. They both stared at her, and she stared back. She fumbled at the ties on the wrap she found in the wardrobe in her room.

“Good morning,” she said in a whisper.

Adam studied her with scrutiny. “Isn’t it a bit late to be walking around in your nightclothes?”

Heat slapped her cheeks. He spoke to her with such disregard and without a single hint of the desire that had thickened his voice last night. “I was just on my way to the study to retrieve my clothing.”

“Don’t you have any other dresses?”

The shame grew, and her entire face caught fire. “I do not.”

“Raven, see to it that Mrs. Steele has a new dress before the sun sets.” Adam walked past her without looking at her again. “I can’t have my wife parading around in rags. Patience, you will go to the mercantile and find material for a new wardrobe. I have an account there. Mr. Bartlett will be more than happy to fill it with your purchases. I’ll be in my office.”

Patience watched him go, disappointment attacking her in waves, crashing into her with every step of Adam’s boot as he walked away from her and slid the door to his office closed behind him.

“Is he always like that?” she asked Raven as she turned to him.

“Mr. Steele is in a mood today. It’s best if we do as he says and stay out of his way today.”

“Was it something I did?”

He shook his head. “You’ve done nothing wrong, Mrs. Steele.”

She looked at Raven. Even he seemed distant. He barely made eye contact with her., Instead he stared straight ahead.

“I’ve asked you to call me Patti.”

“That would not be appropriate,” he answered, his voice clipped, professional. “Mr. Steele is my employer. You are his wife.”

“Raven?” This was killing her. Why were they acting like this?

He finally looked at her and offered her a hint of a smile. “Would you like me to bring you breakfast?”

“Of course not. I can find my way around a kitchen. I don’t expect you to wait on me.”

Raven cleared his throat and stood even straighter. “It is my job to



serve you.” His eyes then twinkled at the meaning behind that statement. “As Mr. Steele’s manservant, I am also yours. I’ve already talked with the staff and informed them that Mr. Steele has taken a wife, and that they are all to treat you as such.”

Comprehension sank in and melted the anxiety tightening around her like a vise. They had to keep their proper images in front of others. It didn’t explain Adam’s actions, but it did Raven’s.

“Breakfast sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll leave you to change. Will you be needing an escort to town?”

“No. I can find my way. Thank you.” Patience hurried into the study and quickly changed into the clothes she’d arrived in. She then hurried back up the stairs to replace the wrap in the wardrobe. She studied her reflection in the looking glass. She twisted her red waves into a chignon before focusing on her eyes. Her usually gray eyes had turned a cool shade of blue, which they always did whenever she was upset.

And then she glanced down at her attire. Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Adam was right. As the wife of the mayor, she couldn’t very well parade around in rags. But, since she didn’t have anything else, she lifted her head and let out a breath. This was as good as it got.

She walked down the stairs and into the dining room. The smell of coffee invaded her senses and made her mouth water. Eggs, ham, potatoes, bread, and, of course, coffee all decorated the large table.

Raven stood behind the table and gave her a curt nod. “Your breakfast, Mrs. Steele.”

Mrs. Steele. That sounded so foreign to her. She took a seat and inhaled deeply. “This looks absolutely delightful, Raven. Did you make all of this?”

He laughed gently. The sound drilled through her senses and settled into her heart, warming it. “Unlike me, Mrs. Chang is a wonderful cook. You may thank her for this meal.”

“You don’t cook?”

“That is one skill I’ve never mastered.”

She picked up a piece of bread and generously slathered butter on it. “I should think, as a manservant, you would need to know how to cook.”

“Mrs. Steele, I have many talents, but alas, cooking isn’t one of them.” That gleam in his eye, triggered by the hunger behind his words, had her feeling the heat.

They fell silent as Patience consumed the rest of her meal. Now full, she thanked Raven for the food and went to the foyer to slip her boots on. A mix of excitement and careful hesitation coursed through her. The thought of new material had her hurrying to leave, but leaving the house, facing the rest of the town now that she’d married the mayor—under duress—kept her movements deliberate and thoughtful.

Should she tell Raven that she’d never learned to sew? Would he help her? Would he care? How hard could it be? She knew how to handle a needle and thread, as the several patches on her skirts demonstrated. But making an entire dress? The thought had her nervous and on the verge of a breakdown.

“Do hurry back. I plan to introduce you to the town council this afternoon when we meet.” Adam’s voice caught her off guard, and she nearly fell back. Straightening up, she then faced him. “I’ll need Raven here with me. We have to go over a few things before the meeting. Will you be all right on your own, or should I have you accompanied?”

“I’ll make do,” she answered.

He nodded, and the impersonal look on his handsome face tore into her heart. This was not the same man who’d made love to her last night, who’d pulled climax after climax from her. This was the man who’d left her side last night after he’d had his fill of her body, the man who left her to wake up alone and hurt and scared.

“I’ll expect you back in time for lunch. We will dine together before the meeting. There are a few things I’ll need to go over with

you before you are presented to the council as the wife of the mayor.” He gave her appearance a slow and steady glance. “Please find something suitable for the meeting. I can’t have you introduced in that.”

With that, he left her standing there, once again bruised by his dismissal. Wiping at her nose to ward off the burning in her eyes, she turned and grabbed her heavy cover. The rain had once again settled across the land and chilled the air.

Then again, that chill could very well be from her husband’s obvious disapproval of her.

By the time she made it to the mercantile, she didn’t have a dry inch on her. She stepped inside the store and hung her cover on one of the hooks next to the door.

“You’re dripping on my floor.”

Patience whipped around and slammed her hand to her chest. A giant of a man with hazy blue eyes and a handsome face stood before her. “You gave me a fright.”

The man frowned and glanced at his floor. “I own the store as well as the floor you’re now leaving a puddle on. And mud.”

As if she didn’t feel bad enough about her appearance, the burden of Mr. Bartlett’s look of obvious condemnation weighed on her. “The streets are swimming in mud due to this incessant rain.”

“That is not my concern.” He walked around to the other side of the counter and lifted his brow. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Steele?”

She stilled. “You know who I am?”

“The entire town knows.”

*The entire town. Wonderful.* She shook off the desire to run back out of the store and keep running until she found the largest rock to hide under. “I came to purchase material for a new dress.”

Mr. Bartlett’s cool gaze assessed her. “Clearly.”

How unkind. The man’s aloofness made her feel about as welcome as a dog in a house full of cats. “You are Mr. Bartlett, are you not?”

"I am."

This was the man Amelia's sister, Olivia, married? He seemed nothing short of barbaric in his demeanor. "Mr. Steele tells me he has an account with you."

"That he does."

His cruelty hit her with every word. What had she done to warrant such a brutal attack from him? "May I see the material you carry?"

"No, you may not."

She froze and blinked at him, her heart in her throat. "Excuse me?"

"Mr. Steele has an account, but you do not. I will not serve the likes of your kind."

"My kind? What, exactly, is my kind?"

"You think I'm a fool, Mrs. Steele? Adam may be a ruthless bastard, but he does not deserve to have a woman like you attack his accounts."

Tears smarted her eyes as emotions swelled inside her. She swallowed thickly and held his cruel gaze. Sobs of humility threatened to rob her of her control, but still she thrust out her chin and refused to back down.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Bartlett. I did not marry Mr. Steele for his money."

"Didn't you?"

"Is that how you see it?"

"That is how everyone sees it."

"You're wrong," she whispered, mortification burning into her cheeks and weakening her resolve. The brave façade she'd managed to present crumbled, and with it, her dignity. "You're all wrong."

"Are we? We see a woman who misrepresented herself to the good, honest men who paid to bring you to Port Steele. When the Gallaghers discovered your deceit, you found the man with the largest means and married him, all to pay off your debt. You are a disgraceful woman, Mrs. Steele, and I, for one, refuse to associate with the likes

of you.”

She closed her eyes as tears streamed down her face. “That isn’t what happened.”

“Am I to take your word for it?”

“No,” a man’s voice sounded from behind her. Patience turned and shook her head as Logan Gallagher stood there, his gaze full of compassion as he studied her. “You may take my word for it.”

Her chin quivered as her eyes flooded. As if marrying her off to Adam Steele wasn’t enough, Logan had returned to make her suffer further. She couldn’t stand it. Pushing past him, she grabbed her cover and ran back out into the rain and down the street, uncaring that mud caked her hem and weighed her down.

Torment blinded her, but she refused to shed another tear. No man had the right to treat her so unkindly, and she didn’t deserve it. Obviously the gossips had made their own minds up about her nuptials to Adam Steele, and whatever details they didn’t know, they’d simply made up.

By the time she’d reached the house, the humiliation was too much to hold back, and she broke down as she threw her cover to the floor. Damn this town. Damn her decision to sneak onto that ship and make the journey to this godforsaken land.

The first of her sobs tore through her, hard, angry, and relentless. She covered her mouth in the hopes that no one heard her, but the doors to the office opened, and Raven stepped out.

As soon as he saw her state, he raced to her side and placed his hands on her shoulders. She wanted to curl into him, but they were out in the open, and, as Raven was her husband’s manservant, that would have been highly improper.

“Adam!”

Her husband came running out of the office, took one look at her, and paled as he ran over. “What happened?”

“They were so unkind,” she cried and held onto him as he wrapped her in his arms. “Oh, Adam. They are saying such awful

things about me.”

He stiffened and pushed her back to look her in the eye. “Who?”

“Mr. Bartlett, the owner of that mercantile. And then Logan Gallagher walked in and only made it worse. I’ve never been so humiliated.”

He pulled her back to him and kissed her forehead. “Raven, ready my coach. We are taking a trip into town.”

\* \* \* \*

He couldn’t remember ever being so damned angry, and he’d been angry enough to kill before. This, however, warranted another action. He wouldn’t use his hands. This time, he’d use everything in his power to make sure Jack Bartlett and anyone else who had an unkind word to say said it to his face. And when they did, saying it would be the last thing they’d ever do in this town.

The coach barely came to a stop and Adam was out, pulling Patience with him. “I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Nonsense. You came to purchase material for dresses. I’m here to see that you are treated with the respect due my wife. Nothing less.” The annoying rain beat down onto his coat, running off in large streams and soaking through his pants. He hated the rain. If it weren’t for the beauty of the land when the sun broke through the clouds, he would have packed up and moved away long ago.

After today, he may still do just that.

They splashed through the mud and up onto the wooden sidewalk. He threw the door open and stepped inside, keeping Patience close to him.

Logan Gallagher stood on the outside of the counter as Jack Bartlett stacked a flour sack full of items next to it. They both paused and looked at him as he walked toward them.

“Mr. Steele,” Jack greeted with a charming smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Patience tensed and buried her face against his shoulder, which only fueled his anger. "I can't say the same."

He darted his gaze to Patience and clenched his jaw as he put up his hand. "Now, before you start in, I have something to say."

"Not before I have my say," Adam growled evenly, laboring his breathing to control the fury pumping through his system.

"Hold your tongue, Adam." Logan, who had been leaning on the counter, stood and nodded at Jack with a grin meant to ease Adam's fury. "Jack simply had his facts wrong."

Patience squeezed his arm and moved behind him. He felt her shaking against him and that only angered him more. With a burning glare, he nailed Jack to the spot. "You upset my wife."

"I'm truly sorry. Please, allow me to apologize to Mrs. Steele."

Adam narrowed his gaze. Patience stepped out from behind him and held her chin high as she bravely met Jack's gaze. His opinion of his sprite of a wife jumped exponentially. He held her hand as she waited.

*What a woman.*

"Mrs. Steele, I was wrong. Dreadfully wrong. I implore you, please forgive me for having such a foolish tongue."

"What changed your opinion of me in an hour's time?" Her voice didn't even shake as she spoke, and Adam's pride in her soared.

Logan spoke up. "I was on my way to the inn when I saw Mrs. Steele in here, so I thought I'd stop by and see how her first public appearance as Mrs. Adam Steele was going."

"Not well, from what I hear." Although Jack had apologized, Adam still felt the need to hurt someone for making his wife cry. No one had the right to be the cause of her tears, not even him.

"I'm afraid I fell victim to the local gossips," Jack explained. "Logan set me straight, and once I realized my mistake, I had every intention of paying a visit to apologize right away. But then you walked in and, well, here you are."

Adam drew in a breath to tell him exactly what he could do with

his apology, but Patience rested her hand on his arm and offered him a gentle smile that warmed her eyes. He frowned, baffled that she could find it in her heart to forgive so easily.

“You hurt me, Mr. Bartlett.” Patience stepped out from Adam’s protection and faced the source of her tears. “You were cruel and passed judgment without ever having met me.”

“That I did. I can assure you, it will never happen again. Please accept my humble apology.”

“I will,” she told him. She then shook her head. “But not for me. You were defending my husband’s honor vehemently, and for that, I know your intentions were true, despite your brutal delivery.”

Adam whipped his gaze from her to Jack. “What is she talking about?”

Jack reached up and scratched the back of his neck. “It really wasn’t anything worth repeating.”

“He questioned my loyalty to you,” Patience explained when Jack clearly wouldn’t. “In his opinion, as well as the town’s, it seems, I married you for your money. He was simply protecting you. It takes a brave man to stand up for what he believes.”

From the shocked look on his face, the way she explained it painted a softer picture than how he must have truly delivered the message. He nodded gratefully at her and then offered a smile. She nodded in return.

He didn’t like it. He’d come here to force Jack into an apology. Instead, the man had beaten him to it. On top of that, he had Patience complimenting him over it. The world had surely gone mad.

“I had started to pull out my finest fabrics to bring to you, some straight from Paris. Perhaps I can interest you in a green silk. It would offset your lovely red hair beautifully. Or a pale blue cotton that matches your eyes perfectly.”

She darted a quick glance to Adam, and the smile she gave him warmed him from his scalp to his toes and flooded heat to his loins. He’d never seen such a striking smile. It not only lit up her pale eyes,



it brightened the entire room.

“Thank you,” she whispered, the depth of her eyes swirling with thick emotion.

He covered her hand with his and continued to stare into her eyes, losing himself in the love reflecting in them.

“I definitely stand corrected,” Jack said and broke the spell.

Adam blinked and tossed him a skeptical look. “About?”

“She is as lost in you as you are in her.”

## Chapter 7

*Olivia Bartlett's Journal, Monday, April 3, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*My little sister, Amelia, tells me that our dear friend Patience Weber is now Patience Steele. What on Earth possessed her to marry a man like Adam Steele, I'll never understand. She seemed to have a better head on her shoulders than that. But, then again, perhaps living at the inn with Constance Kendall was a far worse fate. Jack tells me that they are surely in love, but I have my doubts. I've never trusted Mr. Steele. Let us pray that having Patience as his bride will surely turn the mayor from the man he is currently into the man he should be.*

\* \* \* \*

"Will you have time to fashion yourself a new dress before the town council meeting?" Adam eyed her skirts for the umpteenth time before glancing down at his pocket watch. He then snapped it closed. "You have two hours."

Patience gave Raven a quick glance and widened her eyes. He narrowed his in return. When she shook her head ever so slightly, Adam caught the gesture and tilted his head as he studied her.

"Don't tell me. You don't know how to sew."

Heat crept up her neck. Every woman should know how to sew, and she could, to an extent, but only to sew up holes and apply patches. "I've done my share, but never to complete an entire dress. I

wouldn't even know where to begin."

Adam audibly growled and shook his head. "How is it you've made it all this time as a woman without learning such an obvious trade?"

Another dig at her gender. She couldn't please this man unless they were naked. The look of sheer arrogance on his handsome face fueled her irritation. "I would wield a needle and thread with expertise if it meant using it on your condescending mouth."

His gaze darkened as it swallowed her. "Is that so?"

Patience restrained her smile as the coach came to a stop and Raven stepped out. He opened the whalebone umbrella before reaching inside the coach to help her out. The rain beat down against the canopy as they hurried inside.

"Does it ever stop raining here?" She handed him her cover.

"Occasionally, but I happen to like the wet." Obvious sexual undertones hung between them, heating her and charging the air until it crackled.

Adam pushed into the house behind them, shaking the rain from his hair. "Thank you for leaving me to drown."

Raven's lip twitched as he took his employer's coat. "I do apologize, sir."

"See that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to Patience, his heated expression dark and full of hidden meaning. *Oh, what an interesting look, if not a bit unsettling.*

"And for you, my wife, I'd like to take you in the study."

Her breath caught at his brazen admission. A whimper escaped her throat when he took a step toward her, that fire in his gaze burning with a need that she felt growing inside her.

"I have a few things to tend to first. Go to the study, Mrs. Steele. Try to keep yourself out of trouble until I arrive."

She dropped her jaw at his arrogance. Determination set her jaw as she glared at him. "I believe I'll go lay down instead."

He spiked his brow, and embarrassment smacked her cheeks. *What a terrible choice of words.* With each touch of his gaze, each wicked gleam in his eyes, Patience lost a little more of her resistance to him.

“The study,” he ordered.

“I’ll be in my room.” She turned to the stairs.

He grabbed her arm and whipped her back to him, holding her against him. Those eyes glowed as they imprisoned her.

Leaning down, he rested his lips a breath away from hers and whispered, “The study. I won’t ask again.”

“Perhaps this conversation can continue somewhere other than the *open foyer.*” Raven’s voice broke them of their tense spell. Patience pushed back and looked first at Raven, and then at Adam.

That roguish twinkle in his eyes tempted her. Dear Lord, he was handsome. Mouthwatering. Addictive.

“The study,” he repeated.

“I’ll see that she finds something to keep her occupied in the study until you can join.” Raven then waved his arm to have Patience lead the way.

With a steady breath, she walked into the study and turned as Raven closed the doors behind him. He held that same wicked glimmer in his gaze that Adam had been using against her.

*That same glimmer.*

*Those eyes.*

In an attempt to regain some of her control, Patience focused on the resemblances between Adam and Raven instead of her undeniable need for them both to touch her and ease this constant ache between her legs.

“Tell me, how long have you known Adam?” The walls had bookshelves that reached clear to the ceiling, and she glided over to one of the cases to give her hands something to do and so she wouldn’t throw propriety aside to attack Raven as he stood at the doors, watching her.

“Most of my life.”

“How did you two meet?”

Raven growled. “Perhaps you’d like to read.”

“I’d rather talk.” She licked her lips and bit down on her lower lip.

His gaze dropped to her mouth and stayed there. “Mrs. Steele.”

“Call me Patti. There’s no one else here, Raven. It’s just you and me.”

“We each have our position,” he answered, his words saying one thing, his raspy tone saying something else entirely.

*Fine. If he wanted to pretend they didn’t share anything more than the roof over their heads, so be it.* “Would you say that, as Mr. Steele’s manservant, you also work for me?”

He narrowed his skeptic gaze. “I believe I’ve already made that clear.”

“Splendid. I insist you answer my questions. How old were you when you met Adam?”

He let out another growl and set his jaw. Clearly, he did not want to talk about this. “I was four.”

“And Adam?”

“An infant.”

“Do you share the same mother?”

“No.”

“Father?”

He stiffened and looked away. Emotions slashed deep in his eyes as they clouded over. “If there is nothing else, Mrs. Steele, I must see to lunch.”

She’d upset him, and now she felt terrible. “Raven, if I’ve offended you, I’m truly sorry.”

His gaze found hers, and he paused, his expression soft as a storm brewed in those dark eyes. “I would appreciate it if you’d allow me to keep my bloodline to myself.”

Breathing out roughly, Patience shook her head. “Brothers. I should have known. Is there anything else you aren’t telling me?”

“Mr. Steele has very strict rules. Sundays are the staff’s day off and therefore the only day you will be shared.”

She frowned as her heart palpitated in disappointment. “Do you mean to tell me that we will only...” The sharp look on his tanned face stopped her from finishing what she really wanted to say. “We will only *be* on Sundays?”

“That is the agreement.”

“That’s not agreeable to me.” If she had to wait another week, she’d die.

“Take it up with Mr. Steele.” Raven opened the doors and slipped out.

She stood there staring in the direction of the doors and blinked several times. Surely that couldn’t be right. After the way they’d so thoroughly loved her last night, she wouldn’t be able to survive without feeling their intimate touches again.

She had to do something to take her mind off of Adam’s visit. Perhaps that was why he insisted on meeting in the study, so their meeting would stay proper. And boring. Now that she knew they’d only bed together on Sundays, her hopes of a sexual meeting died.

She huffed and settled on reading a textbook on how to draw up legal documents. What she thought she’d find boring actually fascinated her. She had no idea there were so many rules to writing something as simple as a contract.

“Interesting reading?” Adam asked as he walked into the study, Raven on his heels. She swept a loose wave of her hair behind her ear as she looked up from the book. They both watched the gesture with keen interest.

“Actually,” she said and closed the book before setting it on the table. “Yes, it is quite interesting.”

His lips quirked as he narrowed his gaze on her. “You find learning how to draw up legal documents interesting? Somehow, I find that hard to believe.”

His tone offended her yet again. She was female, but her mind

worked perfectly despite whatever her husband thought. Stiffening, she then thrust out her chin. Damn him and his belittlement. She'd had enough of it for one day, and quite frankly, she should never have to stand for it from her husband. If she had to spend the rest of her life with this man, he needed to know how far he could push her.

And he'd already reached that point.

"Mr. Steele, despite what you may think of me and my gender, I assure you that I am perfectly capable of not only reading how to draw up legal documents, but carrying through with the instruction and drawing them up."

"It isn't a woman's job."

"It also isn't the job of your brother to wait on you. Who made up such a ludicrous arrangement?"

Adam's gaze flickered in shock. "How did you..." He turned to Raven as his gaze grew hard. "You told her?"

Raven shook his head. "I did not. She came to the conclusion on her own."

"With your help, I'm sure."

"You will not attack him for this. I asked the questions, and, since you have him acting as manservant to us both, I ordered him to answer me."

His lips tugged into a little smile of disbelief. "You, my wife, are finding every last one of my nerves and threatening to snap them. I advise you to hold that silver tongue. We have something to discuss."

She stood and stepped toward him, challenging him. Bunching her hands on her hips, she let him know exactly what she thought of his order. "I will not cease to speak my mind, nor will I sit back and allow you to talk to me as you would your enemy."

"I assure you, my dear, if you were my enemy, I'd have far more colorful words to say."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least." She held her voice steady, thank God, even though that look he had in his darkening gaze did more than frighten her. It exhilarated her.

He hooked his strong arm around her waist and slammed her up against his hard body. With nary a breath between them, he rested his lips above hers. "Are you defying me?"

"In every way." Her voice didn't sound like hers as she purred her response. His touch awakened her memory of the way he possessed her last night, and it had her body humming in response.

"Raven, close the door," Adam drawled as he reached up and loosened his tie.

He held her tight, and she didn't even bother to struggle. If he wanted to fight, she'd fight. If he wanted to love her, she'd love him with equal fervor. She wanted this, to show him that he had no reason to try and control her and that his attempts were futile. She couldn't be controlled.

"Are you sure, sir? It's daytime and you do have a full house of staff here."

"It seems my wife is refusing to listen to me. I can't very well allow such disobedience running rampant, especially in front of my staff."

"I'm listening," she countered and lifted her red brow. "I simply choose not to follow your barbaric orders."

"Careful, Patti," Raven crooned in warning after he turned the lock on the doors to the study. "You are tempting him into dangerous waters."

She licked her lower lip and made sure to flick her tongue out enough to brush it against his. He brought his out in return and greeted hers.

"Adam." *One word. So much meaning.* She waited for him to look at her. When he did, it stole her breath. His eyes lost that aloof façade as he allowed her in.

And then he kissed her. No, he didn't just kiss her. He devoured her, sending spikes of arousal to attack the tender flesh between her legs in a shower of scorching need.

He weakened her resolve and shattered her resistance. She had to



have him again, had to feel his touch. She'd die if he didn't place his hands on her and love her, taking away the horrors of her morning.

"I love the way your pale eyes turn to an icy blue when you're upset with me." He bit at her lower lip. "And I am equally upset with you, my sweet wife. So much, in fact, that I'm afraid I must punish you."

That didn't sound good. She shuddered at the thought of what that might entail.

Raven cleared his throat. "Need I remind you that you have a staff?"

Adam reached down and ran the heel of his hand along the rigid bulge between his legs. "That I do."

*Oh, dear Heavens.* She couldn't stop her gaze from traveling down his impressive physique. Her mouth watered at the thought of the flesh beneath that fabric.

"Adam, you can't be certain they won't hear."

Adam lifted the corner of his mouth into a crooked grin and scraped that wicked grin across her body. "I plan to make sure she is adequately preoccupied while we deliver her punishment."

"What are you going to do?" Her chest heaved as she panted. Liquid pleasure burned between her legs, and her nerves throbbed angrily, demanding attention.

"You'll find out soon enough." Adam lowered her to her knees and motioned for Raven to join him. "Take care to keep her quiet."

And then he disappeared behind her.

Raven, without a sound, pulled out a semi-hard erection and began to stroke it right in front of her. A single drop of glistening, clear liquid peeked out of its tip. "Sweet Patti, open your mouth."

"You want me to take *that* into my—oh!" She didn't get the chance to finish before Raven slipped his cock between her lips. With Adam's urging, she fell forward to her hands. In one swift move, he had her skirts up around her waist and her drawers around her knees, leaving her exposed to him.

She was about to pull back when she felt the first strike against her bare backside. Gasping, she struggled, but Raven's cock grew in her mouth, and she sucked greedily, eager to taste him, to please him the way he'd pleased her.

The next light tap didn't strike her cheek. Adam had centered in on her dripping pussy and slapped it. She cried and sucked at Raven's cock as sensations she never thought possible tore at her. Her need for more gushed down her channel, drenching her pussy and giving away just how much she enjoyed this punishment.

Adam spanked her pussy again and a surge of fiery lust shot through her. She moaned and slurped at Raven's flesh in desperation. Just one more slap, maybe two, and she'd shatter.

But then Adam lashed at her with his tongue gently, too gently, and Patience rocked against him with a whimper. She needed more, so much more, or she'd die before her next breath.

Raven fisted her hair and powered into her, rocking his hips in steady motion as she took every inch of him. "Oh, yeah. That's it, Patti. Suck me. I'm going to explode. Take it. Swallow my life. Suck me harder. Yes, that's it. Yes. Just like that. Ah!"

Thick, hot semen jetted from the end of his erection and down her throat, and she swallowed all of the sweet, sticky liquid. Adam continued to lick her pussy slowly. Such torture.

"Please," she whimpered. "You have to give me more."

"This is your punishment," he explained in a rasp. "We will drive you close to release but won't allow it. Now turn around." When she didn't, he and Raven switched positions without a moment's hesitation. "Another reason to punish you, my wife. You need to follow my instruction."

She knew defying him at this moment as she knelt on all fours, her drawers around her knees, her skirts around her hips, really wouldn't be the smartest move. But that didn't stop her. "I-I take orders from no man."

"Raven, be sure to show no mercy. Now, my lovely, defiant wife,

it's my turn with that sweet mouth."

She took his cock between her lips and sucked hard, wanting this sweet torment to end and hoping that, since she'd already provided release for Raven, he'd take pity on her and allow her to come. With Adam focused on his own release, he wouldn't be able to stop them.

Adam thrust his cock in and out of her mouth as Raven licked at her back entrance. He swirled his tongue around her hole and teased, but never penetrated. She whimpered in frustration.

"Keep sucking," Adam groaned and held her head in place so he could direct the pace. Raven lashed his attack in time with Adam's thrusts, but it wasn't enough to break her, to shatter this torment constricting her to the point where she shuddered in need.

Adam drove faster, harder. The pumping of his hips plunged his cock in deep over and over, increasing his speed as his release grew imminent. "A little more. Ah, yes. Oh, my sweet wife. Just perfect. So perfect. Suck me. Harder. Faster. Oh, Jesus. Yes! That's—oh, yes! Jesus!"

He fell forward as his release consumed him and he spilled his life into her mouth. She swallowed and sucked harder, hungry for more. And Raven, the diabolical man, continued to lick her gently, forcing her flesh to swell but never giving her enough friction for her to explode.

Adam dropped to his knees and framed her face with his hands. "You, my sweet wife, are absolutely incredible. I fear if I stay here with you, I will give in and allow you your release. But then where's the punishment in that?"

He kissed her soundly and then stood. Raven had already stopped and stood, righting his clothes before offering a hand to her. Humiliation, stark and vivid, slammed into her. As Adam and Raven simply adjusted their clothes, she remained on her hands and knees, her clothes in disarray to expose her most secret flesh to them.

Dear God, she was no different than the loose women in Seattle's Mad House. Without meeting either of their watchful gazes, she

quickly stood and did her best to fix her appearance.

And just as quickly as he switched to the lover she wished he'd always be, Adam Steele once again fell into his role as the ruthless man. "Raven, please see if our guests have arrived. I believe our work here is done."

"You bastard," Patience whispered and curled into herself.

"Perhaps next time you will take heed to my warnings." Raven kissed her forehead and then left the room.

"How could you?" Tears burned in her eyes, and she squeezed her eyes shut to hold them back.

"Think of me fondly, my dear. Everything I do is for you. I will never purposely hurt you, nor will I allow anyone else close enough to bring you any pain. Today was an example of what I will do for you. I will take on every man in the entire territory if it comes to that, all to protect you. But you lack discipline. That is something we must change."

"I hate you." *God was going to burn her on the spot for that lie.*

"You may believe those words at the moment, but you don't hate me. Nor do I hate you. Quite the contrary. I am falling in love with you with every passing second, my dear Patience." He delivered the news with a wink and a smile, melting her anger like the blazing sun attacking a helpless puddle of rainwater.

"Adam, you made me feel like nothing more than a common whore just now."

He froze and blinked at her. Twice. "My love, that is not at all what this was about."

"Then why treat me this way?"

He brought his hands up and cupped her cheeks, running the pad of his thumb under her moist eyes. "Don't cry, baby. As I've told you, I will do anything and everything for you. You are my wife. My love. Once we have the rules set into place and they are followed, there will be no need to punish you again."

"Will you release me of this torment after your meeting?"

“I’ll do more than that. To prove how far I will go for you, I will allow you to take control. I see the way you fight me for it. Our next time together, I relinquish my control to you.”

She looked up into his eyes. “You won’t take it from me?”

“Not unless you ask me to.”

Although she wanted to stay angry, the way he smiled at her and kissed the tip of her nose had her loving him even more than before. *Damn it.*

“Now do be a dear and bring coffee into my office. We have to make sure the men of this town see how well you serve me.” He walked out of the room, completely oblivious to the fire flashing in his wife’s eyes.

“You want service,” she sang once he was out of earshot. “You’ve got it. After all, I must follow orders.”

\* \* \* \*

Adam sank down in the chair behind the large oak desk and rested his hands in front of him as he studied the town council members before him. Judge Ron Arnett, tall, thin, and without a friendly bone in his body, stared at him with sunken-in black eyes. The man made Miles Petty look like a saint in his twisted dealings. Not a month went by in which Adam didn’t have to do or say something to stop the judge from stringing up an innocent man.

And speaking of the devil, Miles sat next to Ron, looking every bit the prim and proper business owner of half of the port’s lumber. Next to him sat Logan Gallagher. He and his brothers owned the other half of the port’s lumber. And, finally, Sheriff Caleb Brock, Port Steele’s law enforcer, sat on the end next to Logan.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming. If you’ll please take a look at the agenda, we can get started.”

Ron snorted. “We’ll be sure to start once this room is clear.”

Adam hardened his gaze on him. The only other man in the room,

aside from the five town council members, was Raven. It pissed him off that anyone thought of his own blood as anything other than respectable. Because he was more respectable than any of the men sitting in the room, including Adam.

But they did have an image to uphold. With a resolved sigh, he set his jaw and settled into his role. "Raven, that is all. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir." Without another word, not even a growl, Raven silently walked out.

"It's eerie how he moves without sound," Miles commented in a smooth voice.

"It's in their blood. Their kind can't be trusted." Judge Arnett thinned his lips.

"Mr. Steele trusts him," the Sheriff said. "That's good enough for me."

"Are you suggesting that Raven shouldn't be trusted simply based on the fact he's Sioux?" Logan glared at both Ron and Miles. "Are you two really that ignorant?"

Miles laughed at his cousin. "If I wasn't a gentleman, Logan."

"But you're not."

He lost his smile and set his shoulders as he came close to standing and challenging his larger—and clearly stronger—cousin.

"Gentlemen," Adam broke in, always the one to keep them all centered. "The topic of my manservant is not on the agenda."

"Oh, but it is." Ron held up his copy and pointed at the first item. "See here? I added it myself."

"You can't add agenda items," Logan protested.

"I most certainly can. The item was added prior to calling the meeting to order, and it is on all copies of the agenda."

The town council argued, Caleb and Logan arguing against it, Miles and Ron arguing for it. Adam held up his hand and the room fell silent. If they didn't discuss it now, it would just end up on next meeting's agenda and continue to fester until they did.

“We’ll discuss it under new business. Let’s get on with it.”

They hadn’t even made through old business before Miles had to speak up about Adam’s nuptials. “How is married life, Adam?”

Adam scraped a look his way before darting another glance at Logan. They’d both agreed to keep the circumstances of Patience’s marriage to him to themselves. Logan Gallagher, he could trust. Miles Petty, he couldn’t. The gossips had already created their own story, one that would die after his trip to the mercantile today.

“I’m beside myself with joy, Miles. I thank the Lord every minute for my good fortune. Patience is the perfect wife.”

Miles grew red under his collar and the color steadily crawled up his neck. “That’s wonderful, if not a bit shocking.”

“Miles,” Logan warned in a low growl.

Miles put up his hand to ward off the attack. “I’m simply stating a fact. They seemed less than blissful at the ceremony yesterday.”

The Sheriff leaned forward. “I had no idea you were that close to Mr. Steele. I only heard of their marriage at church yesterday. I, like the rest of the town, was shocked at Reverend Reece’s news. The brides were all aflutter, especially the youngest Prescott.” He then let out a long sigh as he released her name. “Amelia.”

Adam pinched the skin between his eyes to ward off his growing headache. When the doors to his office slid open, he glanced up to see his beautiful wife in those reprehensible rags he should have burned when he had the chance. What would the council think of him dressing his wife in dirty calico?

“Your coffee,” she said pleasantly, her pale eyes dancing.

He stilled and gave her eyes a second glance. *Oh, hell no.* They were not only blue, but the iciest blue he’d ever seen. That wasn’t a good sign.

She was pissed.

“Patience, my dear. Allow me to introduce you to—”

“That won’t be necessary,” she crooned, cutting him off and embarrassing the hell out of him in front of the rest of the men. “I’m

sure I'll forget each and every one of their names just as soon as I leave the room."

He gritted his teeth. "I insist."

"Well, in that case." She smiled, and the gesture lit up her piercing pale blue eyes. The rest of the men seemed lost in her gaze, but Adam knew better.

*Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.*

From the look on her pretty face, Patience was beyond furious with him, and apparently, she intended to take it out on him here, in front of the entire town council.

*Wonderful.*

"May I introduce Judge Ron Arnett?"

Patience waved at her face as she beamed and curtsied. "Most pleased to meet your acquaintance, Mr. Arnett." She then batted her baby blue eyes, and Ron softened his hard expression for the first time ever. "Or should I call you Judge Arnett? I do want to make sure I don't offend."

"Ron is perfectly fine, my dear." He took her hand and kissed her knuckles. She fanned herself and let out a slight giggle.

Adam swallowed back a growl. *Goddamn* her. She was flirting, and with Ron Arnett of all men. "And this is the sheriff, Caleb Brock."

"A real lawman? Oh, my. It is ever so delightful to meet you, Sheriff Brock. No doubt Port Steele is in ideal hands with you enforcing our laws." She bowed to him as she offered her hand, which he eagerly took and brought to his lips.

He lingered a bit longer than Adam appreciated. With a sharp clearing of his throat, Adam told him to drop the hand. Caleb did and colored furiously. He'd have to speak to Logan about getting the sheriff a wife.

"And you need no introduction, Mr. Gallagher. There are no words that could possibly convey the thanks I have for you bringing my dear husband and me together."



Although she smiled, and both Ron and Caleb let out audible sighs at the beautiful sight, Adam and Gallagher exchanged knowing glances. Patience Steele was furious, and she aimed to make sure Adam knew it.

“And Mr. Petty. What can I say?” She shrugged, and that forced smile grew. Adam stood to stop her before she not only embarrassed him further, but ended up killing Miles Petty with her bare hands. She looked that upset.

“Thank you for the coffee, my dear. We have much to discuss, so if you would.” He took her by the small of the back and tried to lead her out of the office before she released whatever had her so upset.

Which, he feared, would be directed at him.

She rolled out of his grip. “Just as soon as I serve the coffee.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I take mine with four sugars,” Ron growled and spiked his graying brow at her.

“A sweet tooth, Mr. Arnett?”

Those beady black eyes shined at her. He even straightened the few gray hairs he had on his head. “A sweet everything, Mrs. Steele.”

*Jesus Christ.* The man had the nerve to flirt right back with Adam’s wife, and right in front of him. The need to kill sliced into Adam’s resolve. “You’ll take it black and like it. Patience, that will be all.”

She stuck out her lower lip and batted her eyes at him, making sure the rest of the room saw her act as well. Ron and Caleb and even Miles all snapped their expressions into concerned frowns. Adam rolled his eyes and thinned his lips.

“At least let me serve you, my darling.” When she spiked her brow, he didn’t know whether to drink anything she put in front of him or not.

But having her serve him in front of the rest of the council would serve its purpose. With a resolved sigh, he nodded. “That would be fine.”

She poured the coffee, her bold gaze never leaving his. He flicked a glance down at his cup just as she stopped the flow, leaving enough room for milk and sugar. She scooped several heaping teaspoons of sugar into his cup before adding the milk and then stirred.

At last, she set the spoon down and stepped back. "Enjoy."

He didn't want to taste it, but everyone else in the room watched him. He had no choice but to lift the cup to his lips and take a careful sip.

It took all his restraint to not spit the liquid back into the cup. With extreme force, he swallowed down what he had in his mouth and fought not to gag. The little vixen had replaced the sugar with salt.

"What do you think?"

Oh, she was surely going to pay for this. He couldn't wait to get her alone, where he and Raven could make sure they punished her for her behavior today. Apparently, she hadn't learned her lesson from earlier.

"It's the best coffee you've ever made, my dear. I know you've had challenges with your skills in the kitchen."

She lost her smile, and he knew he'd pay for that comment. It both thrilled and intrigued him. Patience Steele had an entirely different side of her, a side he'd never seen before and he couldn't wait to see more of—just not in front of the entire council.

"My dear, I believe I see something in the sugar. Will you please replace it with a fresh bowl?"

She narrowed her gaze at him as he clearly foiled her plan. Without anything else to argue about, Patience grabbed the sugar bowl and smiled sweetly. "Yes, my darling. Gentlemen, please excuse me."

All of the men jumped to their feet, even Logan. Adam understood why. No doubt Logan recognized when a woman had been pushed too far. He'd married the most outspoken, short-fused of all the brides.

Once Patience left the room, the men took their seats.

“She sure is sweet,” Ron stated, his demeanor completely opposite of what it was when he’d arrived. He even had a smile stretching his thin lips, whereas when he first arrived he wore a frown that had been a permanent look for him—until meeting Patience.

“Like an angel,” Caleb sighed.

“Can we just get back to the agenda?” Adam had run out of patience. He stared at the double doors, fuming at the way Patience had not only openly flirted with the entire council, but then the way she’d served him nothing short of poison and expected him to make a scene...

Oh, she was surely going to pay.

## Chapter 8

*Patience's Journal, Monday, April 3, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory (continued)*

*...As much as I would like to say I've taught my dear husband a lesson for his treatment of me earlier, I fear I have waged war on Adam Steele. Raven, of course, will take Adam's side, as brothers do, but I've been outnumbered before, and it will not discourage me. Adam may have won the first battle this morning, but I do believe the second battle belongs to me. Now that the town council has departed, the third battle will surely begin.*

\* \* \* \*

"Patti, damn it, open this door before I break the locks!" Adam pounded on the door to her room and rattled at the knob. He then beat on it again. Taking turns, he slammed his fist into the door, then tried the handle, then beat on the door once again. "Patience!"

"I have a headache," she hollered over the incessant pounding. "And you're only making it worse."

"I'll make it worse." He slammed his fist against the door, and she heard the distinctive snap as his rage left a crack in the wood. "Open this door!"

She jumped off the bed and rushed to the door to yell back. Her heart throbbed painfully in her chest. She thought salting his coffee would have made her feel better, but seeing the way he acted now, she wasn't sure. "Not until you apologize for the way you treated me."

“Apologize to you? Ha! You embarrassed me in front of the most important men in this entire town.”

“And you made me feel like...like...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it again, having already pointed it out this morning. Tears of humiliation blurred her vision, and she angrily wiped at them as they streamed down her face. She wished she were stronger. She wished she could stand up to him without her emotions showing.

Silence answered her from the other side of the door, yet she still felt him there. After several seconds, he spoke in a softer tone. “Open the door. We need to talk about this.”

“I don’t want to talk.” She folded her arms under her breasts and pouted.

*Slam.* “Woman, you open this door. Now!”

“Order me again, Adam. See how far that gets you.”

“Of all the...”

She heard another man’s voice and leaned against the door to listen but couldn’t make out any of the words. When a click resounded from the lock, she stumbled back and then dropped her jaw when the door swung open.

And there stood Adam Steele, Raven behind him, both looking mad enough to chew glass. Adam strode in and stopped, his chest heaving as he fought to maintain his control. Those eyes pierced into her soul, and as he watched her, unmoving, he remained silent.

Only when Raven closed and locked the door behind them did Adam finally move, stalking toward her in slow, deliberate steps. He spoke, his voice low and even and undeniably dangerous. “You dare defy me in the face of this town.”

“Adam, calm down.” Raven tried to grab his arm, but Adam jerked away and pushed him back.

That did it. She marched over to him and stood between him and Raven. “Take your fury out on me, but do not bully your brother. He’s done nothing wrong.”

Adam stepped back, dumbfounded. “Are you defending him?”

She would not back down. Raven did not deserve to endure the brunt of Adam's wrath. Thrusting out her chin, she gave him a curt nod.

"I most certainly am."

"While I appreciate the gesture, I don't need your protection from him." Raven stepped back over to Adam, and right before her eyes, he pushed him back.

And, like that, Patience disappeared from the attention of her men. She scurried back as the two men turned to face each other.

Adam stole a sideways glance at Raven. "Right here?"

"Right now," Raven quipped.

"You always were a bully, brother."

Stunned, Patience stood there and watched as the two challenged each other, but it gave her time to examine them closer. The high cheekbones. The same brilliant eyes. Her mind sizzled as she also remembered their other wonderful family similarities. The way they tasted. The size of their...*Never mind*.

"And you always cried when you didn't get your way," Raven countered.

Adam smiled at his brother's words. Oh, Lord, that sexy smile. It made his eyes glimmer with dark mischief. His lower lip curled and tempted her to bite at it, to run her tongue along its ridge and taste it.

And then Raven smiled that same potent smile, and she gave up on her sanity. These two men were driving her mad, and she loved every minute of it.

"That is enough," she snapped at them. They both turned and blinked at her. "Raven, you have no right to be angry with me, so I'll thank you to take a seat on the bed and remain silent while I deal with him."

"Surely you...can't..." He trailed off when she spiked her brow, daring him to go on. Without another word, he hurried over and took a seat on the bed.

"As for you, Adam Steele..."

“Don’t think for one moment that I’ll—”

She grabbed him by the collar and boldly captured his lips with hers, silencing whatever threat he had summoned up. Taking her boldness a step further, she then licked his lips open and really kissed him. The blazing need fighting to break free threatened to combust inside of her. She had to have more.

But he then pushed her back, his expression hard, the stark hunger in his eyes burning into her. “What was that?”

She felt wanton. The need to feel him around her, possessing her, touching her as the lover she longed for, consumed her. “I’m taking control. You promised.”

That hardness on his face thawed as his desire clearly won out, but that edge of dominance still held him back. He didn’t want to release control to her.

“That I did,” he stated, his voice thick and raspy with the arousal she drew from him. “Until you ask for me to take it back.”

“I suggest you give it back to him now.” Raven had snuck up behind her and pressed against her. The hard throb of his cock pushed against her lower back and had her pussy quivering in response.

“And why is that?”

“Adam’s control is the only thing that restrains me. Without that discipline, I may let myself go. Will you be able to control two men, Patti?”

Oh, Lord, she didn’t know if she wanted to or not. She wanted them to touch her, love her, and release this sweet torment throbbing between her legs.

She turned to face Raven and sucked in a breath when his tongue swiped over her lips, forcing them open. As their lips melted together, she was vaguely aware of Adam pulling her skirts from her body.

Raven clearly had no plans to give her any sense of control. His kiss proved just how futile it was to ever think she had it. She tried to pull back, but he grasped the back of her neck and held her in place, destroying her with his mouth.

Adam reached around and cupped the swell of her breasts, pinched her nipples through the fabric, drawing a gasp from her. With her mouth open, Raven plunged his tongue inside and explored the recesses.

“Turn to me,” Adam demanded.

She did, not bothering to argue. She could never steal the control from them. They had her, in every sense of the word. To her chagrin, he’d somehow managed to remove his clothes while doing the same to her. His erection, so heavy and almost purple, pressed up against her stomach.

He hooked an arm under her knee and lifted it up, holding her steady as Raven buried his mouth between her legs, licking at the tender nerves of her clitoris, drinking up the syrup he’d drawn from her with that wicked kiss.

Arching her back to expose herself to his tongue, Patience whimpered when he pushed a slick finger through her back entrance. At the same time, he stabbed her pussy with his tongue, and she nearly lost her footing.

Adam worked the buttons of her top and pushed it off her shoulders. He then threw the camisole up over her head and dove to her breasts, licking and teasing a hard nipple. When he pulled it between his teeth and nipped, she bit her lower lip to stop from crying out. They did, after all, have a house full of staff.

“Oh, the other. Please, Adam. Take the other.” Her breath sawed in and out of her lungs. Raven’s attack on her pussy had her body humming as the steady throbbing grew to an angry pulse.

He eagerly consumed her breast while Raven feasted on her pussy. She twisted against them, unable to make sense of the overload of pleasure ripping through her. All the cells in her body fought against the assault, while at the same time in a frenzy in their need for release.

“She’s close,” Raven announced in a voice plagued with hot male lust. “Should I take her over the edge?”



“No.” Adam’s voice washed over her like the heavy rain outside. She jerked her head up and stared into eyes so dark they were black. “Patience, my sweet love, wrap your arms around me.”

She did then let out an involuntary yelp when he lifted her. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around him. Raven stepped back, and she was about to ask why when, in one quick thrust, Adam impaled the length of his rigid flesh deep inside her, stretching her, burning her. If he hadn’t kissed her at that exact moment and swallowed her cries, the entire town would have heard her.

And then Raven stepped back and worked two fingers into her rear entrance. She shuddered and rocked her hips, moving Adam’s erection inside her.

“Do it now, brother.” Adam groaned as he stroked his cock in and out of her pussy. “I’m not going to make it.”

“Patti, I need you to hold still.” Raven bit at her neck, and she arched her back. “That’s perfect.”

The large, blunt end of Raven’s cock pushed against her tiny hole. He rocked his hips, and blisters of pleasure laced with pain seared her as he eased inside her.

“Keep it in,” Adam told her. “Control your cries.”

She couldn’t control her breathing, let alone the strained cries escaping from her.

“Oh, Adam.” She writhed against him, her nails digging into his back, as they moved in perfect time, one slipping in as the other retreated. “Oh, Raven.”

Raven’s hands tightened around her hips as he drove his cock deeper, pulling out as Adam’s hard thrust filled her completely, and then they reversed, and it was Raven inside her as Adam retreated.

“It’s too slow,” she whimpered and wiggled. “More.”

“We’ll hurt you,” Adam said with a shake of his head.

“You won’t. Please. Adam, I need more.”

Raven plunged deep, and she bit down on Adam’s shoulder to hold in her cries. Tremors pounded through her body and had the

muscles of her pussy clenching, spasming.

Adam jerked and drove his cock into her in a hard, powerful stroke. Raven, following Adam's pace, surged inside her.

"M-More." She was in agony. They had to move faster, harder, or she'd never breathe a steady breath again.

Raven slammed into her backside, sending her down onto Adam's cock. The motion sent her into a frenzy. She clawed at Adam's chest and begged for more.

Adam buried his cock to the hilt, driving into her over and over, harder and harder, his brother filling her other hole with a pace that had her close. So close.

With a final thrust, Adam stiffened as he shot hot streams of semen deep inside her. Raven's fingers dug into her hips as he grunted in his release. And she exploded.

Adam swallowed her screams as her climax crashed into her, sending her bucking against them both, riding the waves of her release until she collapsed against him, her body sated.

Gently, Raven withdrew, and then Adam carried her to the bed. She closed her eyes as exhaustion rolled over her. Once they dressed, one—or maybe both—of them washed her before tucking the covers up around her.

"Sleep, my love." Adam kissed her forehead.

"I'll have dinner brought to your room." Raven brushed the hair from her face.

"I love you," she whispered, rolled to her side, and found sleep instantly.

\* \* \* \*

"Who do you suppose she said that to?"

Raven kept his comment to himself. As he served Adam his usual nightcap of a tall whiskey, he snuck one himself. At this point if any staff member walked in on them sharing a drink, he didn't give a shit.

He had more on his mind than what the staff thought of one of the hired hands having a drink with the man who paid everyone handsomely.

Adam glanced at the whiskey and then at Raven. “That bad?”

Sinking into the chair on the other side of Adam’s desk, Raven regarded his brother somberly. They had the same arrogant bone structure, high cheekbones and a square jaw that made their proud people so handsome, men and women alike. Adam had his mother’s lighter complexion, but in the summer, he tanned just as dark bronze as Raven did. If Adam let his hair grow out and had just a hint of a narrower face, there would be no mistaking his heritage.

“Will you go to her tonight?”

Irritation and sorrow flashed in Adam’s eyes, but there was something else. Guilt. He clenched his teeth and brought his drink to his lips and said nothing as he stared down at the papers in front of him.

“She needs you, Adam.”

He laughed, but no amusement, no humor came through in the sound. It echoed through the otherwise silent office. He was in pain, and Raven felt it, too. They’d always shared a bond. Raven felt Adam’s frustration with Patience that he couldn’t control her, but he also felt Adam’s pride. The man loved his wife.

So did Raven.

Only one other woman had the power to have both men fall in love with her—Adam’s first wife, Mina. Before her, Adam stayed to himself, never going out for more than the necessities. Even then, he rarely held his head high enough to meet any set of eyes.

Raven wasn’t blind to the suffering Adam had to endure as a child. They both went through hell, but they did it together. And then when they ventured out on their own, Adam hid his shame in stride and never knew that Raven had heard him all those nights when he’d cried himself to sleep.

He wouldn’t allow his brother to suffer, not any longer. Patience

loved him. She'd said so herself. And still he refused to go to her side and fully give in to that love.

"I just have a lot on my mind," he lied, and Raven knew it.

"Such as?"

"Seattle passed that ordinance banning Indians from within the city limits."

He didn't like the look in Adam's eyes. "How does that affect us here?"

"Ron Arnett made a motion to pass the same ordinance in Port Steele. Miles, that son of a bitch, seconded it." He let out a tired sigh. "We now have to open it up to the townspeople before it goes to a vote."

Rage tore at his gut. *Goddamn Ron Arnett and his one-sided view on the world.* "If it passes?"

Adam met his gaze. "We leave."

"With Patience, of course."

Adam didn't answer, and he didn't have to. Raven saw it in his eyes. He used this as a reason to not allow himself to get close to her.

"I know you're scared," Raven mentioned softly.

Adam shook his head in an attempt to disregard his comment, but Raven knew better than that. He felt Adam's fear.

"Don't keep her at a distance. Your love is what she needs, not your detachment."

"All my life, I've avoided getting close to anyone or letting anyone get close to me." He took a pull off his whiskey and winced as he swallowed. "Look at where I am now. I'm the mayor of a fucking town, Raven. Can you believe that? Twenty-eight years ago when I killed my own mother to come into this world, did you ever think I would be where I am now?"

"Dear God, listen to yourself. Do you also blame yourself for the rain falling from the sky?"

He shrugged. "Whatever it takes."

"I can't let you do this, Adam. For too long I've watched you push

everyone away, even me. It has to stop, brother. For both of our sanity, stop this.”

“How does this in any way affect you?”

Raven studied his younger brother, shocked and befuddled that Adam even asked that question. “Ten years. Ten fucking years we’ve shared temporary lovers that you pushed away as soon as you started to feel a spark for them. And for ten years I’ve gone along with it, watching you kill yourself a little more each time you walked away.”

He threw back the whiskey to calm him. If he let his anger take over, Adam would shut down and Raven would lose the chance to finally confront his brother about moving on.

“Adam, pushing people away isn’t what got you where you are today. Refusing to allow love back into your heart is not keeping you safe from getting hurt again.”

Adam chuckled hollowly. “It’s done a pretty damn good job so far.”

“Bullshit!”

Adam flashed Raven an angry glare. “Mind you to watch the volume of your outbursts. There is still staff present.”

“Fuck the staff. Fuck the image. This is all bullshit, Adam, and it’s time it ends.”

“Are you saying you no longer wish to be my manservant?”

“I never wanted to be your goddamn manservant in the first place, but it was the only way I could remain close enough to you to keep you from destroying yourself.”

Adam frowned and stared straight ahead. “I’ve never asked for you or anyone else to care for me. I don’t need it.”

“The hell you don’t. Look at you. You have a beautiful wife who adores you. I can’t let you walk away from this one. I won’t allow it.”

Adam laughed at his brother’s comment. “You won’t allow it, eh? And how will you stop me?”

“By any means,” Raven told him. “I pray it doesn’t come to that. She’s already a part of you, whether you are ready to accept that or

not.”

“She is just a woman,” he told him as if that statement somehow justified his actions.

“You wouldn’t have taken her as your wife if you truly believed that.”

He slid down in his chair. “It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

“She loves you.”

Again Adam shook his head, dismissing Raven’s words, pushing him away as he’d done everyone else in his life.

Raven stood and hoped his words had some meaning to his bullheaded brother. “Perhaps one day soon you will see that the greatest gift God has given us is not only to love, but to be loved in return. Patience loves you, and I love you, too. If we are destined to leave Port Steele, then we go as a family.”

Adam looked up at him, and Raven saw the uncertainty in his gaze. “Is that what you want, to leave Port Steele?”

“I like it here, rain and all, and you do, too.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I say we stay and fight,” he snapped with furious intent. “We fight for our right to go where we damn well please. We fight for the woman we love. And we fight to stay in the town bearing our name.”

Adam pinched the skin between his eyes. “It won’t be an easy fight, on any of those fronts. I’m not strong enough, Raven.”

“You are stronger than you give yourself credit for, brother. I have faith in you, even if you don’t have it in yourself.”

“I’m scared,” he whispered, and Raven stilled. He’d never heard his brother admit it before. “I’m scared that Patience will get to know the real me and hate me because of it. I’m scared that despite my authority and influence in this town, it won’t be enough. I’m scared that this fucking ordinance will pass and I will have let you down.”

“The only way you’ll let me down is if you give up,” Raven told him sincerely. “I’m willing to fight. Are you? I’ll leave you to your thoughts. Good night.”

And he left his brother alone to make his own decision. Raven prayed this wouldn't be the beginning of the end between them, because as God as his witness, he'd fight, even if it meant standing against his own brother while Adam made the biggest mistake of his life.

## Chapter 9

*Patience's Journal, Saturday, April 15, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*Times are tense here in Port Steele and, I fear, across the war-torn country. Adam does what he can to keep peace, but ever since Judge Ron Arnett posted signs around town urging the passing of an ordinance to ban Indians from within the city limits, Port Steele is as divided as the country. As if my nerves over the imminent division of this town weren't enough, I received a telegram from Walter today and almost burned it. How dare that cheating rogue contact me. What more could he possibly say to ruin me? And then I read it. It seems my ex-husband and his new wife are expecting. I suppose I deserved the news after sending them a telegram announcing my nuptials to the town mayor. Despite my hatred for them both, I wish the child well and am trying my hardest to not be melancholy over the last sentence of the letter. "She gives me what you never could." I wish I could believe he spoke of love, but deep down I know he refers to the fact I never conceived while married to him. Will I ever be a mother?*

\* \* \* \*

Patience rocked quickly in the chair as she chewed on the last traces of her nails. In a new dress Mrs. Chang miraculously created outside of her duties as the cook, Patience looked every bit the part of a mayor's wife. Being presented as such at the dance had her both excited and nervous.



She only wished she felt the confidence her appearance presented.

“Haven’t you run out of nails, yet?” Raven stood and removed her hand from her mouth before kissing her knuckles. “Relax, my dear. What has you so worked up?”

She couldn’t tell him. No one could know of her past. Divorced women were considered nothing short of scandalous. If anyone found out, not only would Adam be ruined, he’d hate her for being the cause.

Patience took her hand back and started in on the remaining nails.

These past two weeks seemed like a dream, where at any moment she could open her eyes and all she had would be gone. No Adam. No Raven. Nothing but emptiness and loneliness. She shuddered at the thought.

“I don’t know how to act as a married woman.”

“Neither do I,” Raven teased with a wink that sent her nerves back into a frenzy.

“Will you be joining us tonight?”

He shook his head. “As much as I would adore swirling you around the dance hall floor, a married woman dancing with her husband’s manservant would be highly improper.”

“You aren’t his manservant to me. Or to him. You must know that.”

“Ah, yes.” He leaned in and kissed her each time she rocked toward him, and stopped the chair as she leaned forward so their kiss lingered.

“I leave you two for a moment and look what I return to.” Adam walked into the room and dropped a folded paper onto the table.

Raven stepped back from Patience with a grin. He then lost it when he studied the look in Adam’s troubled eyes. “What is it?”

“Read the front page,” he said and sighed as he sank down in a chair. “This war is tearing our country apart. It’s heartbreaking to read. I pray it ends swiftly.”

“As do I.” Raven set the paper back onto the table.

Patience stood and glided over to her husband, resting her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. He reached up and patted her hand with his. She let out a yelp as he then grabbed her hand and swung her onto his lap before firmly planting a resounding kiss on her lips.

When he tried to pull away, she framed his face in her hands and held her to him, kissing him deeply. She loved him more than she loved breathing. If he hurt, she hurt.

“Tell me what I may do to ease your pain.”

He rested his forehead to hers. “If I tell you, we’ll never get out of here.”

That was perfectly acceptable to her. But, alas, they had a duty to appear at the dance, and the Gallaghers were waiting.

She stood and brushed at her skirts. Dainty yellow ribbons accented the pale blue taffeta. The high neckline presented her properly as a married woman. She had her hair up in a loose roll that rested on her shoulder with ringlets bouncing around her face that, she had to admit, did wonders for her eyes. The blue in the material brought out the blue in her eyes, giving them a more brilliant than usual shine.

“What do you think?”

Adam stood and nodded as he slowly raked that dark gaze over her. Her nipples peaked, and she swallowed hard.

“Mrs. Steele, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you look so ravishing. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather stay in?”

“Why, Mr. Steele.” She batted at him with her hand. He grabbed it and kissed her fingers. Their gazes locked.

“I’m jealous.” Raven pouted and stood several feet away. “I must admit, this is one time I truly wish Adam and I were in opposite positions.”

Feeling bold, Patience moved over to him, the hem of her skirt humming as it brushed across the floor. “You’d best wait up for us, Raven. I’m sure after a night of dancing, my blood will be pumping, and I can assure you that you and Adam will be in several positions.”

His gaze darkened. "I'll have your room ready for you."

"For us," she corrected. When Adam joined them, she pulled him by the hand and then grabbed Raven's with her other. "This night together will be for us. I take you both to my bed. I have you both in my heart."

She glided out of the room and waited at the foyer for Adam. After a few words between the brothers, Adam stepped out into the foyer and helped her with her coat.

"At least the rain has given us a reprieve." She buttoned her cover in place.

"Temporarily, I'm sure." Adam led her out the door and into the coach waiting for them. He wore a permanent frown, and as they pulled out, he sank down and stared out the side.

"Are you not looking forward to the dance?"

"It isn't the dance that has my nerves on edge."

"Then what is it?"

He shook his head to dismiss her question and continued to stare out the side.

"It's this talk of the ordinance, isn't it?"

His gaze flicked to her as he straightened.

"The town seems torn over it," she continued, reciting what she'd heard at a meeting earlier in the week with the rest of the brides. As with the town, the women were divided down the middle over it, the ones blindly following Constance Kendall for it while the ones at Lizzie Gallagher's side against it.

Shadows surrounded his eyes as he offered her a weary smile. "Worry not, my wife. It will work out. I promise."

"You can't promise something like that. We don't know that it will. Ignorance runs rampant in Port Steele over this ordinance. You can't reason with it. You can't disregard it." Her lips trembled as tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision. "I'm scared, Adam. What if it passes? I can't bear the thought."

He leaned toward her and took her hands in his. "It won't."

“But what if it does?”

“It won’t,” he repeated with more conviction in his voice.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I will stop at nothing to see that it doesn’t.”

That she believed. His faith gave her hope.

The coach pulled up to the dance hall and Adam stepped out to help her. She took his hand and allowed him to lead her through the double doors and into the bright, open room.

The lively music had already started, and couples crowded the floor, bouncing and laughing as they danced. For tonight, it seemed the townspeople would lay down their swords and come together.

Patience spotted Amelia dancing with one of the many suitors pursuing her hand. The youngest Prescott wore her pretty blonde hair in ringlets that bounced around her petite shoulders, her blue eyes shining as she seemed to be having quite a time out there.

“Shall we?” Adam held out his hand.

She took it and allowed her husband to lead her out onto the dance floor. They moved in time with the music, both smiling and laughing at their missteps. Adam moved lightly on his feet and didn’t mind that she kept stepping on them.

Adam moved closer, and Patience tensed. They may be married, but it was still highly improper to dance so close in public. That wicked smile smoldered on his lips. “I don’t recall you having this much of an issue the first time we danced together. Where is that lovely mind of yours?”

His scent wafted up into her nostrils. Oh, how she loved the way he smelled. She inhaled again. He gave her a flirtatious sideways glance as that destructive smile grew.

“As if you don’t know,” she answered in a weak voice.

*Oh, bother.* He knew exactly how she reacted to him. No wonder he had that wicked glimmer in his dark gaze.

“How about we dance a few dances, share a glass of punch with a few select people, and then we go back to the house. Raven would be

extremely pleased if we retired early. There is no need to stay for the entire evening.”

The sexual desire thickened between them. Patience looked up into his eyes. “I think that’s a splendid idea.”

\* \* \* \*

The song ended, and another lively tune filled the room. Adam started to move to it when a booming voice caught his attention. He swung his attention over to Miles Petty as he stood in the center of a crowd of men. Constance Kendall beamed as she firmly planted herself at his side.

“I tell you, it’s the only way we are going to be able to insure you have employment a year from now.” Miles’s cold gray eyes shined as he held the center of attention.

Adam growled and clenched his jaw. *Goddamn* that man and his blind pursuit of this ordinance. “What is he doing here? This is the Gallaghers’ dance for the brides, is it not?”

“Mr. Petty makes it a point to come to all the dances. I believe that he has been trying to persuade some of the women to move to better accommodations. At least, that is how Constance presents it.”

Well, if that wasn’t a blatant kick in the teeth. Adam glanced around the dance hall and found Logan Gallagher, his gaze hard and narrow as he stared at Miles Petty. Next to Logan stood his brothers Noah and Andrew, both with their arms crossed and equally reproachful looks as their glares rested on Miles.

“I should think the Gallaghers would ask him to leave.” Adam twirled Patience, although not to the music. He no longer heard it. His concentration focused on Miles and the crowd’s reaction to his comment.

A mountain of a man spoke up. “But Mr. Petty, the Gallaghers have been good to us. If hiring Indians was a bad thing, they wouldn’t be doing it.”

Adam danced Patience over to the crowd, yet kept them far enough away so they could continue to dance and not be noticed. He whispered to Patience, "Do you know the name of the man speaking?"

She glanced around. "I believe Amelia calls him Joshua. She dances with him quite a bit. I don't know his last name."

Miles laughed at Joshua's comment. "If you only knew the Gallaghers the way I do, Josh, you would redefine your opinion of them."

"Doubtful," Joshua answered with a grin.

"The Gallaghers aren't as upstanding as you think."

That did it. The Gallaghers were good, honest men who employed good, honest men. To hell with Miles Petty and his underhanded way to try and sway men's opinions, all to pass a damn ordinance that should have never been brought to vote.

Adam stopped dancing and took his wife by her arm. "My dear, why don't you go and get us some punch? I'll say a few words to the men, and then we'll be on our way."

Her pale eyes lit up to a brilliant blue, the recognizable fire igniting inside her. He couldn't wait to get her home. Raven had quite a feast there waiting for them, although with the hunger sweltering between them, they may just bypass the food.

"I won't be long." She glided away, and he watched her go to make sure she was out of earshot before he approached the crowd of men.

Joshua asked, "How do we know we wouldn't have the same competition with them Indians if we worked for you?"

"I refuse to employ those savages. As your employer, I promise to only employ white men." Miles caught Adam's glare and stiffened.

"What makes the Indians so bad?" someone else asked. "They ain't done nothing wrong."

Miles flicked a nervous look Adam's way before turning his attention to the man who spoke. "They are beasts who walk on two

legs. Nothing more than wild animals that must be tamed.”

Adam growled and several of the men in the crowd turned, saw who it was, and quickly backed up. He barely noticed them as he pinpointed his glare onto Miles.

“Good evening, Mayor.” He smiled easily.

“What makes them any different than you?” Adam crossed his arms to stop himself from reaching over and snapping Miles’s scrawny neck like a twig.

“We were simply having a friendly conversation. There’s no need to get upset.”

“The hell with that,” Adam snapped. “You’re trying to push your views onto others and sway their opinions.”

“Nonsense. Indians are dirty beasts who eat food off the ground and live in pointy little tents.”

“The only beast I see is standing before me,” Adam ground out.

Miles colored and turned to Constance. “Perhaps you should join the women over by the punch. This may get a bit colorful, and it would be a shame if you had to hear the language.”

Constance lost her smile as she darted her wide gaze between Miles and Adam. She then nodded and hurried away, right over to the Gallaghers. She pointed right at Adam as she said something. The three brothers glanced over and started his way.

“Wonderful,” Miles muttered. “Now you have those brutes on their way over.”

“The more the merrier.” Adam gave them a nod as the Gallaghers stopped next to Adam and faced Miles.

Logan spoke up. “What seems to be the topic of conversation this evening, gentlemen?”

“It’s nothing,” Miles said.

“Oh, I think it’s more than that. Why else would someone like you be holding these men’s attention when there is a room full of women looking to dance with them?”

Color crept up Miles’s neck as he thinned his lips. “There are

things far more important at stake than finding a dance partner, Logan.”

“Then perhaps you should take those who share that thought somewhere other than a dance hall when a dance is being held.”

“I can see where your loyalties lie.” Miles flicked his glare to Adam.

“It’s not loyalty,” Logan countered. “It’s common sense.”

Andrew Gallagher spoke up. “Come now, gentlemen. This is a night of dance. Let’s enjoy the evening instead of squabbling about *petty* things.” He then grinned wide as Miles Petty glared at him.

“This doesn’t sound all that petty to me,” one of the men said.

Another said, “Me, either.”

Several others joined in.

Adam held up his hands to silence them. “Gentlemen, please. Andrew and Logan are right. This is not the time, nor the place, for us to hold this conversation.”

“Then when?” a short, stout man with brown curly hair and eyes as large as silver dollars asked. “When else are men like me, who doesn’t have the power or money to be on the town council, supposed to talk about this? Our opinions matter as well.”

Adam nodded at him. “Of course they do. That isn’t what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying, Mayor? Would you hold an assembly with the town to discuss this?”

“Yes, of course—”

“Because that hasn’t happened,” the man talked over Adam.

“Shut up, Larry. You’re making a fool of yourself.” Joshua barked at him.

“These Indians are taking our jobs, Josh. What are you going to do if you can’t put food on the table or a roof over your head? Do you think any of these women will want a man who can’t provide?”

Too many men nodded their heads in agreement.

*Shit. Shit.* Adam tossed Logan a look. He shook his head in return.



“This is getting out of hand,” Logan told him.

“Agreed.”

With tempers flaring, too many men in too tight of a space, and not enough attention paid to the women, it was too volatile a situation to allow it to continue.

“Enough!” Adam hollered above the growing group of arguing men.

The arguing grew louder and louder until the men had to shout to be heard. Even then, the sounds of their angry voices all joined together, their arguments falling into the crowd. The men all screamed their heated opinions, no matter how misguided they were. Even Miles Petty had started to shout.

“Gentlemen, please!” Adam yelled, but no one listened to him. Hell, they weren’t even listening to each other as they made a scene.

The piano stopped, and those on the dance floor stilled to stare at the scene. Men started to push at each other. Someone pushed Joshua, who stumbled into Adam. Logan caught him before he fell back.

And then the fight broke out.

Adam didn’t know who threw the first punch, only that it was from the biggest damn fist he’d ever seen. It struck him in the jaw and snapped his mouth closed. Jesus Christ, he hoped that hadn’t chipped any of his teeth.

“Goddamn it, you just hit the mayor, you son of a bitch!”

“He’ll just get his savage shadow to scalp you.”

“Shut the hell up.” Joshua pulled his hand back and connected his fist with the man's face. Adam cringed when the man fell back, out cold.

“I’ll kill you!” Another man yelled and jumped on Joshua’s back.

Men from the dance floor left their dance partners and joined in on the brawl, pulling men off their friends and attacking others. Soon almost every man in the room had joined in the brawl.

“Andrew! Get the women out of here!” Logan threw a punch at a man whose punch he’d just blocked.

Adam threw man after man off each other just to break up the fight. Larry jumped on his back, and he threw the man off. Larry ran into another man, and together, the two turned on Adam.

"You're an Indian lover," a tall man with several missing teeth accused.

"I'm a man who doesn't believe in judging another based solely on the color of his skin," Adam growled in return.

Two men had jumped on Logan's back. Adam ran over and threw them off. Logan nodded at him in thanks. "We have to stop this."

Someone jumped on Logan, and together, they fell to the ground. Adam reached down, grabbed the man by his collar, and drew his arm back. He'd knock every last one of them out if that was what it took to stop this.

An ear-piercing screech sounded from the front doors. The men all froze and turned to see the town clerk standing there, a telegram in his hands and tears in his red-rimmed eyes. Time stood still as they all waited to hear the news that would change the world.

"The president has been shot," he sobbed. "President Lincoln is dead."

Nobody made a sound. Nobody moved. Everyone simply stood there, numb.

The women hadn't made it out of the room, yet. Echoes of sobs started and soon filled the room. Men stood, brushed themselves off, and even helped the man they were fighting with to stand.

Logan paled as he turned to Adam. They stared at each other as a thousand words passed between them. Here they were, fighting to protect a man's civil liberties, as were the men in the war. The parallels weren't lost on Adam, and he saw that same recognition in Logan's eyes.

And now their president. Shot down, no doubt in cold blood, all over a war that put brother against brother.

Logan shook his head to hide the devastation Adam saw burning in his eyes. "I believe we'll call it a night."

Adam nodded and glanced around the room to find his wife, who stood hugging one of the other women. He turned his attention to the men. “Gentlemen, in light of this shock, I believe it’s best if we continue this conversation at a later date and in a more civilized manner.”

The men remained silent as they shuffled out of the dance hall behind the sobbing women. Adam made sure the last one had left before he went to Patience and pulled her into his arms. Her body shook as she cried, and her tears pulled at his heart.

“I’m, uh, going to go home and, uh...I’m sure Lizzie will want to know.” Logan swallowed and shook his head. “Jesus, this is just terrible.”

Andrew and Noah agreed to stay back and help Hattie clean the dance hall so the men with wives could take them home. Adam wrapped his arm around his wife and fought the feeling of loss and despair clawing at his inside. He paused outside the hall as he glanced up at the sky.

The rain had returned.

## Chapter 10

*Patience's Journal, Wednesday, April 19, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*According to the paper, today is President Lincoln's funeral procession. It is truly a dark time. Adam brings the paper home every day and seems to sink into a depression with every word he reads. I pray that the man who shot and killed our beloved president finds his just punishment. For now, I must focus my prayers on my husband. Raven and I are concerned as Adam falls into a deeper and deeper depression. This ordinance is gaining strength. Men from Seattle came and spoke at a gathering held by Mr. Miles Petty. More and more men are now supporting the ban of Indians. It is absurd, and I know it must be tearing my dear husband apart. I only wish there were something I could do to help.*

\* \* \* \*

The brides were once again on their separate sides, the ones following Constance standing with her and shooting daggers with their glares at those standing with Lizzie Gallagher. A few more women had been married and sported sparkling rings, including Patience's.

Constance stood and stepped forward, her petite chin out and her haughtiness in full effect. "Well, Elizabeth, you called this meeting. Perhaps you'd like to inform us as to why."

Lizzie nodded and stepped forward as well. The women all stood

on opposite sides of the room, siding with the woman they followed, and glared at each other. It broke Patience's heart. Even the women had chosen their sides.

Lizzie drew in a deep breath and addressed everyone in the room. "The men in this town are, I fear, being led down a dangerous path."

Several melodramatic gasps sounded, and Patience rolled her eyes.

"What sort of danger is there in protecting their rights?" Constance flashed her eyes at Lizzie and looked ready to start a fight herself.

Lizzie simply sighed. "I see you've been swayed by Mr. Petty's words."

"He isn't swaying anyone," Constance countered. "He is simply informing those who have, up until now, been misinformed."

"Ignorance is not misinformation," Patience said, unable to stand Constance's own ignorance passing as fact. "It is simply that—ignorance, and it shouldn't be tolerated."

"Patti, please." Lizzie gave her a small smile.

Amelia took Patience by the arm and pulled her back. "Do not let her provoke you. She's doing this for the attention."

"What kind of attention is she wanting? This is ludicrous."

"Lizzie will take care of it. She always does."

Patience sighed. She certainly hoped so.

"Perhaps we should look at this another way," Olivia, the middle Prescott sister, spoke up. "Constance, you clearly have motivation for your strong feelings about this. I, for one, would be interested to know what has happened to you to warrant this hatred for your fellow man."

Constance's jaw fell open as she blinked at Olivia. Lizzie gave her sister a sideways glance and they exchanged quick smiles.

Patience leaned toward Amelia. "Did you know those two were in this together?"

Amelia merely smiled the same smile the other two sisters had just flashed.

Oh, those Prescott girls were good.

"I, well, um, I..." Constance stammered as she attempted to justify her position.

Several of the women standing with Constance looked at her with confusion crinkling their brows.

Barbara, one of the most recently wed brides, took a step away from Constance. "On what basis do you want to drive the Indians from town?"

"Surely one of them has done something to you to merit your stand." Ruby, one of Constance's more devout followers, waited for an answer.

"On the words of Miles Petty?" Patience asked, not able to remain silent.

Constance let out a huff. "My business is my business."

"Not when you are trying to make it everyone else's business." Lizzie smiled.

"Ladies, the fact remains that this ordinance is tearing our town apart. Whether we support it or not, some, if not most of our husbands support it. If it passes, what's to stop them from banning woman from town? Or children?" Patience asked.

"It would never come to that," Constance assured her.

"How do you know?"

"Miles would never take it to that level."

That comment burrowed under Patience's skin. "But the level he is taking it now is acceptable?"

"What happened to you, Patti?" Constance shook her head and crinkled her brow in mock concern. "Marriage has changed you."

"For the better, I assure you."

"Not from what I see."

*Of all the nerve.* Patience knew better than to engage in this petty argument with Constance, but she couldn't stop herself. "I'm married to a wonderful man who loves me. I have a family and will fight to the death to defend them."

Constance spiked her dark brow as her emerald eyes glimmered. “Them?”

Patience closed her eyes and let out a long breath. *Oh no*. In her haste to prove Constance Kendall wrong, she didn’t even think about what she was about to say until it slipped out. Fear and irritation sparked heat into her cheeks.

“Oh, my Lord,” Constance murmured as comprehension sank into her expression, brightening it. “That savage who follows him around. I see it now.”

Shaking her head, Patience whispered in desperation, “No, you see nothing.”

“Those eyes.”

“Constance, this is none of your business.” Dread fed her anxiety, pulling it to the surface.

She ignored Patience, and her smile widened as she put it all together and announced it for everyone else. *The witch*. “I knew there was something wrong with Adam Steele.”

The hairs on her arms and neck stood on end. “There is nothing wrong with him.”

“Why, of course there is. Although I don’t believe he’s full blood like his manservant. How are they related, precisely? Cousins? No, they must be brothers.”

Anger threatened to cause Patience to throw propriety aside and unleash on Constance. She doubled up her fists and shook her head. “Don’t.”

She practically cried with delight as she delivered the final blow. “Adam Steele is a half-breed. Of course! It’s perfectly obvious now. All this time, I wondered why I couldn’t turn his head, but now I know. A savage like him would never find an upstanding woman of society, such as myself, suitable. He’d rather have a woman with morals equal to his.”

Several of the women gasped.

“How dare you!” Amelia jumped forward, but Olivia and Lizzie

held her back. "You are nothing short of the devil, Constance Margaret Kendall."

Constance laughed, and the shrill sound rang in Patience's ears, sending a crawling of annoying chills across her skin. Patience's gaze moved across the room at all of the sets of eyes staring at her. She trembled as rage mixed with raw sorrow twisted inside her.

She dropped her attention to her hands in front of her, and she wrung them until they ached. Patience kept her gaze hidden as best she could, but the heat of Constance's glare burned into her neck. How could she have been so foolish? A simple slip like that would run rampant in the hands of the likes of Constance Kendall.

"Ladies, let's return to the matter at hand." Lizzie pulled everyone's attention back to her.

"I do believe I've had my say." Constance nodded her farewell and went to the front door.

"Where are you going?" Patience had already started toward her.

"I must pay a visit to a friend."

Patience knew better. Constance was about to find Miles Petty and tell him about Adam.

She had to stop her.

"Constance, please. Don't do this."

But she simply smiled, those green eyes shimmering with maliciousness, and walked out of the inn.

"I must go," Patience stated and grabbed her cover.

Amelia stopped her with her hand on Patience's arm. "Stay."

"But Constance is going to tell everyone."

"Then let her," Lizzie said.

Patience blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Patti, you can't stop her."

"I must try."

"And then what? Will you be able to stop her tomorrow? Or the next day?"

Patience closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath as the despair



took over. She'd ruined her husband. He'd lose his seat as Mayor of Port Steele, and that terrible ordinance would pass. He and Raven would be run out of town. He'd never forgive her.

No doubt Constance would run straight to Miles Petty and inform him of Patience's loose tongue. It wouldn't take much convincing. Adam and Raven had such similarities between them.

She collapsed down in the closest chair and buried her face in her hands. Her perfect life. Gone with one slip of the tongue.

"I wouldn't worry about her," Barbara said and moved to Patience's side. "Constance is just upset that you have everything she wants."

Patience blinked back her tears as she lifted her gaze to Barbara. "I do?"

"Of course." Amelia sat down on the arm of the chair and wrapped her arms around Patience.

"And that is?"

"Power," Lizzie answered. "Constance is looking to attach herself to the most powerful man in all of Port Steele. Adam Steele was clearly one of the top choices. When you married him, she deemed that as a personal threat against her. You, Patience Steele, have everything she's ever wanted. Money. Power. Men who love you."

Patience swallowed thickly as Lizzie offered her a knowing smile. She then whipped her gaze to Olivia, who gave the same smile. Just how many women knew about her choice to love two men? Did they share the same desires?

"So why don't I feel like the winner in all of this?"

"It will work itself out," Amelia assured her with a pat of her hand.

"I certainly hope so." Patience stood. "If you don't mind, I'm going to make my way home now. You already know how I feel about the ordinance."

"Of course." Lizzie nodded at her. "Rest assured, Patti. Constance is swiftly gaining more enemies than friends. If she continues down

this path, her only option will be to marry Miles Petty, and I don't think he's terribly fond of her to begin with."

Patience thanked her and left before any of the other women shot accusatory glares her way. The rain had settled into a frigid drizzle that soaked everything it came into contact with. She shivered as she hurried down the long path in front of the inn and turned down the muddy street toward her house.

Why hadn't she taken Raven up on his offer to escort her in the coach? She lifted her skirts and hurried as fast as she could without breaking out into a sprint toward her home.

Panic urged her to push through the mud even though her legs burned, her lungs burned, and her conscience burned. She had to reach him before anyone else.

*Like Miles Petty.*

She didn't slow until she slammed the front door behind her. Raven hurried out of the back office, looking mad enough to chew glass. His dark eyes blazed at her.

"Where have you been?"

"I hurried home as fast as I could," she said, panting to catch her breath.

"Not fast enough."

"Raven." Her eyes filled with tears of sorrow, of regret. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm not the one you owe your apology to."

"Is that Patience?" Adam's clipped voice sounded from his office.

"Yes, sir." Raven narrowed his eyes on her.

"Bring her in, please."

"Let's go," he growled, his voice so cold, so unkind.

She kept her head down as she slowly made her way into the office to face her husband.

"Hello, Mrs. Steele."

She whipped her gaze over to Miles Petty. Beside him stood Constance Kendall, looking quite pleased with herself. But that

wasn't the worst of it. The entire town council sat in the room. As she walked in, every set of eyes snapped to her. Not one of them had a kind look for her.

*Oh, no. No, no, no.* She was too late.

"Ms. Kendall brought something to my attention," Miles started.

Constance lifted her chin and offered each of the town council members her most flirtatious smile. "I felt it was my duty to uncover the truth, you see. I'm simply beside myself that you'd keep a secret from me, Patti."

Patience took a breath to say something, but Raven reached behind her and squeezed her arm to silence her. She held her tongue and continued to glare at Constance.

"When you told the brides of Adam's heritage and then of his relationship to his own manservant, we were all shocked. Our own mayor, holding a secret like that from the entire town. Why, it's just such an upsetting blow. It really does play against his credibility, doesn't it?"

She looked at Adam, but he kept his dark gaze down, his expression solemn.

"You could only imagine my shock, as well." Miles smiled. The gesture did nothing to warm his cold, gray eyes. "I insisted that the entire council meet immediately to discuss this. We simply can't have a man like Adam Steele in a position of power, not now that we all know the truth."

Her mouth fell open. "He's a good man. His blood is just as red as yours. There's no reason why he shouldn't be Mayor."

Adam flicked a glance her way before pulling his attention back down. "Constance, please tell her what you told me."

When Constance pulled out the leather-bound journal and opened it to a page marked by a silk ribbon, Patience tried to charge her. Raven held her back.

"That's mine!"

Constance cleared her throat and read from the journal. "It seems

my ex-husband and his new wife are expecting.” She closed the journal and paused for dramatic effect. “To be a divorced woman is a scandal in its own right, but to marry a man without regard to what your soiled reputation would do to his...Tsk, tsk. Just how many more secrets are you hiding, Patience?”

Patience turned to run away, but her legs gave out and she collapsed as her world faded to black.

\* \* \* \*

He couldn’t believe it. His own wife, the woman he thought he knew and loved, betrayed him. *Ruined* him. The devastation threatened to take over and have him break character by showing emotion in public.

Damn her. How could she do this to him? To Raven? He couldn’t even look at her in the office. The way her lower lip trembled would have been his undoing.

He paced at the foot of her bed. She hadn’t even stirred since she’d fainted. If it weren’t for Raven’s quick reflexes, she would have crumbled to the floor. All the men rushed to her side, but Constance, that bitch, simply stood there, a smug smirk on her face.

What the hell was she thinking saying something like that, especially in front of the likes of Constance Kendall? Patience knew better. Constance must have done something to provoke her. She wouldn’t betray her family like that.

He knew her better than that.

Or so he thought.

But, then again, she’d never told him that she’d been married before. She wasn’t even a widow. Oh, no. She was divorced. Perfect.

“Just fucking perfect,” he muttered.

“Adam,” she whispered.

His anger dissolved as soon as he heard his wife’s sweet voice. He hurried to her side and sat down on the bed as he took her hand. “I’m

here.”

“Adam.”

“Patience, baby. I’m right here.”

“Forgive me.” She opened her eyes to slits and rested those gorgeous blue-gray eyes on him. Her blazing red hair spilled across the pillow and gave her even more of a glow.

“Let’s not talk about that now. How are you feeling?”

“Like a fool.”

He brushed the hair away from her face and caressed her porcelain cheek. “Aside from that.”

Her eyes shined with tears. “I didn’t tell her. You have to believe me.”

“Then how did she find out?”

“It was a simple slip.”

Adam stood and moved away from the bed. He had to move to work out this agitation clawing at him like a wild beast. “It was more than that by far, Patience. By now, the entire town knows.”

She sat up and swung her legs over the side. “Then let them know. Why hide it?”

“Why hide it, indeed.”

She visibly swallowed as she looked up at him. “You have every right to hate me, Adam. Not only did I betray your trust, I kept a secret from you.”

“One hell of a secret, my dear. Why? Can you tell me that? Why keep something like this from me? Do you have any idea the damage you’ve done?”

He’d believed in her, and it shattered him to know that she didn’t trust him enough to tell him about her past. What else had she kept from him? The knowledge that she’d managed to find a way into his heart only irritated him further.

She charged him and jerked him around. Anger, stark and vivid, blazed in her pretty eyes as she flashed them at him.

*Oh, shit.* They were ice blue.

"I am your wife."

"Apparently you've had practice with that justification."

Surprise and hurt flickered in her gaze. Her shoulders lowered as she seemed to deflate. She turned away from him and melted back down on the bed.

She had him angrier than he'd ever been. Although he felt like a heel for that comment, he wasn't about to apologize.

"What do you want from me?"

He labored his breathing as he moved to the door. Without turning around, he told her, "Why don't we start with the truth?"

Throwing open the door, he paused as the first of her sobs ripped into him. He drew in a breath and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

He jogged down the stairs, walked into the study, and slumped down in the chair facing the fire. Goddamn her for what she did to him. He wanted to hate her. Oh, how he wanted to hate her.

But he didn't. And why? He had no idea.

"She's crying," Raven stated as he walked into the study.

"I know."

"Perhaps you should—"

"I know what I'm doing!" In a burst of anger, he jumped to his feet and charged his brother. Raven stood there, unflinching, and stared at him with that stony expression he wore when they were in public. "She betrayed me, Raven. She betrayed us both."

He lifted his brow.

"Don't look at me like that. This is her doing."

Raven shook his head.

Adam stepped back so he could pace. He waved his hands as he continued to argue with himself. "The entire town knows now. It's no longer a secret." He fell back down into the chair and pinched the skin between his eyes. "I suppose it was bound to happen eventually, but the timing couldn't be worse. This ordinance goes to vote on Monday."

Raven thinned his lips.

“And then this business about her being married before.” He stood and paced again. “Why wouldn’t she tell me that? You would think that is something a husband should know.”

“Have you told her about Mina?”

Adam stilled and jerked his gaze to him as his gut clenched at the mention of his first wife’s name. “This is completely different.”

“Is it?”

“I’m a widower. I’m not divorced.”

“Does that matter?”

Adam sliced his fingers through his hair. “Hell yes, it matters.”

“I disagree.”

They both whipped around to see Patience standing in the entryway to the study, her icy blue eyes narrow as she rested them on Adam. She did not look happy at what she’d overheard.

“I came here to tell you the truth.” She glided into the room and took a seat on the chair farthest away from either of them. “I ask the same respect in return.”

“That seems reasonable,” Raven said.

Adam glared at him and debated whether to tell them both to go to hell or sit and listen to what she had to say. It wouldn’t matter what she said, he reasoned. He’d still do his damndest to not forgive her.

No matter how futile his efforts.

## Chapter 11

*Constance's Journal, Wednesday, April 19, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*My triumph over disgracing Patti kept me in a euphoric mood all day. I finally had my revenge for her stealing Adam from me. She's positively disgraced! Miles sees me exactly as I want him to—as a woman, an ally, and one with the perfect mind to help him to achieve his goals, as well as my own. If I cannot have the most powerful man in Port Steele, I will accept the second in command and simply grow him into that position. Once Miles rises above Adam in power, I'll marry him and finally be the most important woman in this town. It is, after all, why I agreed to journey out to this awful land of uncivilized miscreants.*

\* \* \* \*

Patience accepted the tea Raven handed her. She took her time stirring in her sugar and milk to avoid the topic she knew they all waited for. Without anything else to distract her, she drew in a shaky breath and began.

“I was married once before.”

“That much we’ve gathered,” Adam growled, and the bitterness in his tone sent cool chills washing up her spine.

“Adam,” Raven warned.

Adam set his jaw and waited, his dark gaze almost black as it kept her pinned to the spot.



She had to look away to gather her thoughts. She only thought of one thing when he looked at her like that. The heated lust in his eyes couldn't be mistaken, despite his cantankerous demeanor.

"His name is Walter. I met him when I was sixteen and fell madly in love with his charm. We married, and at first, everything was wonderful."

Adam cleared his throat and frowned.

"We tried to conceive. He wanted a dozen children, at least. Month after month went by and nothing. And then he started to grow angry at everything I did. At first he simply yelled." She pinched her brow into a frown as she recalled the horrors of her time with him. "And then one night when I broke the news to him that we'd failed again, he hit me."

"He what?" Adam sat up straight, nothing short of murder burning in his eyes. "That son of a bitch hurt you?"

She nodded and kept her gaze hidden. "He said there had to be something wrong with me and that's why I couldn't conceive." She closed her eyes against the pain of the truth. "No one wants a wife who can't bear children."

"Patience, that—"

Raven shushed his brother.

She went on before her bravado faded and she allowed the consuming ache to take her into silence. "I tried not to do or say anything to provoke him. When he started to see other women and parade them around in front of me, I did nothing for fear that he'd hit me. When he went off to war, I was happy to see him go. Deep down, I secretly wanted him to never return. At least then I'd be free of his tyranny."

With a shudder, she closed her eyes and shook her head. "So when I received a letter, the guilt ate at me. I wanted him dead. I held it for days, praying for forgiveness, positive it was my fault for his death."

"And then I read the letter. It seemed he wasn't dead after all, and

I waited for relief to wash over me. Instead I felt the weight of his oppression return tenfold, and it suffocated me. I couldn't stand to be married to him. He informed me that he'd met someone else and had taken up sides with the South to fight the North and wouldn't be returning. I took the letter to a judge in Boston, and he granted a divorce, I believe more due to Walter's desertion than his infidelity."

"How did you end up in Port Steele?" Adam asked.

"After the divorce, the US Army refused to send Walter's money home to me any longer. Not knowing what else to do, I followed a large group of women who talked excitedly about a new life in an uncharted land. It sounded so perfect that I snuck onto the ship with them and, well, here I am."

Adam tilted his head as he studied her. "And you paid no mind of how you were going to live once you made your way out West?"

She shook her head and laughed through her tears. "It didn't matter. I was free. No matter my fate, it was mine. I couldn't wait to start my new life. I'm here now, and I'm yours. You, Adam, are my new life. You and Raven. I'm frightened out of my wits of you no longer wanting me. I wasn't enough to hold Walter's affections. What makes me believe I have the power to hold two men's affections?"

Adam rose to his feet and let out a long sigh as he held her in his gaze. He approached and knelt down in front of her, took her hand in his, and brushed his lips across her knuckles. Her heart fluttered as she waited for him to pass judgment.

"My love, I've unfairly judged you. I'm so sorry for what you've gone through."

She tried to smile but failed miserably and gave up. Guilt ate at her for what she'd done. "And I'm so sorry for what I've put you through."

When he smiled, his gaze dancing up at her, she wanted to sing. She loved that handsome smile. Reaching down, she rested her hand on his cheek. He turned his head and kissed her palm.

"His wife's name was Mina." Raven moved and knelt down next

to Adam. He looked at his brother. “She needs to know. It’s the only way you’ll finally move on.”

Adam moved to his feet and backed away, his color draining. “No. It’s not necessary.”

Raven stood as well. “Adam, talk to her. What are you afraid of?”

He snapped his brow into a frown and turned away, his massive shoulders rising and lowering.

Patience rose and went to him. “I know the difficulties of letting go of a memory. You think by telling me about her that you are somehow betraying her memory, but you couldn’t be more wrong.” She easily turned him around and placed her hand over his heart. “Mina lives in here, Adam. Don’t fear her memory. Cherish it. Loving me doesn’t make you love her any less.”

The deep lines in his face softened as his lips slowly curled into an easy smile. “You, my wife, are truly incredible. I promise that I will never raise my hand to you. My love for you will never fade. It will never cease.”

“I second that.” Raven stood behind her.

She trembled at the feeling of having the two men she loved sandwiching her. Raven pushed up against her, urging her into Adam. Her husband reached up and cupped his hand behind her neck, pulling her lips to his and taking them. He devoured her, opening her mouth with his, using his tongue to explore the recesses.

This kiss wasn’t fast or greedy, but that didn’t make it any less intense. As Adam made sweet lip love to her, Raven touched his lips to the back of her neck and feasted. She didn’t even bother to fight to control her senses. When these two men touched her, when they loved her, she lost all sense of control.

“Raven, I believe it’s time to take our wife to my room.”

*Our wife?*

They led her up the stairs, beyond her room the three of them shared when they made love, and down to the last door on the left. When they arrived, Adam nodded for Raven to enter, but kept

Patience out in the hall.

His hand curved around her neck, turning her so his lips brushed hers. "Tonight we take you, Patience. As our lover, as our wife."

"Haven't we already been doing that?" She let out a shaky breath.

He chuckled in a deep, rough tone that had her burning for him to take her into his room and introduce her to new powers of the flesh. He trailed kisses along her jaw and down her neck, scraping his teeth against her tender skin. A tremble ripped through her.

"There's sex, and then there's making love. Tonight we make love. I've been holding back with you, my dear. But no more. It's time you know me, all of me. That includes Raven. He's just as much your husband as I am."

The door opened behind her, and Raven popped his head out, his gaze so heated and dark that it ignited the inferno already destroying her from the inside out.

"We're ready." He took her from Adam and led her inside, his eyes never leaving her face. "Patience, before we move forward there are rules we all need to agree to."

"If you tell us no," Adam told her, "then we stop. We will not continue with anything that makes you scared to the point that it overtakes your pleasure."

"But a little fear is good." Raven lifted her hair and kissed the back of her neck as he led her over to an enormous bed, the biggest she'd ever seen. At the head of the bed rested a large headboard with the most intricate carving of day turning to night. A hole resided in the upper left corner depicting the sun, and another hole rested on the right depicting the moon. Something told her those holes had been strategically placed.

Raven pushed her down to the bed. Adam moved beside her and undid the first button of her high-neck top. Excitement over what they had in store for her rocked through her system.

As Adam unbuttoned her top, Raven went to work on her skirts. The act was slow, torturous, as they undressed her. Once they had her

naked, they stood back and studied her, ardent hunger darkening both of their gazes. She allowed them to look at her without embarrassment, without reservation. These men loved her, and she loved them.

“Beautiful,” Adam whispered. He ran his hand along the large erection struggling to be free. “See what you do to me? I’m almost blind from how hard I am for you, Patience.”

Oh, how his words affected her. Her nipples pinched to tight little peaks. Adam dropped his gaze to her breasts and licked his lips. He removed his shirt, and she stared at his broad, muscular bare chest. Raven tossed his shirt aside as well, and Patience sucked in a breath. Although Adam’s chest sported more coarse, black hair than Raven’s, they were both equally sculpted and glorious.

Raven nodded as his hands moved to his pants. He unfastened them and pulled them off, leaving him naked. His hard cock distended from his body. Her mouth watered as she stared at it. She wanted to taste him again, wanted to take the length of his rigid flesh between her lips.

He’d distracted her enough she didn’t see that Adam had undressed as well. Her husband came to her, stretching her out as he joined her on the bed. She wrapped her arms around his strong neck, loving the feel of his flesh, so hot, so male.

“In this room,” he murmured as he licked and nipped at her lips, “there is no propriety. We say what we want, how we want it, and with whatever words we want to use. Do not hold back from us when you are in here.”

Raven joined them on the bed, pressing up behind her, his erection tucked between her back slit. When he bit at her shoulder in a heated nip, a blast of desperate need exploded inside her. She wiggled back, begging for more contact.

“Talk to us, sweetheart.” Raven nuzzled her neck, licking and teasing and driving her mad with want. “Tell us what you want.”

She opened her eyes and looked up at Adam from beneath her

lashes. Dare she say what she really wanted? All her life, she'd been taught to speak in polite, proper means. It always felt so foreign to her, so hard to really say what she had on her mind when she had to worry about how to say it.

"I can see our wife will need a little persuasion." Adam pushed her to her back and then nibbled her neck, her shoulder, down her collarbone, and continued down. Patience arched her back and moaned when he covered one of her hard nipples with his burning lips.

"Tell us what you want," Raven said again. He leaned in and settled his lips over hers, tasting her, teasing her. Licking them open, he then kissed her with fervent need, and she released a whimper into his mouth.

Adam had moved to the other breast and feasted on her flesh. She arched higher, needing more, so much more.

And then they both pulled back. She blinked back her haze and looked at them. "Why stop?"

"We're waiting for you to tell us what you want." Raven kissed her nose.

"More," she admitted.

"More what?"

"Be honest with us." Adam licked at her nipple. "Is this what you crave?"

"Yes."

"What about this?" Raven captured her lips in a kiss worthy of a cry. She did exactly that as he pulled back.

"Yes."

"Tell us," Adam whispered as he trailed ever downward, his lips and tongue wicked as they left a searing path wherever he touched.

"Please."

"Please, what? Patience, we want you to tell us. Nothing pleases us more than to have our woman tell us exactly what she wants, what she likes. Use words, baby."

She hesitated and drew in a breath. To hell with propriety. She was desperate in her lust for them. She ached deep in the depths of her core and needed to have both of them filling her before she died from the torture.

“Touch me, Adam.”

His gaze brightened with wild hunger. “Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“Here?” He placed a finger on her stomach.

She shook her head. “Lower.”

“Here?” Keeping his hand on her flesh, he moved it down painfully slowly.

“L-Lower.”

His finger slipped between the slick folds of her pussy. “Here?”

She moaned in response. Just one brush of his finger, one whisper from his lips, and she’d shatter. She lifted her hips and spread her legs.

“I can smell your arousal for us,” Adam rasped and lowered his head between her legs. “Your pussy is glistening with your own sweet syrup, my love.”

He didn’t have to tell her. She felt the hot liquid coating her pussy lips from the first kiss these wicked brothers delivered.

“Taste me,” she whimpered. “Oh, please. Adam, I need you.”

“And what would you like me to do?” Raven asked.

Adam carried out his orders and stabbed his tongue between her wet folds, flicking her tormented nerves, building the sweet sensations ever higher.

“Let me taste you. Oh, Raven. I’ll scream if I don’t have something in my mouth.”

Raven adjusted and rested his glowing erection at her lips, a large, glistening drop shining on the tip. She licked at it, savoring the taste. She then sucked his flesh into her mouth just in the nick of time.

Adam attacked her pussy without mercy. A never-ending assault. The pleasure grew violently within her, threatening to destroy her.

Her senses hummed as the burning intensified. She moved faster, bobbing her head, driving Raven's cock in and out of her mouth in time with Adam's assault on her pussy.

She was so close, her orgasm just out of reach.

Raven groaned and powered into her mouth. "Yes. That's it. Fuck me with that sweet mouth, Patience. Jesus, yes."

His naughty words drove her that much closer. She shouldn't find it arousing to hear him say such foul words to her, but it was. Oh God, how it was.

Adam pushed two fingers into the slippery entrance of her pussy, and she cried out. He stretched her, scissoring his fingers inside her, lifting her all that much higher.

And then he pulled his mouth back but kept his fingers easing in and out of her. In desperation, she arched her back and lifted her hips off the bed, begging for him to finish what he'd started.

"Tell me," he whispered and kissed her inner thigh. His breath, so hot, made her shudder. "Tell me how much you want me. Oh, my sweet Patience. Let me hear the words."

Lust took over, and she threw everything else to the wind. "Fuck me, Adam. Fuck me with your mouth."

"That's my girl." And he did.

She sucked Raven's hard, glistening cock back between her lips, her brazen command sending her into a wild frenzy of carnal need. Adam had her willing to surrender anything to him, just for him to relieve this sweet agony twisting inside her. He already had her heart, body, and soul. She didn't know what else she could give him, but she would.

"Oh, Patti." Raven fisted her hair and drove his cock deeper, increasing his pace as his drive for release took over. "Suck me. Oh, harder. That's perfect. Sweet and fucking perfect. Yes. Ah!"

Hot streams of thick semen shot out the end of his cock and down her throat. She moaned in appreciation of the taste and sucked even harder the closer Adam had her to her own orgasm.



Adam sucked her clitoris between his lips and flicked relentlessly. She tried to scream as she exploded into a million pieces, but her climax was so violent it stopped the breath in her lungs and robbed her of her voice.

Raven leaned down and took a nipple into his mouth, scraping his teeth over the end and then gently biting down, and her climax came ripping back as wave after wave slammed into her.

Adam covered her other nipple with his lips, and she reached down to weave her fingers in her men's hair as they feasted on her flesh. Adam then rocked his hips and slid his heavy cock into the slippery entrance of her pussy, and she hissed in a breath.

He thrust powerfully inside her, over and over, faster and faster. He growled, the sound one of primal lust, as he drove closer to his own release.

She lost all sense of reality. He powered faster, harder, slamming his flesh into hers. Her entire body jolted as their hips met over and over, his cock filling her, burning her in his furious, blazing search for release.

"Patti. Oh, Jesus. My baby. I love you. So much. My sweet wife. I. Love. You!" He erupted with a holler and threw his head back, pumping his life into her until he lost his rhythm and collapsed against her, gasping for air.

His drive for release had set her want for him on fire once again. They couldn't be done with her.

She rolled Adam over and straddled him. He widened his eyes at her, but she didn't explain a thing. Instead she kissed him, hard and hungry, conveying to him what she wanted.

"I love you," she whispered against his lips.

He framed her face in his hands and lifted his head to really kiss her, taking control by consuming her with his lips. She felt his erection grow between her legs. He nudged his erection between her thighs, deep through the slick folds of her pussy, and tapped at her weeping entrance.

“Hold her still.”

Raven moved behind her and grabbed her hips, holding her in place. She struggled but couldn’t move. In a whisper of a whimper, she stilled to see what came next.

Adam barely moved his hips and slid the end of his cock into her aching pussy. “Do you like that?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you want more?” Raven asked behind her.

“Please,” she pleaded. “I need more.”

She needed them both inside her at the same time.

Raven easily lifted her off Adam. She whimpered her protest and tried to break free, but he had a firm hold on her. Realizing how futile her attempts were, she relaxed in his arms and turned.

“I love you,” Raven said before taking her lips with his, “my wife.”

She licked at his lips. “And I love you, my husband.”

“Tonight, we’ll love you completely.”

She frowned. *Weren’t they already doing that?*

He then lay her down on the bed above him, taking Adam’s position, and Adam his. With eyes so dark and heated with lust, Raven stared at her, holding her there with nothing more than a look. Without looking away, he pushed his cock into her pussy, and she breathed out a moan in pleasure.

She tried to close her eyes, but he nipped at her lips. “No. Keep them open. Look at me, my Patti. My wife. I want to watch your beautiful face as we take you the way husbands should take their wife.”

*Oh, dear Jesus.* She writhed on top of him, pushing back as she felt Adam’s slick penis press against her tiny back entrance. He retreated and then penetrated farther, pushing into her gently, slowly.

And it was killing her.

“Faster. Oh, Adam. I need it faster.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She rocked back, forcing him deep into her rear.

“Jesus, fuck!” He slammed his hips into hers.

She screamed into Raven’s mouth and drove his cock into her by pushing down.

“Holy shit, Patience.” Raven sucked on her bottom lip.

Feeling a sense of power she’d never felt in her life, she set the pace and control who entered her and how fast. Rocking her hips out, she pushed Adam’s cock deep into her while withdrawing Raven’s. She then rolled forward, and shards of intense sensations shot through her as Raven eased into her while Adam pulled out.

“That’s it,” Adam groaned. “Fuck us, baby. Just like that. Nice and slow.”

“Just like that,” Raven crooned in agreement.

Each slow movement put her through agony and ecstasy. Pleasure burned inside her with every stroke. She pushed herself higher and higher, the burn hotter and more intense. Not able to stop herself, she moved faster, driving herself closer to her release.

The air ripped in and out of her lungs as she rocked harder, her body tense, tight, as the coil twisting inside her snapped. She exploded and literally cried, the tears streaming down her face, as she lost her rhythm, the intensity and pleasure too much to control.

Adam and Raven moved in perfect time to keep her crying, her orgasm at its peak. Her bones shattered, and she collapsed against Raven’s chest. Her body clenched her men, convulsing around them as she continued to cry out in her blinding ecstasy.

Raven drove deep and held his position as he gave into his own release, pumping thick jets of cream high inside her. Adam thrust hard and fast as he powered his way to his climax in long, smooth strokes. Faster. He set a violent pace and buried his cock into her ass, over and over, before stiffening and growling out as his release took over.

Patience melted on top of Raven as her knees gave out. She flattened out and laid her head on his chest, her body unable to move any more than that. Adam brushed her hair away from her sweat-

covered face and lay down behind her, pulling her off Raven and over to him.

He curled to her, holding her tight, his entire body shaking from the aftermath. Raven turned to his side and backed up against her.

And she fell asleep cradled between her two lovers, her best friends.

Her husbands.

## Chapter 12

*Patience's Journal, Monday, April 24, 1865*

*Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*Today is the day of the vote for the new ordinance. I already know how Miles Petty and Ron Arnett are going to vote. Sheriff Caleb Brock and Logan Gallagher have sensible heads on their shoulders and will vote against it, I'm sure. Which leaves Adam. Will the council allow him to vote now that they know his true heritage? If it passes, he will have to step down as the town mayor. There are some in town who are demanding he step down regardless. He says it doesn't bother him, but deep down, I know it does. How can the people of this town turn their backs on the man who created it?*

\* \* \* \*

Patience fixed Adam's collar and then kissed him on the cheek. "You look magnificent."

His eyes glimmered wickedly as he smiled down at her. "Thank you, my wife."

"You're welcome, my husband."

"I wish you'd allow me to accompany you." Raven stood in the corner, his arms folded in front of him, a stony expression on his face.

"He won't even allow me to go," Patience said with a pout.

"As I've already told you both, it's too dangerous. The town is in a volatile mood. My brother, having you there could provoke those who support the ordinance."

Raven narrowed his glare on his brother. "Then you are in danger as well. They know of your bloodline, Adam. It's just as dangerous for you."

"I'm the head of the council. I must be there to lead the meeting."

"All the more reason I should be there. You can't take on the entire town on your own."

Patience watched as Raven's protective nature surfaced. And then she understood. Raven didn't present himself as Adam's manservant to protect his own hide. He did it to protect Adam.

"I agree with Raven," Patience spoke up. "Please, Adam. Listen to reason."

He kissed her. "I'll be fine. The Gallaghers will be there, and there isn't one of them smaller than Raven or myself. The men who work for them are loyal. And Caleb Brock will be there. He's a good sheriff and isn't one to back down from a fight."

She frowned as his comment sent a ripple of panic through her. Memories of the dance came flooding back. He'd nursed his bruised jaw for days after that. She couldn't bear him getting hurt again. This time, he may end up with more than a bruised jaw.

"Adam, I'm scared."

He clenched his jaw, and although he forced a smile, she knew better. He was scared, too. But, damn his foolish pride, he refused to back down.

"Not to worry, my love. Stay here and play a nice game with Raven. I'll be back soon." He gave her a final kiss and walked out the door, into the rain and darkness.

She stood there, shivering from the cool chills the wetness brought, and watched him until he climbed into his coach and pulled out. Only then did she drag in a breath and allow Raven to close the door.

"What if something happens, Raven? What if someone starts something and we aren't there?"

He sighed and led her over to the sitting room. "I have to believe

he knows what he's doing."

She wished she held the same belief.

But, deep down, she knew better. If her meeting with the brides was any indication of how the men would act when in the same room, arguing on the same topic, it would not end well. The brides nearly broke into a fight, and they were supposed to be the more civilized of the genders. She could only imagine how the men would react.

"Stop fretting, Mrs. Steele."

She hated that he had to act so prim and proper in front of the staff. He was just as much her husband as Adam. *Why should they hide it?* She loved them both equally, proudly, and didn't care who knew.

But if she hadn't done enough to ruin Adam's reputation, announcing that his wife was also having relations with his brother—at the same time—would certainly do it.

She hated society and its standards.

"Will you be wanting tea this evening?"

"No. My stomach is too upset to even think about putting anything in it."

"Shall I ask Mrs. Chang to retire for the evening, then?" His eyes danced in silent mirth. But, even as he hinted at something that should have both their bodies heating in anticipation, their deep-seated worry for Adam won out.

If she remained here with Raven, eventually one of two things would happen. Her worry would give her a pounding headache and she'd retire early, lay awake in the darkness and wait for her husband to return unscathed. Or, and this was the much more likely scenario, she'd break down and cry over not being there for Adam. Raven would escort her up to her room, and then he would hold her. And then kiss her.

And, ultimately, make love to her.

She wanted that now, wanted to be held and told that everything would be all right. But she wanted it from both of her husbands.

Jumping to her feet, she hurried over to the door. She would not allow Adam to go through this alone. It was her fault that the entire town knew of his heritage, of his relationship to Raven, and now the fact that he'd married a divorced woman. She couldn't sit back and do nothing.

"Where do you think you are going?" Raven demanded and chased after her.

"Where *we* are going," she corrected and grabbed his hand, and dragged him outside. "Is there another coach?"

"Yes, but it will take me time to ready it."

She shook her head and pulled him toward town. "There's no time to waste. We have to go to him, Raven. We have to."

He stopped her with a jerk of his arm. "You heard what he said."

"And so did you."

They stood there staring at each other, the rain beating down on them steadily. After several seconds, Raven nodded.

"Allow me to fetch your cover."

\* \* \* \*

Four of the five members of the town council stood outside the building as Adam pulled up in his coach. He stepped out and released a weary sigh. They appeared to be in the middle of a heated conversation. He slowed as he moved toward them, mentally preparing himself for the battle that lay ahead.

"That has nothing to do with his vote and you know it," Logan Gallagher snapped. "Adam has been against this insanity from the onset."

Judge Ron Arnett snorted as he held a match to his pipe. "It isn't insanity any more than allowing those heathens to steal our jobs."

"They are men, flesh and blood, just like the rest of us. What makes us any better?"

"The fact that you even have to ask that truly shows your



ignorance, Gallagher. You employ them, which makes you part of the problem.”

“You son of a bitch. At least I pay an honest man for an honest day’s work. They earn their keep just as every man does.”

“At what cost?” Arnett puffed on his pipe. “Logan, we have good white men who need work. This town won’t possibly grow if we can’t employ them.”

“Aaron Lambert has been working on opening a bank here,” Sheriff Caleb Brock announced. “With the work there, along with the new deputy positions I’ll need to keep the peace, there’s work.”

“Why are we avoiding the obvious issue?” Miles Petty, always the sleazy diplomat trying to find an angle to better his position, spoke up. “These are issues our mayor should be addressing. He’s failing us, gentlemen. He’s deceived us.”

“How?” Logan demanded. “Because he hasn’t shared every detail of his personal life with the rest of this damn town? None of us have, Miles, and it needs to stay that way.”

They exchanged knowing glares.

Arnett lifted his pipe to draw the attention to him. “I believe it’s time we brought it to a vote. If Adam is forced to step down, Miles will be next in line. At least then we’d have a real man in the position and not a half-breed married to a blemished woman.”

That did it. Let them insult Adam all they wanted, but the second they brought Patience into the argument there would be bloodshed.

Petty forced a smile as he spotted Adam. “Hello, Adam. I wasn’t quite sure whether you’d attend the meeting or not, considering your situation.”

If only he could kill the bastard with his bare hands and not hang for it. The corrupt judge, too, for that matter. “And what situation is that?”

“Why, you’re an Indian, of course.” He said it like he’d just announced the most disgusting thing.

“I’m the same man I was when the fine people of this town voted

me into office, Miles.” Adam turned from him and rested his glare on Arnett. “And the last I checked, I’m still the mayor of this town, and the decision to bring anything to a vote resides with me.”

Nothing was up for negotiation and the look Adam shot Ron conveyed as much.

“Perhaps we should take our places,” Miles announced.

Ron nodded and walked inside with Miles. Caleb followed them in, but Logan fell back and waited for them to disappear before turning to Adam, his expression somber.

“I’m sorry this is happening.”

“So am I, Logan. So am I.”

“I can’t help but take some of the blame for all this. Having the brides here has created so much animosity in this town.”

Adam nodded. “Jealousy is a powerful beast. But rest assured, my friend, you did the right thing. Having the women here has breathed new life into Port Steele.”

“If this ordinance passes, you know they’ll force you to step down.”

“I know.”

“What will you do?”

Adam had been thinking of the answer to that question since Ron first brought up the idea of passing the ordinance in Port Steele. “I’d travel north. South. East. West. Anywhere that my family would be welcome without prejudice.”

He patted Adam on the back. “I pray your acceptance requires no travel. Let’s step inside and do whatever it takes to see that this insanity is put to rest, once and for all.”

Adam waited until Logan walked inside. He then drew in a deep breath and stepped into the dance hall. Besides the church, it was the only building large enough to house the entire town. With the language he knew the men would use in an attempt to persuade others to their side, the church wouldn’t be appropriate.

As soon as he stepped foot inside the dance hall, the crowd fell

silent—aside from a few whispers that did little to boost his confidence. Immediately his memory thrust him back to him as a child, the ridicule and prejudice almost too much. And this time he didn't have his big brother here to protect him. This time, he was on his own.

With his shoulders back and his head held high, he started toward the only empty chair at the table strategically placed where the piano usually resided. Miles and Ron sat to his right, Logan and Caleb to his left. Already having their minds made up, the town members who favored the ordinance sat on the right side of the room, while those against it sat on the left. The chairs were all taken, and still people continued to pour into the room.

"Let's call this meeting to order," Adam said above the murmurs in the crowd. The men and women settled. "This special meeting is to discuss the ordinance to ban Indians from within the city limits."

"To hell with discussing," a man yelled from the crowd. "Let's take a vote already."

Several others shouted in agreement.

"With a savage at the head of the table, we won't get a fair vote!"

"I demand he step down."

"As do I!"

The bellowing from the crowd increased, and with it, his faith in the town he'd created faltered. He should have known better than to place his belief in anyone other than himself. The betrayal left a bitter taste in his mouth, as well as a twisting in his gut.

He lowered his head and debated whether to just give up. They wouldn't listen to him, no matter what he had to say.

And then the most beautiful voice stood out above the crowd. He looked up to see his stunning wife standing on a chair, her hands cupped around her mouth as she yelled.

"Allow him to speak!"

What the hell was she doing here? And, *goddamn* it, beside her stood his bullheaded brother.

Adam whipped his attention to Logan, who nodded in understanding. He met the looks of his brothers, and they all pushed through the crowd to surround Patience. With Raven's help, the men led her up to the front of the hall and over to Adam.

He pushed past Ron and Miles and ran to her side. "What are you doing here?"

Her pretty eyes were as blue as the clearest sky. Determination shined in her expression, and although it scared the hell out of him to have her here to witness his downfall, his chest swelled with pride.

"I'm not about to stand aside. This is my fight, too."

"Patience."

"Adam," Raven began as he joined them, his expression no longer stone, but one of compassion, "you must tell them."

Shock and horror flooded his system. He shook his head. "No."

"Tell them what?" Patience looked between them.

"Adam, it's the only way."

"No, damn it. I'd just as soon leave this town than tell them."

"Tell them what!" Patience demanded again.

Raven turned to her. "What Adam went through when we were children."

"Adam?"

He nodded and moved back to his position, quite possibly for the last time. He glanced at his lovely wife, his love for her bursting inside him. She risked her own safety to fight for him. Why wouldn't he risk everything for her?

He then glanced at Raven, who gave him a single nod. And he knew what he needed to do.

It would expose him in a way he'd rather take to the grave, but it just might save his family, if not the entire town. "For as long as I can remember, I've fought against a prejudice brought on by fear and intolerance. As a child, I was forced to ignore the most hateful actions against me. Half Sioux. Half white. Accepted by no one."

He made eye contact with Patience. "Until now. I've finally found

a home in Port Steele. I have a striking wife who I love very much. If this ordinance passes, we'll be forced to leave the town my brother and I created. My family loves it here."

"But she misled you!" Constance Kendall cried out. "She's divorced. She lied about being one of the brides! She was a stowaway on the ship that brought us to Port Steele. What other secrets is she keeping?"

Adam directed his attention to Constance. "And what secrets do you hide, Miss Kendall? What brought you to Port Steele? Perhaps your loose tongue drove all your suitors away in Boston as it did here."

Constance colored deep and dropped her jaw. Her eyes flooded with tears as she looked to Miles for support. He remained silent, as Adam knew he would.

*The worthless coward.*

"My friends, I stand before you as your mayor. I'd give my life to protect this town and everyone in it, regardless of your heritage. To me, you are all men and women. I place no labels on you. Today, I ask you to do the same."

"I've known these men since they first came to this area," Hattie Red stated. "They are good men. Solid morals. If Mr. Steele is forced out of Port Steele, you leave our fate in the hands of Miles Petty. Is that what you want?"

Miles colored as dark as Constance. Finally, he stood and addressed the crowd. "I would make an excellent mayor. I care greatly for the advancement of this town."

"You care about yourself," Logan stated as he stood as well. "Let's get to the point, here. Seattle's town council is already regretting their decision to pass the ordinance. I've heard rumor that they are going to reverse the decision before the year is out. Let's send them a message that we will not allow the ignorance that blinded them to also blind us."

"Hear, hear!" someone from the crowd shouted, and the room

erupted into applause.

*Take the vote now.* Adam looked to Raven, who seemed to have sent him his thoughts.

"I need a show of hands for the ordinance," Adam hollered. More hands than he would have thought shot straight up into the air, including Miles's and Ron's. To his shock, even several women held up their hands.

But it still wasn't the majority.

"And opposed?"

Two-thirds of the room had hands up in the air. As those voting against the ordinance looked around and saw that they held the majority, applause and shouts of glee resounded throughout the hall. With a quick glance at Miles and Ron, Adam saw that they both shook their heads as they sank down in their chairs.

"The ordinance is denied." Adam grinned as he announced the results and the worry weighing down on him finally lifted.

In a burst of anger, Miles Petty jumped to his feet and bellowed above the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, there is still the matter of whether or not we want a man like Adam Steele in such an important position. I ask that you—"

"Shut up, Petty." A man's voice in the back barked out.

"Now see here!"

"You heard them," Adam crooned, that feeling of triumph euphoric. "Shut up, Petty."

Logan nodded and grinned. "I say we adjourn."

"I second that."

## **Chapter 13**

*Patience's Journal, Wednesday, May 24, 1865  
Port Steele, Washington Territory*

*It's been a full month since the town voted down the ordinance that would have forced my family to leave Port Steele. Adam seems in the best spirit these days. Raven still stands as Adam's manservant, but I believe that is a front so that he may protect his little brother. News of the remaining confederate soldiers' surrender has brought new hope to our small town. As our nation is reunited and works to repair the damage from the war, so does Port Steele. With each ship new settlers arrive, and we are thriving as our town grows. I am beside myself with happiness and keep pinching myself to wake. It all seems too good to be true, but as my husbands often remind me after the three of us have made love, we all deserve our happiness.*

*I've found mine.*

# **THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allie K. Adams writes as Eve Adams when a sizzling, M/F love story isn't enough. She currently resides with her family in southwest Montana, where the west is still wild and that's just the way she likes it. Please visit her website for more information or to contact her. She loves to hear from readers, so please don't be shy!

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