

Because of a Woman

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Dedication

This book is dedicated foremost to the Lord, who inspires me in all things and to my family, who encouraged, supported and believed in me. Because of a Woman is especially dedicated to my husband and to my mother for their unfailing support, patience, guidance and complete devotion to my work.

Special Thanks

My deepest gratitude and heartfelt thanks go out to Melissa and Jeneal for their tireless work on my behalf.

Chapter One

The summer sun beat down on his sandy head. He could see the clouds forcing their way across the sky and smiled ruefully, pondering how and why he was there. It was all because of a woman -- wasn't everything because of a woman? At that moment, he cursed having ever seen Elizabeth Marie Dalton; cursed having seen her sitting on top of her jet black mare with her sharp hazel eyes, her bewitching figure and her wild, red hair whipping in the wind. The very memory twanged his stomach painfully.

Aggravated, he pulled on the ropes cruelly binding his wrists to a large, pretentious White Oak. He'd wondered about the probability of an oak tree growing in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert but was now long past caring.

The turkey vultures had stopped circling now; some sat on the tree branches, some at his feet, waiting for him to weaken. He should have weakened by now as three days had passed.

He was naked, save the underwear they permitted him to keep on; the rest of his body was horribly sun-burnt.

He addressed the vultures, "Well, fellas, at least your meal will be well-done."

He looked up, and there she was -- sitting on that pristine mare, which she aptly called Velvet, and laughing at his comment.

Shaking his head, he chuckled to himself. "You're back, are you? I wish you'd quit haunting me!" He'd seen her several times since they lashed him to that darned old oak.

"Have I been haunting you, Pax?"

"Humph! You're talking back? I'm even more delirious than I thought."

She laughed a laugh which drove him even closer to the point of insanity than the sun did. At one point in his past he'd loved hearing it.

"It is the sun, perhaps? You seem to have had enough of it -- the sun I mean."

He muttered a half intelligible yes.

She dismounted and the spurs on her boots clanged when she landed. She snaked one finger down his muscular chest causing his burn to sting. "I almost regret having to take you down; you look so...delicious tied to that tree."

"Then don't, I'd rather die than owe my life to you."

"Really?" she smirked. "Then prepare for disappointment. I'd hate to have your death on my conscience." She removed a worn leather flask from her saddle bag. "Now, I know if I take you off that tree you're going to try to strangle me, so I think I shall tend to you first. I

hope you don't mind."

Pouring some water in her hand she smoothed it across his forehead. Then spread the water over his dry, cracked lips.

"I'm not hallucinating -- you are real! What are you doing here?" he asked as she rubbed some cooling ointment over his chest.

"Why do you think I'm here?"

Having always despised it when someone answered a question with another question, he growled, "You really love annoying me, don't you?"

"It's my favourite pastime," she smiled, placing the flask against his lips and pouring water into his mouth.

He coughed when the liquid hit his throat, but as he grew accustomed to it he gulped thirstily. She removed the flask after he'd had a meager portion.

"You shouldn't have too much all at once."

"Thank you," he said, truly appreciating the Adam's ale.

Studying him for a moment, she opened her mouth as if to say something important, but merely smiled and said that he was welcome.

He watched appreciatively as she tenderly eased some of his discomfort.

"I really do love you, Elizabeth Marie," he declared unexpectedly.

"I think you're delirious!" she stated, and withdrew a knife from her belt. "I brought you some clothes."

The knife severed the ropes cleanly, and she caught him as he came down; his weight was too much for her though and she stumbled. He took advantage of this, tripping her. As they tumbled to the ground he tried to pin her with what remaining strength he had, which wasn't much. Suddenly, he felt something cold and hard pressing below where his belt would've normally hung. He quickly loosened his grip.

"Did you think a couple of lovey-dovey words would make me lower my guard, Pax? I know how much you hate me now," she snarled, clutching the knife tightly.

"There was always hoping, Lizzy."

"I always detested it when you called me Lizzy!" She kneed his groin with considerable oomph, and rolled him off her.

While he slouched there recovering, she stood up, retrieved the clothes she'd brought and threw them at him. "I seem to have forgotten boots -- sorry."

Mounting her horse, she tossed him the water and another leather flask.

"Good luck, Pax."

"So, you're leaving me again, are you?"

"You're not surprised."

"No."

Painfully, he got to his feet, blistered and sore from her assault and the time hanging on the tree.

The noise of a gunshot rang through the air. Startled, Elizabeth turned her horse sharply, and after a concerned glance at Paxton, spurred her to a canter.

As Velvet sped in the direction the shot had come from, Elizabeth took out her gun and held it ready. She couldn't yet see who'd fired the

shot because of the desert dunes and brush, but she was sure the perpetrator was no friend.

Paxton watched her ride off, grabbed the clothes, rushed behind the large oak, and hurried to put them on. Periodically, he peered around the tree to see if anyone was coming. To be caught in such a compromising, not to mention embarrassing, position could be dangerous.

Elizabeth saw the rider clearly and her stomach flipped in despair. She had hoped she would never see him again.

"Miss Eliza, er, should I call ya Mrs. Reign? Ya sure are pretty."

He sat confidently on his horse, leering at her.

Saying nothing, she eyed the large rattler he'd evidently just shot. Her heart pounded as she thanked the Lord that Willy was not too bright. He'd obviously not considered that his decision to shoot the snake would alert her to his presence and give her time to react.

"Dinner." He licked his thin lips and then dismounted to pick up the dead snake. "Gotta be careful picking these beggars up," he grated. "Some creatures just don't give up; even when they're dead they'll still attack ya." Willy gave Elizabeth a sideways glance and with great care bagged the snake.

"What'cha doin' here, Liza? Mr. Stanton told you to stay away."

"I'm just burying my past, Willy," she replied coolly.

"So he's dead then?"

"Must have just died; the vultures were tearing at his flesh, but his blood was still warm."

"Tearing at his flesh were they?" Willy smiled viciously, envisioning the gruesome spectacle with conspicuous delight. "Good! Mister Stanton'll like hearing that. But, he won't be none too pleased to hear ya came here and..." he paused and looked her up and down disdainfully, "... dressed like that too."

"Mr. Stanton doesn't have to know," she retorted, tightening the grip on her gun.

Ignoring her statement and its implications, he conjectured, "Guess now Mr. Reign has passed on, sadly..." again that sardonic grin, "Stanton's free to marry ya."

"You guess so, huh?" she murmured, glancing back toward the oak.

Noticing her momentary distraction, Willy was suddenly filled with suspicion, doubting Elizabeth had really buried her husband. Indeed, it was more likely she'd freed him and was now anxious for his escape. His eyes narrowed. She was never supposed to find out about their plans to crucify Paxton. It was sheer luck that Stanton had noticed her listening in. Stanton, not trusting her, had promptly set Willy as Elizabeth's watch dog and he'd done a first-rate job for at least three days. Today, however, he'd dozed off because he'd drunk too much the night before. About an hour later he'd discovered Elizabeth had disappeared. It didn't take him long to figure out where; only about a quarter of an hour.

While she was preoccupied, Willy moved toward her; he could not let Elizabeth or her husband escape. Faster than she could react, he seized her leg and yanked her from her saddle. Kneeling down on one knee, he grabbed her torso and hoisted her against his upright knee, placing his sweaty palm against her throat.

"Ya wouldn't be lying t'me now would ya, darlin?"

She gasped for air and fished around for her gun which had been knocked out of her grasp when she hit the ground. Unable to locate it, she grabbed a fist full of dirt and threw it backward hoping to get some in Willy's eyes. It worked, but not to her advantage; he only tightened his grip around her throat and she soon blacked out.

Willy released his hold on Elizabeth and looked toward the oak, hoping to catch some glimpse of movement or a hint of his quarry. Paxton, however, had already vacated that particular tree in search of both his wife and the origin of the gunshot. From behind a Western Juniper tree, he quietly watched as an unconscious Elizabeth was thrown over her horse and secured to the saddle. Willy, still holding Velvet's reins, mounted his own horse and rode toward the oak. Paxton deftly stole to a location where he could monitor Willy without fear of discovery. Fiddling lazily with a twig, he observed as Willy, noticing a freshly dug grave (Elizabeth's red herring) decided a more thorough search of the area wasn't worthwhile. The henchman turned in his saddle, scanning the vicinity once more before he rode off with Elizabeth and her horse in tow.

Paxton sighed and glanced at the oak with the severed ropes that had almost meant his death. Exhaustion surfaced and he knew he'd narrowly escaped with his life. Lizzy had brought him clothing which camouflaged him with the terrain. That fact, supplemented with his own skill, had kept him concealed from Willy's probing eyes. She'd also had the foresight to bring him some cooled chicken broth which naturally filled his belly without making him sick.

Ever since he'd met Elizabeth she'd always been intelligent and very adept at caring for herself and others. In that instant, he knew what had happened hadn't been her fault. Despite what he'd been told, it was evident she hadn't been involved in the plot to murder him. Why else would she have rescued him? A nagging in his brain rationalized otherwise. She could have planned his annihilation and felt guilty or regretful afterwards, and thus sought to right her wrong by freeing him. But if she were in control or even a willing pawn of Stanton, then why did Willy have to knock her out to take her back? Why was Willy there in the first place? Many similar questions buzzed in his mind. Eventually he came to the conclusion that deep down he knew Elizabeth could always be trusted to do what she thought was best.

A slight gust of wind whipped up a miniature whirlwind of dirt and caused Paxton to look up. A storm was moving in. Finishing the broth in one gulp, he pocketed the flask and stood up. If only once more, he had to see her again, even if it was an extremely foolish risk. He knew what he had to do.

Paxton Reign searched where Elizabeth had lost her gun and located it partially buried in some bracken. He un-cocked it and checked to see if it was properly loaded, which it was. He chuckled; Elizabeth sure knew her guns and how to use them. His bare feet were bleeding from the rough underbrush, shrugging, he pocketed the gun and began walking toward Mayor Maxwell Stanton's house.

Chapter Two

When Elizabeth came to, she wished she hadn't. She was lying on a sumptuous, red velvet couch in a large, spacious living room. She had been changed from her riding pants and chaps into a stylish gown. This was not a surprise as she was fully aware that upon her arrival, regardless of her unconscious state, Stanton would have ordered his maids to change her immediately. He resented her tendency to wear men's clothing and demanded that she was always ladylike in her attire, attitude and demeanour. Her head hurt and it took a while for her eyes to focus. The door burst open and a well-tailored, well-built man entered the room.

"I've been hearing things, Elizabeth. In fact, I just heard that you have been a very naughty girl."

"You can't believe everything you hear, Mr. Stanton."

"Tsk, Tsk, Tsk, Elizabeth, I've asked you a thousand times to call me Maxwell."

"Yes, you have." She swept a hand through her hair.

He sauntered over and mimicked her hand with his, slowly smoothing it through her silky locks. His grip tightened on a fistful and using the hair as leverage, he snapped her face up to look directly at his. "I will have you, Elizabeth Marie, one way or another."

A low rumbling from outside gave little warning of the burst of light which suddenly permeated the room as lightening rent the sky. Another boom of thunder announced a heavy downpour of rain which created its own thunderous sound against the rooftop. If Maxwell hadn't been distracted by the flashes of lightening and the deafening roar of the present weather conditions, he might've discerned a different type of storm brewing within Elizabeth's eyes -- a tempest that more than rivaled the one outside.

Maxwell let go of her. "Don't make me regret having spared you, Elizabeth. You may be tough but you are not invincible and you are..." he chuckled, "...merely a woman."

She stood up defiantly and walked away from the sofa and from Maxwell.

"I may be just a woman, but I am a woman that you want and cannot have. I refuse to marry you!" She continued before he could interrupt, which he'd intended to do. "You reneged on the deal, Mr. Stanton, so my ethics now permit me to do the same, and let me be perfectly clear when I say that I feel absolutely no compunction in withdrawing from my part of

the bargain."

To her surprise, he laughed, but his dark eyes smouldered, warning her of the danger he imposed.

"Elizabeth, my darling, I did not break my word or renege on our deal."

"You promised not to kill Paxton if I told him it was over and that I had committed to marry you."

"Ah, well...I promised no one would see him hang; that there would be no public execution. Now, no one saw him die, did they? Don't look so dismayed, my dear. He died an honourable death and his name remains unmarred." He advanced on her and deftly touched her pale cheek.

"Aside from that, my sweet, how could I marry you while your husband still lived?" He pulled her into an embrace and held her tightly so she could not break free. "You seem to have forgotten what he said about you. Have you?"

Although she didn't believe it possible, his grip tightened even more, causing her to whisper breathlessly, "No."

He smiled cruelly. "Well, I would like to make sure. Why don't you repeat it to me?"

"He said he hated me, that he would kill me if he ever saw me again and that marrying me was the biggest mistake he had ever made."

Satisfied with her response, he loosened his grip.

"How could I let a man like that, a man that threatened you, live? I know you were miserable with him, that he treated you abhorrently with his affairs, his drinking and his gambling. I will never treat you in such a manner. You will be my goddess and I will possess you and mould you so carefully that in time you will come to appreciate me and our life together."

Elizabeth was sure that he wished to add -- or else.

His words were grossly inaccurate and darkly fringed with insinuated threats. One of the tools Maxwell had used to manipulate her was the threat of ruining Paxton's reputation with vicious lies. Paxton had never had an affair and he rarely drank or gambled. Her eyebrows lowered mutinously. 'I am not a piece of clay to be moulded and possessed,' she thought. 'Oh, Pax, if you only realized I still love you; that I did it all for you; that what I said was said because of duress, would you want me back again?' A tear escaped down her cheek.

Maxwell lifted her face and dusted away the tear. "I knew you would be as happy as I am about our future and the way I plan to indulge you," he said. "Tears of joy are just streaming down your face, my darling."

He lowered his lips to hers. They were cold and somehow seemed to sting as his kiss grew more insistent.

"Elizabeth, why make me wait until our wedding night? Let me make love to you now. I want you."

Involuntarily, she lurched backward and cried, "No!"

His eyes flashed with brutal fire and he grabbed her arms and held them painfully. "You are mine, Elizabeth. I can take you whenever I want."

Yes, he could. He was not above murder or corruption, she knew that. His dark eyes and hair were analogous with his shadowy nature, and

for Elizabeth his character removed any hint of handsomeness that might have been there had he been an honest and respectable man. He was just a big-shot whose family had profited well from the gold rush. He'd come into their little village and bought out several of the ranchers that had toiled most of their lives on their land. If the men refused to sell, Maxwell forced them out and his methods were cruel and overpowering. Elizabeth's father had been one of those ranchers, only Maxwell was unable to use veiled threats or force her father to move; he had stood his ground. So Maxwell had him murdered, Elizabeth was certain of it. But his body had never been found and that was several years ago now.

When her father first disappeared, the sheriff, whose services Maxwell had obviously bought, told her that her father had left on urgent business and asked Mr. Stanton to watch over the ranch for him until he returned. She was then only fourteen and had little choice but to stay on the ranch hoping more than believing that his story was true.

For three years Maxwell transformed the ranch and fired her father's hired hands one by one until she was the only original occupant left. One day Maxwell called her in to see him, which rather alarmed her since he'd basically ignored her existence, although he'd provided her with a decent education. Surprisingly enough, he'd hired the best private tutors, which Elizabeth appreciated. As soon as she had entered the dining room, he'd stared at her as if he'd never seen her before. After recovering from his astonishment, he confirmed she was seventeen, complimented her on her looks and shown her a letter. He explained that he'd received the letter only weeks after her father had left but he'd hadn't the heart to show her at the time.

The letter was supposedly from her father indicating he would not be returning and that he gave the ranch and all its entreties to Mr. Stanton, giving Elizabeth a modest sum of money for her well-being. Stanton then informed her he'd deducted her education from the sum and that was why it seemed smaller than what she would've expected. Telling her she was welcome to stay on the ranch, he looked her up and down in a way that revealed all too clearly, that his intentions were not entirely honourable. She'd glared at him, incensed by the whole meeting.

In the back of her mind she was tempted to argue she'd never asked for the education, but he probably would've smoothly replied that her father had requested it. She'd also realized a reproach on the money he owed her for work on the ranch would've been just as pointless; he'd dismiss it claiming her work paid her maintenance. True, he'd never asked her for board, but surely that was due to guilt at having murdered the only family she had.

As for the letter, Elizabeth knew it was entirely false. Her father would never have abandoned her or the ranch, and he certainly would not have asked Maxwell Stanton to maintain it; he hated him. Elizabeth recalled her father ranting at the dinner table about how evil, cruel and unethical Mr. Stanton was. Of course, her father didn't refer to him as Mr. Stanton; he'd dubbed him the "Bullying Big-Shot Gold-Digger."

She had attempted to oppose the letter but her youth prevented her from making any real impact on anyone, and all of the ranch hands that could have backed her up were gone. Merely smiling, the sheriff told her

not to be upset about her meager inheritance, and that her father probably realized she'd have a hard time running the ranch. The sheriff seemed to take great pleasure in assuring her Maxwell Stanton would take good care of her. Oh yes, she was very sure he would! If she displeased him she'd end up as dead as her father. Despairing, Elizabeth returned to the ranch, left a note with enough money to purchase Velvet and had left her beloved home.

During the years after her departure, Maxwell had mutated the village into a town, filled it with Stanton supporters, and had himself elected Mayor. Granted, the town was extremely prosperous and the people there were relatively happy, but it had been built on the blood and toil of others and if Stanton was corrupt then so was the town.

She looked up at the man whom she had more reason to hate than any other and realized this was no time to offend him. She had to be careful or he could make things worse for her.

She smiled shakily, "I'm not denying you out of spite, Maxwell. I'm an honourable woman, you know that, and that is one of the reasons I insist on waiting until our wedding night." Seductively skating a fingertip over his bottom lip, she whispered, "I look forward to giving myself to you for the first time as husband and wife, and for our first night to be a special, meaningful communion. Please don't deny me that." She hoped this tactic would succeed.

His look softened. "Oh, all right, my dear, I suppose I can wait one more day. I have, after all, moved up the wedding..." He assessed her carefully. "I don't want to take any chances of you getting away."

She kept her face soft and masked her true emotions as well as she could. "Lovely. I can hardly wait to be Mrs. Elizabeth Stanton," she lied.

Maxwell might not have been convinced, but at least he was placated. He walked toward the exit, but then he paused, turning to her and smiling. "Elizabeth, I never agreed for you to take Velvet. I didn't make a fuss about it because you did pay more than enough for her, and I realized what she meant to you. Your father gave her to you as a colt, didn't he? But, I am taking her back into my possession for now. I will give her back to you as a wedding present. Good night, my love." He shut the door behind him and locked it.

Willy was waiting outside the door.

Maxwell looked at him angrily and hissed, "Are you sure Paxton Reign is dead?"

Willy shifted uneasily as he was not entirely sure. After he'd thrown an unconscious Elizabeth onto her horse, he'd gone in search of Reign but all he found was a recently dug grave not a stone's throw away from the tree. He'd been tired and looking forward to dinner and couldn't be bothered to search for a man that was likely as dead as his wife had confessed him to be. Willy recalled how furious Stanton had been that Elizabeth had escaped in the first place and then been relocated near where they had strung up her husband. Willy, not wanting any more verbal abuse from the mayor or to increase the chance of losing his job and perhaps even his life, had assured him Reign was dead. He was well aware that his boss wanted to make sure nothing could stand in

his way of marrying Elizabeth legally; that nothing could stand in his way of possessing her entirely.

"He's dead, Sir," Willy declared.

Maxwell's eyes narrowed as he assessed the short, beefy man that stood in front of him.

Willy had been born a bastard on the estate of Mister and Mrs. Romulus Stanton, Maxwell's parents. Willy's mother, as it so happened, was one of Mrs. Stanton's favourite maids and hence she was very adamant in her refusal to dismiss the maid on the grounds of impropriety.

Romulus was furious with both his wife, for her unusual opposition to his desires, and with the behaviour of her maid. He was, however, persuaded to permit the baby to stay, when he was promised the mother would take full responsibility in covering their living expenses. In exchange for providing mother and child with a home, he would ultimately receive the lifelong service of the boy. Although Mister Stanton was fully aware that the benefit of this bargain was entirely on his side and unfairly so, he accepted; and as generosity was not in his nature, Romulus never stopped behaving as if he was still the one at a disadvantage because of it.

So it was that Willy had grown up alongside of the illustrious Stanton children and his mother never let him forget what a great blessing this was.

Upon the unexpected death of his wife, just before Maxwell's sixteenth birthday, Romulus, realizing that Willy had few relevant uses, had gifted Willy's services to his youngest son. Maxwell, who absolutely refused to grieve for his mother, felt this was the one decision of his father's he was truly grateful for.

Unknown to any of the Stantons, or to Willy, Maxwell had been observing Willy since he himself was a four-year-old child, and had long since discovered his few talents. He was extremely loyal to the Stanton family to whom he felt he owed his life, a feeling that had been bred into him by his mother. In Maxwell's mind that devotion alone when mixed with his more disreputable qualities such as greed, stupidity, malice, lust, and brutality, made for a perfect puppet. Then, barely sixteen, Maxwell believed himself a masterful puppeteer.

Willy was only a few years older than the mayor, but his keen inclination to smoke like a wet wood fire, booze, gamble, and womanize had aged him greatly.

"He is dead, Sir," Willy repeated, uneasy with the way the mayor was scrutinizing him.

"Good! Tomorrow I marry Elizabeth," Maxwell Stanton nodded decisively, and went to his room, no doubt, Willy thought begrudgingly, to get his beauty sleep for the big day.

Willy shrugged and sauntered off. He had better things to do than worry about the mayor and his desires. It was, after all, highly unlikely that Reign could have lived for three days in the unmerciful heat of the sun without food or water. There was a grave, and Elizabeth herself had said she'd buried him -- or what was left of him.

'Yeah, he's a goner,' Willy thought, convincing himself there wouldn't be further trouble from Elizabeth's bothersome husband.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth removed her ear from the wall, cried out in despair and collapsed on the couch. Paxton was dead! Willy must have found and killed him before he'd had time to escape. Her plot to secretly rescue her husband, to dig a fake grave behind the tree, and to escape had failed. Maxwell had won. He knew she'd never leave without Velvet, who other than Pax, had been her only and dearest companion for several years. Smothering grief was quickly replaced with a compelling need to exact revenge. Stanton had murdered her father, and now the blood of her beloved husband was on his hands. He'd kidnapped and manipulated her into doing things that under normal circumstances she would've rather died than do, and now he'd stooped so low as to abduct her horse. No, there was no way she would let him survive unpunished, let alone marry her.

Glancing at the large grandfather clock on the wall, she realized half an hour had passed since Stanton had locked her in. She stood up resolutely; she had to locate Velvet and soon, before her time ran out and she would have to become the wife of that evil brute. There was plenty of time to concoct a plan to end Stanton's malevolent sovereignty after she had escaped his grasp. His threats to devastate Paxton's reputation no longer held sway with Elizabeth; she was now determined to ruin Stanton before one single rumour could be spread.

Clenching her fists, Elizabeth turned around and headed for the window, which was surprisingly open. Positive that window had not been open while Maxwell was in the room, she quickly surveyed her surroundings. Noticing nothing alarming, she turned around again planning to use this strange occurrence as an opportunity to escape. She was startled by the silhouetted male figure unexpectedly in her way. She jumped and would have screamed if his hand had not hastily covered her mouth.

He waited for her eyes to adjust and exclaimed with a grin, "Gosh, but if you aren't the prettiest woman this side of the Great Sandy Desert!"

"Pax! Oh, Pax, you're alive!"

Before he could react, she had thrown her arms around him and was kissing his neck, chin, ears and cheeks fervently over and over again.

He removed her reluctantly and held her at arm's length, his face flushing. "Enough of that, Lizzy, we have quite a bit to talk about."

Elizabeth's reddening cheeks made it more than a little obvious that she herself was embarrassed and shocked at her rather impulsive reaction.

Regaining her composure, she asked, her voice quivering, "Paxton, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be dead. Obviously you're not, but when I freed you from that tree I never thought you would come here."

"Really? You didn't think I would come for you after what you put me through?" He raked a hand through his hair and after a moment smirked roguishly. "I'll admit that I thought it was ludicrous but my curiosity got the better of me and, well, here I am. I want some straight answers from you. First you condemn me to death and then you come all the way out to save me. You fool Willy with a fake grave, which was no small effort on your part. You bring me the supplies I'd need to get out of the desert alive -- I just don't get it. You saved me. Why'd you come save me, Lizzy?"

She looked astonished, as if she couldn't believe he needed to ask, but then she remembered the icy rejection she'd given him in the jail; the contemptuous rebuke and the incredible lies Stanton had forced her into telling. The mayor had stood outside the door listening and Pax had sat on the prison bunk staring at the floor.

"Why? Because I love you! Willy told Stanton you were dead."

He appeared thoughtful. "Good. That's probably why I've had such an easy time getting here -- we have the element of surprise on our side." He chuckled acidly, fully aware of her awkward attempt to change the subject. "Well, if you love me so much, woman, then why'd you leave me? Why did you decide to marry Maxwell Stanton? Why did you put me through absolute hell?"

"It was against my will," she shuddered. "I mean, I was under Maxwell's control. He said he wouldn't hang you if I agreed to marry him. If I didn't do all he wanted, he told me he'd slander your name, burn our home, destroy all we had built together. "What choice did I have?" She dashed away an angry tear, wishing Paxton wasn't ignorant of just how much she hated Maxwell Stanton.

She had refused to tell Paxton of her past experiences with the mayor because she was worried that her Mr. Reign was the type of man that would, for her benefit, exact revenge on Stanton -- he was an expert bounty-hunter and tracker, after all. Despite his expertise, she feared he'd end up in a noose because of her vendetta, and there was no way she wanted to ultimately engineer the loss of her husband. Naturally the loss of a husband, as well as a father, and all due to her arch enemy would be more than she could bear. Inwardly, she cringed at the irony of the situation; all she'd tried to prevent from happening had almost come to pass, regardless of her efforts. She thanked the Lord they had not.

"What choice was there?" She demanded, returning to the matter at hand. "He had you in custody and was threatening your death; of course I said I'd marry him and do what he asked. As a matter of fact, I just finished telling him I wouldn't marry him because he'd broken our agreement. A lot of good that did me; he merely said..."

He stopped her in mid-sentence, "No need to tell me; I can imagine what that lousy rat said, Elizabeth."

"Oh..." she paused. "Pax, I honestly didn't mean anything I said in that jail. Maxwell basically wrote me a script, eavesdropped, and made sure I said all those things or else. I certainly don't want to marry

Stanton. I hate and fear him -- more than anything!"

He nodded, looking around. "I know that -- now. But, my next question to you is why didn't you tell me all of this at the oak tree?" He felt downright gullible for believing his wife had wanted him dead. Why on earth had he trusted Maxwell Stanton, especially when he was the one in the process of tying him to that tree?

"I hate to do this to you Mr. Reign as I'm sure you're a good man. But Elizabeth has decreed you must die for our marriage to be legal. It's terrible she's in such a hurry to be my bride -- I mean were she willing to wait perhaps there could have been a divorce. But our love is so intense, we need to be together. I'm normally a good man too, but I'm sure you understand how bewitching Elizabeth can be -- I would do anything for her, Reign -- even kill!"

The vindictive and calculating confession of the mayor had succeeded in leading Paxton to believe Elizabeth actually devised the plan to secretly dispose of him, so she'd be free to marry the wealthy and attractive mayor. Now, in hindsight, it seemed utterly preposterous, but under the premise of his own insecurity and jealousy, and Stanton's guile and deceit, it had seemed very probable. Shamefully, he'd allowed another man to so manipulate his feelings. He'd permitted the mayor to convince him that Elizabeth was the villain.

"Paxton, I had to free you as quickly as possible in case I was missed or followed, which as it turned out, I was. Besides, would you really have believed me at that moment?"

"Elizabeth, I was a fool. Please forgive me for my weakness," he groaned, silently acknowledging that she was his weakness. "Maxwell played me..."

"Played us," Elizabeth corrected. "He's an evil man, Paxton."

Reign accepted that as fact, but he also realized that every second they stood there they lost time in escaping. There would be time to talk later.

"Elizabeth we have to get out of here, pronto!" He looked at her fashionable outfit. "Pretty," he confessed backwardly.

She knew he approved of the outfit overall but not in the present situation. He wanted her to leave the same way he'd come in -- through the window. Ever since he'd arrived, she'd subconsciously noticed that her husband was absolutely soaking wet. But as this detail was becoming increasingly applicable to her situation, she became fully aware his hair was plastered to his head and the clothes she'd given him were dripping water onto the floor. Now the moisture that had been transferred onto her garment during their embrace was apparent, she figured she'd been so relieved to see him alive that nothing else had mattered.

She grinned, secretly pleased for the opportunity to ruin the dress Maxwell Stanton forced her to wear. "I ain't gonna let a skirt get in the

way of my escape," she intoned playfully. Recklessly, she hoisted the skirt up, revealing her undergarments, and tied it at her waist. "Nor am I going to let the weather sway me."

He chuckled. "You sure do know how to sidetrack a man, Lizzy. All right, let's get out of here. I was really lucky this window wasn't locked. All the others were; I was afraid I might have to break in. There was someone watching the house too...but I knocked him out and..." he grinned mischievously. "...his boots just happened to fit me perfectly."

It was then that Elizabeth noticed the muddy boot prints coming from the window and wondered why she'd not detected them before. She observed her husband appreciatively as he moved about, intent on his purpose of rescuing her. Paxton Reign was an extremely handsome man even with the stubble and mucky dirt on his face. He was larger than Maxwell in bulk, though Maxwell was a little taller, and Paxton was fairer, a contrast she was grateful for. She adored his sandy hair, which was often an unruly mess, and his passionate, blue eyes that were so adept at seeing right through to a person's soul.

"What about Velvet?" she remembered abruptly. "Maxwell took her from me."

"Don't worry, I found her on the way here," he replied easily. "Saw Willy ride her to the Saloon and park her in front. I knew you'd never allow him to take Velvet, and by the way that mare looked, I knew she wasn't happy about it either. I figured Willy would be in there for quite a while since he'd just arrived, so, I just untied her and rode her here." He could not help a cheeky grin. "I also took the liberty of saddling up Castro, whom I found in Stanton's stable. Since I never sold him to the Mayor, he doesn't belong here."

"Was Velvet glad to see him?" Elizabeth asked, suddenly glowing.

Their horses' fondness for each other was an unexpected delight. Paxton once commented that Castro had fallen for Velvet the first time he'd laid eyes on her, just as he himself, had fallen for Elizabeth. Elizabeth had blushed, which only added to her charm in his estimation.

Paxton's smile widened. "Thrilled! They must have really missed each other. See," he laughed and pointed out the window.

The moonlight shone determinedly between gaps in the storm clouds and illuminated the two horses that were nuzzling, obviously happy and contented.

Paxton climbed through the window and turned to assist Elizabeth. Hurriedly, the two of them crossed the shadowy distance between Stanton's imposing mansion and their horses. Paxton handed Velvet's reins to his wife, evidently pleased to be reuniting them. Velvet whinnied and nudged at her mistress. Elizabeth patted her mare's neck affectionately, smiling gratefully at her husband.

Paxton mounted his horse and whispered, "You know where we're going, don't you, Elizabeth?"

She spurred her horse forward and replied confidently, "To where we met."

It was obvious to both of them that they would go to the location where they had first come into contact with one another. Elizabeth would never forget that time of her life.

It was just two months after she'd left her father's ranch and she was living in the mountains. She'd discovered a naturally concealed cave in a small valley, which was surprisingly clean, small and well-ventilated. It was evident that Indians had once known of the place but had not been there in a very long time. She was able to keep the cave quite warm with a small fire. There was a delicious tasting stream flowing through it, and there was plenty of healthy game to be found in the valley. Shortly after, she'd transformed the cave into a comfortable living space. A fur covered bed (which she'd industriously sown together with strips of leather) adorned the far wall, and a well-developed cooking fire was effectively situated in the center. The leather was collected from animals that she'd killed for food. She did not like to kill living things, but she had little choice. She made use of a large percentage of the animal's remains and prayerfully thanked the animal for its sacrifice.

She was extremely happy with her luxurious living arrangements and was absolutely delighted at the discovery that a basin shaped rock within the cave held fresh water and she was able to dig a pit half way underneath it. It was only too easy to light a fire in that pit and hence, heat the water that filled the basin; presto: a heated bathtub. In her travels she'd even discovered a source of gold! Amazed no one else had located it, she created a secret compartment where she stored the gold mined each day. Ecstatic with her new-found home, she was particularly thrilled that an adjoining cave functioned perfectly as a stall for her beloved Velvet. She'd marvelled at how fortunate she was; this cave in many respects was a better home than the ranch.

Now more than ever, she was glad she'd learned all she could from an Indian that had taken up residence at the ranch for a short time. He was charmed by Elizabeth's eagerness to learn and had been willing to teach her about hunting, tracking, surviving in the wilderness, methods of fire lighting, and the many ways she could use the skins of animals. Great Bear, the name of her Indian instructor, had taught her not to be wasteful, and to appreciate the sacrifice the animals made so that she could eat and remain warm in the winter. Great Bear, well-travelled, and knowing many dangers of the world, had also taught her how to protect herself and how to fight. That education had been far more useful to her than the one Maxwell Stanton had provided.

It was in her cave dwelling, that she'd risen one morning to find Paxton Reign sitting at her cooking fire preparing breakfast and drinking her homemade tea. She was astounded! She didn't know who he was or how he'd managed to sneak past her traps and her notice; no one else had ever succeeded in sneaking up on her except Great Bear himself.

Chapter Four

"Here's the river," Paxton announced, interrupting her memories. He'd kept them riding at a quick pace. He glanced back at her and suggested they rest for a while before continuing. After he dismounted, he went to Elizabeth and helped her down, although, he was completely aware she needed no assistance. They walked their horses over to the river to let them drink and went upstream a little to have a sip of the refreshing water themselves.

Paxton looked up at the sky and the half-moon and guessed it was nearing the middle of the night; they'd been riding for a while.

"Do you think it would be too risky to have a swim, Pax?" Elizabeth asked.

She was feeling very sweaty and dusty, an uncomfortable combination.

"Well, it really depends if you think..." he paused and grinned mischievously, "...your fiancé will have missed you before Willy will have missed Velvet. Willy'll probably stay in that saloon until well after midnight, I reckon."

"Stanton was finished with me for the evening. I doubt he'll notice my departure until morning."

Paxton shrugged. "There was that guard I knocked out too. I gave him a good bump on the head, but I doubt he'll be out for long and then we don't know if he was expecting his replacement or company."

We weren't really careful about our tracks. I decided speed was best and then we could ride upriver to the mountains. It's not likely Stanton has anyone in his service that could tell whether we went up or down river and I'll be sure to hide our tracks."

Elizabeth nodded, beginning to remove her bodice. "Well, I don't think a ten minute swim will make a huge difference. You can ride the horses upriver a bit and I'll meet you there," she suggested, glad Willy had not taken her extra shirt, pants, chaps and riding boots out of her saddle bag.

"What? And leave you alone -- naked," he grinned, "Not a chance! Anyhow, there are more dangers to a woman in the woods at night than men and Indians."

She looked half admonishing, half playful. "As I am well aware, having lived in them for quite a while," she continued to remove the top layers of her clothing. "Now, Mr. Reign, please let a lady enjoy her bathing in peace and privacy." She lifted an eyebrow at him. "I can take care of myself, I assure you."

"Seriously, Elizabeth, I'd rather you wait till we reach our destination. You can safely bathe in hot water at the cave, or at least

in the lake you're familiar with. We'll be safe from our pursuers then."

"Oh Pax, just let me have a quick dip. I need to be refreshed now. Please. I don't have to go in too far. I'll just rinse."

He shook his head. "You're stubborn as all get out, Lizzy," he sighed, concerned for her well-being and partially aggravated he wasn't invited to join. "Just be careful and don't take long. I'll stay close so I can hear if you scream and be back here pronto."

"Okay."

She stood in the last layer of her clothing, looking at him, and he could tell she was waiting for him to leave before taking it off.

Frustrated, he grabbed both horses' reins, yanking their muzzles apart.

"Well, if you should need me, Lizzy," Her name dripped with venom. "Just call."

He mounted Castro with a gruff grunt, and the horse pawed the ground impatiently, alarmed at his master's sudden mood change.

Petulantly, Paxton rode Castro upstream with Velvet trailing lazily behind. He despised how much influence Elizabeth had over his emotions, how she'd make him angry in less than a moment, and how she'd make him overjoyed just as quickly. From the first moment he'd stepped into the cave and laid eyes on her, sleeping soundly in her comfortable bed, he knew she was the woman for him. From then on his heart and mind belonged to her. Although he could now look back and recognize that feeling for what it was, he was unable to discern his feelings then. A hint of a smile quirked the corners of his mouth -- winning her heart had been the greatest adventure he'd ever had -- and that was saying something.

He'd been in hot pursuit of Harrison Kent, a notorious cattle thief and murderer to boot, who was wanted in several counties and worth a fat commission if Paxton could bring him in alive. Unfortunately, this wanted man was not at all an ignorant brute; he'd been trained for survival in the wilderness. He was cunning and had not proved an easy capture. Paxton was determined however, and had followed Kent when his fellow bounty-hunters had given up in frustration and exhaustion. For nearly a month Paxton had pursued Kent, practically nipping at his heels, when he saw her. It was an unnaturally hot day and the chase was causing Paxton some discomfort and the excessive use of his water flask. It was not only his own discomfort but Castro's as well that had finally convinced him a rest was needed. He'd reached a summit which overlooked a particularly pretty valley. The sight made him marvel at the beauty of this as yet undeveloped country. He noticed a small lake with an attractive waterfall and led Castro down to it.

After bathing and refreshing Castro and himself, he decided to take a short nap. He let Castro wander to graze as he pleased, and found a lovely tree beside the lake which provided ample shade. Leaning up against it, he settled himself comfortably. He'd just covered his eyes with his cowboy hat when the sound of a woman's voice reached him. He sat up abruptly and glimpsed her, sitting on top of a regal, midnight black mare.

The girl was laughing, having obviously just returned from a pleasant ride. The breeze played with her glorious burgundy hair, and he noticed that her superb figure was scantily clad in an animal skin. The skin was wrapped tightly around her chest, covering her breasts and reaching down to about mid-thigh. He'd not seen that much skin (he wasn't thinking about the animal skin) on a woman for a long time and he was rather taken back by the sight. She appeared to him like a gorgeous, wild Amazon woman; those beautiful but dangerous women he'd read about in school. Those stories of the Amazon women and their battles with Heracles and the Greeks had always intrigued him.

Evidently she'd not seen him and had begun to remove her outfit, obviously intent on a swim. He'd used all of his willpower to avert his eyes.

In that moment he forgot all about Harrison Kent -- he'd found another conquest. He observed her for a couple of days and marvelled at her knowledge of the valley and of the ways of the wilderness. She, like Kent, had also been trained in the ways of the tracker and Paxton wondered why and how she'd come to live like this. Not that he blamed her, many of the women who lived in upscale towns and cities didn't have it as good as she did. Finally, after several days, he decided it was time to meet this woman and speak to her. Just before sunrise he'd caught some fish and quietly entered her cave, carefully avoiding the traps she'd cleverly set about to alert her of any unexpected company. After stoking up the fire, he'd begun to cook the fish. He was happy to discover some wild tea leaves that she'd gathered and boiled some water, preparing himself a cup.

The cave was extremely well-kept and decorated. It was very comfortable and he appreciated this young woman's clear talent for making any place a home. She stirred. He reckoned she must've been very tired to sleep through the smell of food cooking. At length, she turned and opened her hazel eyes, which opened wide upon seeing him. He watched as her eyes moved about the cave, eyeing the fish on the fire, his cup of tea and the rest of her domain. It looked as if she were assessing any immediate danger, which he also found admirable.

"Good morning." He greeted. "I'm here to protect you, not harm you. I've been tracking a dangerous murderer and I was afraid if I could find you, so could he." He gestured towards the tea. "Would you like some? It's delicious. You sure know your herbs."

Her eyebrows furrowed and she'd sat up. "You have some nerve..." she'd begun, but hushed when he'd walked over to her with some tea. He literally towered over her and she'd noticed this with some trepidation.

"I know," he'd replied, smiling. "But, I do hope the breakfast I've prepared for you will repair any offence I might have given."

"Humph." She sipped the tea and seemed pleasantly surprised. "Well, the tea certainly does."

Her enjoyment vanished and was quickly replaced with reservation and suspicion, as if she felt guilty for having fraternized with a hazardous stranger. "Just what exactly are your intentions?"

"It's like I said Ma'am, I'm here to protect you."

"From whom?"

"Harrison Kent, Ma'am." He'd watched for any sign of recognition, but had found none.

"Oh, really? Well, Mister..." She'd waited for his name.

"Paxton, Ma'am, Paxton Reign."

"Well, Mister Reign, who will protect me from you?"

He'd looked at her, startled. "I pose you no threat, Ma'am."

"I am a woman, you are a man; you pose a threat whether you accept it or not."

He scrutinized her and suddenly realized what she was referring to and chuckled softly. "I pose you no threat; your virtue is safe around me. I'd never attempt to take something of yours -- without your permission."

She blushed hotly and he enjoyed her innocence and her embarrassment, nevertheless she swiftly rebuked him. "Well, you helped yourself to my tea, didn't you, and I'm quite positive I didn't give you permission for that!"

There was a stunned pause before he quickly changed the subject, "Breakfast?"

He'd insisted on staying in the valley to protect her, and she in turn insisted he sleep elsewhere. She was not responsive to him at first, completely ignoring his presence. He gathered she did this in hopes that he'd leave, but he only found this a challenge and he loved a challenge. After a week of leaving gifts at the cave opening, such as food, flowers and little things he'd carved from wood, he was pleased to see that she was at least acknowledging him with a nod and a faint glimmer of a smile.

One night he'd heard her cry out and had rushed in to see if she was all right. She was obviously having a nightmare and he reached out to wake her, but stopped dead when he'd felt something cold and hard against his stomach. Peering down slowly, he realized she held a knife.

"You were having a nightmare and cried out. I came in to see if you were all right...that's all."

"Well, as you can see I'm fine. Now please leave," she'd said somewhat icily.

He'd turned to leave, feeling disgruntled by her lack of trust in him. He was just thinking he should leave the valley and return to hunting Harrison Kent when she said softly, "Thank you for your concern, Mister Reign."

"Call me Paxton and you're welcome."

"Elizabeth...Elizabeth Marie Dalton. Marie was my mother's name; she died when I was four-years-old."

Paxton smiled at her, overjoyed to finally know this beautiful creature's name.

"It's a very pretty name," he'd replied softly, and left the cave.

After that evening they'd started talking, walking and hunting together. It was safe to say at that point that Elizabeth considered him a friend, one whom she trusted.

Elizabeth watched until Paxton was out of sight, removed the rest of her clothing and cautiously entered the water. Glancing upstream, she made sure Paxton was out of view before she immersed herself in the water. Enjoying the silky, cool caress of the river water, she waded upriver a little and then swam across to the opposite bank. Reaching the other side of the river, she dunked her head and swam under the surface, testing whether she could make it back to the other side without a breath. When she felt the embankment in front of her, she popped her head up and gasped for air. Then she gasped again, but this gasp was from surprise, not a need for air. She was face to face with a large Grizzly that was lazily pawing at the water. Upon seeing her, he rose to his full height and grunted. Elizabeth slowly, so as not to spook the bear any further, paddled backwards towards the middle of the river. The bear watched her for a moment but was obviously not interested in pursuing her. He grunted again, sniffed the air, then turned around and sauntered off. Elizabeth, thanking the Lord for sparing her any trouble with the bear, hastily swam back to shore.

She heard someone chuckling and glanced over to where the sound came from. The sound was coming from a dark figure leaning against a tree with a large rifle resting against his shoulder. "Well, that was a mighty close one; thought you might've been a goner."

She smiled, although she was rather embarrassed at the situation. "With you around?"

"You did tell me to leave."

"Yes, but I didn't expect you to listen for long. The bear was clearly uninterested in me, but I do believe it was your potent odour that saved me," she joked. "I'm sure you noted the way he sniffed the air before taking off so quickly."

"Huh?"

"Be a gentleman and turn around so I can change."

He groaned, exasperated, "Elizabeth, you are my wife. You're too much of a prude."

Affronted, she quipped, "I am not a prude, as you well know. I'm just modest, like a lady should be. Besides..." her eyebrow rose impishly, "I don't want to cause you any trouble -- trouble that might further delay us."

"Humph." He paused, and then reluctantly conceded, "I reckon you're right."

He turned his back to her and she got out of the water, dried off and dressed herself.

"Ready?" He turned around, partially disappointed she was finished dressing. "Let's go."

"Yes, Sir!"

Chapter Five

Elizabeth would've rather died than confess that she was struggling with her own desire. It had been weeks since she'd been separated from her husband and she'd missed him desperately; missed his company and his touch. She tapped Velvet's ribs gently and the horse quickened her pace; Elizabeth wanted to get to that cave and fast. Her mouth curved as she recalled the first time she ever kissed a man, and that man had been Paxton Reign.

Elizabeth had just celebrated her nineteenth birthday and Paxton who'd been hanging around the valley for more than a month had carved her an exquisite figurine. He explained that he'd carved the statuette from soapstone which his father had brought home with him from his travels abroad. Paxton described how New Englanders often used soapstone for their fireplace hearths because of its unique ability to retain and consistently dispense heat for long periods of time. Paxton's father had educated him in the many uses of soapstone, such as sinks, countertops, bowls and most intriguingly to Paxton -- sculpture. Eventually his father created a lucrative construction business and whenever he received a soapstone commission, he employed his son. After the job was concluded, Paxton had collected any discarded pieces of soapstone like they were gold. He'd worked diligently with the material until he'd learned to sculpt with it. When he had left home, he'd taken a substantial amount with him, just in case he was ever inspired to sculpt something on his journey.

Elizabeth was accustomed to little gifts from her guest, though she secretly wondered at his motive for being so kind to her. Paxton was obviously a talented carver which was evident by several of the charming wooden figures he'd given her; but this one, this one was so beautiful, unique and clearly meant quite a lot to him. He told her it was a figurine of an Amazon princess and her loyal mare.

"I have officially entitled her Royal Dalton..." he coughed abashedly at the clever entitlement of his sculpture. "Well, she's a princess and I'm giving her to you...Miss Dalton."

She was so overcome with gratitude that she had quite unexpectedly wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek. This was a gesture she'd grown unaccustomed to; her father was the only one she would ever hug or kiss on the cheek. It was obvious Paxton was also unfamiliar with this type of affection because he flushed and pulled back from her

warily.

Alarmed at her spontaneous behaviour, she turned away and whispered, "Thank you, Mr. Reign, it's absolutely divine. My tutor told me all about the myths surrounding the Amazon women. He insisted it was only a myth but I argued even myth has some element of truth."

Paxton was pleasantly surprised with her knowledge of the myths and this spurred a conversation about their educations. Elizabeth explained that her tutor (from England) was extremely stringent on proper pronunciation and oral dictation, but was a gifted teacher. They continued to speak about what they'd learned and the lessons that had meant the most to them.

This conversation revealed that they shared many common interests and dulled the tension that had hung so thickly in the air a moment ago. It was dark when Paxton announced that he should be leaving as it was getting late. He said goodnight and left the cave. For some reason unknown to Elizabeth, his sudden departure had stung and left her feeling bereft.

The next morning Elizabeth woke up thinking about Paxton. She was dismayed when she realized she'd slept in so dreadfully late, it was past noon and she feared Paxton might have gone off without her. She dressed quickly and went out in search of him. He was nowhere to be found and Elizabeth felt acute disappointment. Thoughts and fears raced through her mind; had she so offended him that he'd left forever? She waited for a moment, and then when her stomach growled, she decided to prepare something to eat. Paxton would be back soon -- she hoped.

It was late afternoon and she still hadn't seen any sign of the bounty-hunter. She went to the lake, where they often sat and talked, but he was not there. Visiting his camp caused even more concern, there was absolutely no sign that he'd been there at all; no gear, no fire pit -- nothing. She stood there for what seemed like hours, going over everything that had been said the previous night, trying to remember if he'd hinted anything about leaving or resenting her actions.

Footsteps interrupted her thoughts and she turned around anxiously, "Paxton, I was..." The relieved smile faded as she realized it was not Paxton, but a complete stranger.

"Oh, I'm not Paxton, pretty lady, but I am looking for 'im." His voice was deep and hard and sent shivers down her spine. Although his exterior was mildly handsome, Elizabeth sensed an evil which made him appear loathsome and she backed off slowly.

"Who are you?"

He removed his hat and bowed nonchalantly, "Harrison Kent, at your service, Ma'am." His eyes glowed as he licked his lips, "And, I do mean at your service."

Elizabeth remembered the name instantly and that Paxton had been pursuing this dangerous criminal.

"What do you want with Paxton?" she demanded, the thought of the latter giving her strength she wouldn't have otherwise possessed.

"Well, I thought we might have tea and strike up a friendship," he quipped sarcastically. He pulled a gun from his belt and pointed it straight at Elizabeth. "I'm gonna kill him, girly. Noticed he ain't

chasing me no more and I'll bet his guard's down thinking I'm long gone. I'll get 'im now and be done wit'im. No one be after me then. Freedom!" His voice became a low, vicious growl, "Now, be a good girl and tell me where he's at."

"I don't know," she murmured, watching the gun.

His smile faded into an ugly, threatening glare. "Tell me where he's at or I'll put a gaping hole through that pretty face o'yours."

"I honestly don't know," she declared and then added defiantly, "Even if I did know, I certainly wouldn't tell you."

He snarled, irked by her response, "He's gotta be 'round here somewhere. I can smell him!" His eyes shifted about as he surveyed their surroundings malevolently.

Noting his distraction, Elizabeth cautiously knelt down, retrieved a large rock from the ground, and without any hesitation, threw it at his head with all her strength. He grunted, surprised by her attack and felt where the rock hit leaving a gash. Kent peered down at the blood on his fingers and looked up to see Elizabeth running away. He swore viciously. Enraged, he started after her intent on causing her severe pain. He was reluctant to shoot her for two reasons: one, the sound of the gun would alert Paxton, who had by now let his guard down to danger; and two, the woman obviously cared for Paxton and might come in handy as bait.

Elizabeth searched frantically for an escape route, knowing Kent was close behind her and would likely catch her too. Then she saw Paxton, mounted on his horse Castro, riding towards her. She realized he wasn't aware of what was going on, and Kent, who had his gun ready, would find him an easy target.

"No," she cried, terrified at the thought of Kent killing Paxton.

Quickly, she plunged to the ground and rolled towards her attacker. Kent, who'd just noticed his quarry, tripped over her, landing hard -- the gun falling from his grasp. He was stunned from yet another surprise attack and also from the fall, and consequently he was too slow to react.

Elizabeth grabbed the gun, pointed it at him and declared fiercely, "I know how to use this and I'm not afraid to. Don't think that just because I'm a woman I'll hesitate to kill you -- because I won't." She cocked the gun and glared him down.

Harrison Kent put up his hands, defeated.

Paxton, who'd watched the entire scene from his saddle, dismounted, and retrieved the rope from his saddle bag. He then proceeded to tie up the captured criminal.

"Well done, Elizabeth!" He beamed at her admiringly. "You are quite a woman. You've just captured one of the most elusive and wanted criminals in the territory! He's worth a large bounty -- congratulations!"

She blushed under his exuberant praise. "It wasn't on purpose and besides..." she faltered, not wanting to admit she'd only thought of him the whole time and didn't give a snit about the commission.

"Yes, congrats Elizabeth..." Kent crooned caustically, glowering at her.

"Besides, he underestimated me," she retorted spitefully, deciding to finish her sentence off after all for Kent's benefit.

"You'd better watch it, girly, 'cause I won't be making the same mistake twice," Kent threatened menacingly.

Paxton punched him solidly, knocking him out cold. Then noticing that Elizabeth was looking at him curiously, he confessed, "Well, I didn't want to bother with a gag."

"Where did you go today?" Elizabeth demanded, shrugging off the subject of Kent.

"Elizabeth! Is that blood?" Paxton exclaimed, rushing over to her and examining her arm where blood was evident. "Did he hurt you?"

Heat flared through her body at his touch. "No..." she said weakly, confused and overwhelmed by the reaction her body was having. "I'm sure that happened when I rolled..."

"That was a brave thing you did," he uttered slowly, his voice unusually husky and introverted.

"I couldn't bear the thought of him killing you, Paxton," she admitted, trying hard to avoid peering into his handsome face.

There was a stillness, like a spell, that hovered gently around them, erasing the rest of the world, as she thought of his lips touching hers. She was sure he was going to kiss her and she wanted him to -- so badly. The spell was completely eradicated when he turned around sharply, letting her go and remarking distantly, "I'll have to take him in."

Fury flashed in her eyes and she said roughly, "You do that then, Paxton Reign! I won't miss you and don't bother coming round here no more." She huffed, too devastated by his icy rejection to care about good grammar. "You obviously have no desire to be near me." Her voice shook and she knew she sounded ridiculous, which only made her angrier. Determined to maintain her remaining dignity, she nodded curtly at Paxton, who was completely astounded by her behaviour, and turned to leave.

Paxton seized her good arm and turned her round to face him.

"Elizabeth! Wait!" he opened his mouth to say something more, but nothing came out. After a second he cursed and in the next moment she found herself in a tight embrace being kissed passionately. When he finally released her, all she could do was stand there unsteadily and stare at him, utterly dumbfounded by the intensity of his kiss.

"You silly female, can't you tell I'm crazy about you? Not want to be around you? What a notion! I've only stayed here a month to be close to you -- only I didn't know how you felt about me and well..." he flushed, "I didn't want to take advantage of you. You have no idea how being near you affects me."

He whistled for Castro, who'd gone off to munch on some grass. Upon Castro's arrival, Paxton flung open his saddle bag and grabbed a brown paper package. "You asked where I was today -- I went into town to get this for you." He urged her to go ahead and open it.

Still silent, which was an unusual thing for Elizabeth; she unwrapped the parcel and discovered an absolutely beautiful and intricately decorated dress.

"It's...it's breathtaking..."

"I was hoping you would wear it on our wedding day." He dropped to

one knee and produced a beautiful diamond ring. "Elizabeth Dalton, will you be my wife?"

Excitement unlike any other filled her, and it was then she realized he'd shaved and dressed up for the occasion, which touched her far more than she would've thought. In that moment, she knew she wanted him and wanted to be with him forever. That entire day had been empty, drained of significance because he was not there to share it with her. She could no longer imagine being alone and she certainly did not want to face a lifetime without him. She swallowed and allowed him to slip the ring on her dainty finger and smiled at how wonderful it looked there.

"Yes," she whispered and then reached up and kissed him sweetly.

After a minute he pushed her away gently. "Whoa, Ma'am, we aren't married yet and there is only so much a man can take." He smiled sheepishly at her. "Now, I suppose we should get going. We have to take this scum to the sheriff and collect the bounty on his head, and then we can be married in town. It's about a five hour ride so we should arrive in town just after dusk if we leave now and keep a good pace."

"But we wouldn't be able to be married until the next day. We'd have to share separate rooms and that is twice the cost. If we left tomorrow morning we could spend our wedding night at the hotel..."

Apparently the idea of a wedding night had not been fully apprehended until just now, because she coloured shyly at her words, which made her all the more endearing to Paxton.

He grinned. "Money conscious are you? Even with that stash of gold you hid in your cave. You must have more than ten thousand dollars in there."

"You knew about my gold all this time?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, but it was left alone. I assure you..."

She interrupted him heatedly, "Well, now I can see the real reason behind your marrying me, Mr. Reign!"

"Golly, you sure are jumpy aren't you," he laughed. "I was just going to tell you I've no need of your money. I've my own and plenty of it. Being a bounty-hunter has its advantages; being a good bounty-hunter has even more." Seeing she was still unconvinced, he continued, "Darling, I wouldn't marry you for your money, really. Honestly, you think I'd let you know I was aware of your stash of gold if I were marrying you for your money? Do I look that stupid to you?"

She shook her head. "Well, I suppose if you only cared about money you would be a different sort. A sort like..." she stopped, not wanting to mention Stanton.

"And, I certainly wouldn't be looking for a rich wife in a mountain valley." He grinned.

She relaxed, believing him. "Okay, we can leave tonight."

While Elizabeth prepared to go, Paxton searched an unconscious Kent, removed any hidden weapons, and also checked to make sure his bonds were secure. When Elizabeth returned, leading Velvet, Paxton hoisted Kent off the ground and flung him over the mare.

"You and I will ride on Castro," he explained, firmly tying their captive to Velvet.

He gently lifted her onto Castro's saddle and mounted behind her.

She enjoyed feeling his warmth and his strong arms around her. They rode all the way into town, stopping once to subdue Kent, who'd regained consciousness.

When they reached the town, Elizabeth was absolutely astounded at the changes that had been made. There were now rows of elaborately painted shops, a larger saloon, a barber shop and a renovated hotel along the main street. The main street was no longer a pass-through dirt road but a cobblestone thoroughfare, lined with expensive gas fuelled street lamps and wrought iron benches. Several houses and warehouses also dotted areas that used to be barren. People filled the street while they went about their personal errands of window browsing, shopping, searching for a good time, or simply strolling with a loved one. Everyone seemed friendly enough with warm smiles and pleasant greetings but Elizabeth still felt strangely uneasy.

The town itself seemed to exude a posh busyness and a type of hostile undertone Elizabeth couldn't quite explain. Perhaps it was because she was now a stranger; things were very different and the place held such bad memories for her. There was no denying that the town had amassed a great amount of wealth and prosperity.

"Elizabeth, would you like to check into the hotel while I take Kent to the sheriff's office?"

"No. I'll come with you," she said decidedly, suddenly afraid of bumping into anyone she knew on her own. It had been a long while since she'd been in anyone's society save Paxton's, Velvet's and Kent's; if you could count him.

The sheriff's office, situated in the very hub of town, was a medium-sized building of wood. A porch with a railing dominated the front, and four elongated stairs led to a pair of heavy-duty doors.

Kent wrestled about as Paxton hauled him off the horse and up the stairs. Finding both the bounty-hunter's grip and his bonds unrelenting, Kent succumbed to his fate. After knocking to announce their presence, they opened the double doors to reveal a large room, equipped with a coat-rack, two plain wooden desks, and some chairs lining the wall. Behind the desks were two holding-cells, each with thick steel bars, an uncomfortable looking cot, a filthy wash-stand and a stinking chamber pot. Two deputies, who were unknown to Elizabeth, greeted them, one with a smile and the other with a surly expression. The sheriff wasn't there. The town was generally peaceful, so he usually avoided the nightshift.

Without hesitation the deputy took Kent, who had started struggling again, and placed him in a cell. "I'm Deputy Martin and this is Deputy Howard," he informed them.

Deputy Howard's unfriendly eyes narrowed.

Deputy Martin, a tall, thin man with tousled brown hair and large brown eyes, held out his hand to Paxton. "Why don't you have a seat and fill us in."

After shaking hands, Paxton went over to a huge bulletin board that was literally covered with announcements, posters and newspaper articles.

"Thanks Deputy. I'm Paxton Reign, this is Elizabeth Dalton, and the man in the cell," he placed his index finger on a single wanted poster with an authoritative thud, "...is Harrison Kent."

Deputy Howard, who was avidly chewing on a toothpick, sat up glowering. He was the physical opposite of his counterpart Martin: short, overweight, balding, and nasty looking. "Better make sure, Marty. You don't want to be duped again like last month. The sheriff wouldn't be too happy with another blunder on your record."

Other than his jaw muscles tightening, Martin gave no indication that Howard's comment affected him. "Tell us how you caught him, Mr. Reign; I'm sure it's quite a tale."

Paxton gave an accurate and entertaining account, explaining how the bounty really belonged to Elizabeth. The deputy, obviously shocked at the details of Kent's capture at the hands of a young and beautiful woman, was speechless.

"A likely story," Howard grumbled, as he scrutinized the wanted poster, comparing it to Harrison Kent.

Martin went over to the desk drawer, and swatting Howard's hand away (which had hastily blocked access to the drawer) retrieved the designated reward money. He thanked Elizabeth for her services rather automatically, still amazed by her courage.

She shook her head, declining the money, "Really Paxton, you should take it."

"Elizabeth, take your money, my dear. Pretty soon we'll share everything anyway," he reminded her, winking.

"Right." She coloured and quickly took the money.

"Enjoy that, girly. Hope you don't think of me hanging in agony while yer using it." Kent said patronizingly, lying down on his bunk still sore from the bumps and bruises inflicted on him.

"Goodbye, Mister Kent," Elizabeth replied, untouched. "May the Lord have mercy on your soul."

Kent grunted, furious that his downfall had been because of a woman.

"He'll hang tomorrow at noon," Deputy Howard announced with a disturbing hint of glee. "According to his wanted poster, he's already been tried and sentenced to death in a county courthouse. He escaped on the way to his execution."

Martin eyed Kent coldly. "That won't be happening this time Mr. Kent, you can be sure of that." He readdressed Paxton, "We have no reason to wait to hang 'im. You two, of course, are welcome to attend."

"I've seen enough death, Sir." Paxton said quietly. "Thanks anyways." Then he leaned in close so only Elizabeth and the deputy could hear him. "Be careful -- he's a tricky devil. He won't think twice about snapping your neck if you give him an opportunity."

Deputy Martin nodded. "We'll be very careful, Sir. Good luck to you and especially to you, Miss," he smiled.

"Thank you. Goodnight." Elizabeth returned his smile.

Feeling hungry, they stopped at a surprisingly good restaurant and enjoyed a late dinner. They strolled around town savouring the cool night air until they reached their hotel. Paxton had insisted on getting the most expensive room in the hotel for his soon-to-be bride. The room

was beautiful with green and yellow laurel trellis wallpaper and an oak hardwood floor which was delicately accented by a beautiful Persian rug. Two full length windows with rich, golden draperies flanked the mahogany stained glass door which led out onto a grand balcony. Elizabeth hadn't even drawn back the drapes to see the type of view her room afforded, but she was sure it was extensive.

Her room was also lavishly furnished with an elegantly carved mahogany sofa with golden upholstery, a mahogany and gilt decorated, pedestal based, drop-leaf table, a matching wash basin and chest of drawers with gold etching. In the center of the room was a massive canopy bed with pale, lace curtains; it looked very comfortable, soft and inviting. Elizabeth was delighted to discover there was also an adjoining bathroom with a large tub, a full length mirror and a cleverly designed dressing table.

She removed all of her clothing, glad at the prospect of relaxing in a hot, steamy bath. Paxton had immediately ordered that a bath be drawn for both of them and she was extremely grateful for his foresight. She had too much on her mind to go to sleep after her soak, so she lay down on a mahogany Recamier and scanned the local newspaper.

Paxton stayed away from her, which was probably wise. The next morning she awoke and reveled in the beautiful sunshine which poured into her room. Before she'd gone to sleep, she'd opened the drapes and was slightly disappointed by the view of the saloon and a couple of houses in the distance. Elizabeth decided she would always prefer Mother Nature to the sight of manmade buildings. She quickly got out of bed and seized the package which contained the dress Paxton had purchased for her. She called for the maid to iron her dress and help style her hair.

Paxton, in a well-tailored suit, holding a single rose, met her in the lobby. "You..." he paused, taking in her beauty, "You look absolutely breathtaking!"

She did. Her white dress looked as though it had been intended only for her, with its intricately embroidered bodice and flowing double-tiered skirt. Her glorious red hair was done up in a pouf accompanied by an extravagant bun at the back. Soft, ringlet wisps of her hair played around her neck and shoulders and there was a string of pearls woven into the thick mane at the top of her head. The overall effect was dazzling and Elizabeth turned every head in the hotel lobby that morning. Paxton proudly took her arm and led her out into the street. They went directly to the church and were met by the priest who married them with a simple yet charming ceremony.

"Well, Mrs. Reign, what shall we do now?" Paxton asked saucily, as they left the church.

They stood there silhouetted by the entrance to the church for a moment and then he took her hand in his and kissed it gently. They walked out into the street and noticed the crowd gathering to witness the hanging of Harrison Kent.

Paxton shook his head disapprovingly, "You'd hope the people of this town would have better things to do with their time than to watch a man die."

"On the other hand, my dear husband, Harrison Kent murdered and

robbed a lot of people. It's important the authorities illustrate the consequences of breaking the law. It's also imperative people feel a sense of justice and retribution." She spoke from experience; the ache that her father's murder and the crimes Maxwell Stanton committed had as yet gone unpunished was still strong.

Paxton stared at her and she felt she'd erred on the side of decorum by contradicting her husband. Now that she was a wife, new rules were in place, but her mother hadn't lived long enough to teach her how to be a proper wife and naturally her father, being a rancher and all, didn't know much about it or really care.

She faltered, "Forgive me. I didn't mean to..."

"Forgive you?" he blurted incredulously, understanding her thoughts, "For what? No, I was just surprised by your statement. I'd never thought of it from that angle. I'd only thought about prevention, not retribution. You know, 'Once a criminal, always a criminal.' It's a morbid reality in almost every case, that once a person commits a crime, he or she is likely to do it again. However, if the perpetrator is caught the first time, it's possible they'll turn from their life of crime...it's possible but..." he didn't mean to continue.

Elizabeth, pleased she was praised for her point of view, added, "It also depends on the person's reason for committing the crime and their disposition..." The debate was interrupted by a voice that Elizabeth had wished never to hear again.

"Elizabeth Dalton!"

She turned and looked into the steely eyes of Maxwell Stanton. Paxton, who'd noticed the tremor that went through her, looked Stanton up and down with gravity.

"Mr. Stanton," she whispered, barely curtsying.

Stanton eyed Paxton coldly and then boldly took Elizabeth away from him and started her up the street.

"My dear girl, how have you been? It has been ages since I saw you last and you have become..." he relished her, "...quite an attractive woman. Your father would be so proud. We put aside our differences before he left, you might say, and became friends. He told me how much he would miss you and implored me to take good care of you. Did you know your father hoped you and I would one day wed?"

She pulled away from him sharply, affronted by his lies. "No," she said tightly. "No, I certainly was not aware of that at all. Mr. Stanton, I would like to introduce you to Paxton Reign..." She gestured towards Paxton, who was observing them with dark curiosity, "my husband."

"H-husband..." Stanton hesitated, and then offered his hand. "Mr. Reign, the bounty-hunter, if I'm not mistaken. I've heard of you." They shook hands but the gesture was devoid of approval. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. Elizabeth, I would have appreciated receiving word. I am your guardian after all."

Her eyes flashed indignantly. "You never were my guardian or my friend."

"Well, I must be off." He pointedly ignored her last statement. "As mayor of this town, I must witness the death of Harrison Kent. Congratulations on catching him, Mr. Reign."

"I should say so, but as I heard it, Mister Mayor, it was this here little lady who actually caught the notorious outlaw. Excuse me, mayor," A tall, thin, well-dressed man pushed past the mayor and thrust his hand out toward Elizabeth in an eager gesture, "So thrilled to meet you, Miss Dalton." He shook her hand, "...or should I call you Mrs. Reign?! I have it on good authority that you were just married, and to the famous bounty-hunter, Paxton Reign no less; whom I can only assume is this handsome gentleman here." He jovially diverted his hand to Paxton who was slower to respond than his wife had been. "The name's Bingham, Lester Bingham."

"How do you do, Mister Bingham," Elizabeth was delighted to see the man's interruption obviously annoyed Stanton, but she also noted the slight hesitation in her husband.

"Well, as I was saying before I was interrupted," the mayor paused to fairly glare at Bingham.

"Yes, yes, I heard you were just about to leave to watch Kent hang. I'll catch up with you later; I've some questions for you too, Mister Mayor. So, Elizabeth," Bingham grasped her arm and led her away from Stanton.

The mayor, unsuccessfully striving to hide his irritation, nodded at Paxton and not looking at Elizabeth once said curtly, "Good day to both of you, Reign, Elizabeth." With that, he left.

Elizabeth breathed again, although she was anxious for Bingham to leave as well. She wasn't quite sure what she thought of this man. He seemed friendly enough and yet she sensed a sanctimonious and duplicitous nature within him.

Lester Bingham continued unabated, "If it's not too much of an inconvenience, I'd really like to question you about the capture of Harrison Kent. Were you wild with fear? Was your life in serious jeopardy?" He whipped out a small note pad and pencil and started to scribble something down.

Elizabeth stared at him blankly, and finally Paxton, approaching them from behind, observed, "You work for the local newspaper, I presume."

The man gaped. "Didn't I say that? Oh, my deepest apologies. Yes, my brother and I own The Cobblestone News. As a matter of fact, we are the only printers in town."

"Mister Bingham..." Paxton began.

"Please call me Lester; I'm sure we're friends here. I've written about you quite often Mister Reign. Your exploits are sensational and I always enjoy receiving anything concerning you from my colleagues. You're currently a town favourite and with good reason."

Reign faltered and Elizabeth clarified, "Lester, we are indeed flattered and intrigued with your curiosity, and even though we've just been married, I don't mind giving you a little of our time in the interest of the town's newspaper. Ask what you will."

Elizabeth was determined not to rub Lester Bingham the wrong way although she didn't quite understand why. Inwardly, she felt it was imperative he remain an ally. Perhaps it was because she'd surmised that Stanton and Bingham were at odds with one another and she sensed a sort

of affiliation with Bingham as a result.

Bingham grinned, comprehending why he'd instantly liked this woman. "I appreciate it, Mrs. Reign."

After the interview with Lester Bingham was concluded and he'd run off to watch the hanging, Elizabeth expected Paxton to bombard her with questions about Maxwell Stanton, but he didn't and for that she was grateful.

When they returned to the hotel, Paxton informed the host that they'd just been married and there was no longer a need for two rooms.

"Shall we go up, my dear? Or perhaps you're hungry? Would you like to have something to eat and then maybe tour the town a little?" Paxton asked.

She nodded mutely; uncertain of what would transpire when they did go to their room. After all, her mother had died when she was young and naturally it never occurred to her father to discuss what happened after marriage. Therefore, all she knew was what her tutor had briefly explained -- that something beautiful happened between a man and his wife. He'd added a few compulsorily physical details before moving on. She wished now he'd been more explicit, though at the time she'd been glad when he'd changed the subject. It now worried her that her husband might be displeased with her lack of knowledge. Hastily deciding to prolong that event for as long as possible, she suggested going out to shop and having a bite to eat.

Bedtime, however, was inevitable and after a wonderful day of sight-seeing, shopping, and dining, they grew tired and returned to the hotel. He sensed her hesitation when he, highly motivated, led her quickly to the room.

"Elizabeth, what's wrong? Are you nervous?"

"Yes," she replied honestly. "I really have little idea of what's going to happen when we..." she giggled nervously, "...are alone."

He grinned, his anticipation climbing. "Worry not, my beloved Mrs. Reign!" He grabbed her hand and mischievously pulled her toward the door even faster than before. "You will soon find out." He stopped, looking down at her seriously. "There is nothing to fear, Elizabeth, but if you would prefer to wait a while I'll understand."

She smiled, reassuring herself as much as him. "No, that's all right. I've braved scarier things than a wedding night."

He returned her smile and opened the door to the room she'd slept in the previous night -- alone. She walked over to the bed and smoothed her hand down the covers, which were soft and welcoming. He approached her calmly, and taking her hands in his, smoothly pulled her close. She savoured his irresistible aroma, a nice aftershave or cologne mixed with his own personal scent.

"Relax," he kissed her forehead and then lowered his lips to hers. "Trust me." He kissed her softly at first, and as she shyly responded, more intensely, which made her tingle all over.

"My darling Elizabeth..." he whispered as his lips found their way down to her neck. "I love you."

Turning his head, Paxton noticed Elizabeth had quickened her pace after a long, pensive silence.

"Why the sudden hurry?" he asked jokingly, having evidently understood her motive.

Then his look became somewhat serious. "Elizabeth, I've never asked this, because I believed you'd tell me everything I needed to know, but I can't help a little curiosity after recent events. The man obviously has it in for me and has a history with you. What exactly is your background with Maxwell Stanton?"

"Now is not the time to go into that," she stated after a drawn-out pause. "It's too hard to tell a long story on horseback. Wait until we get to the cave and then I will tell you -- everything."

Chapter Six

Maxwell Stanton was rudely awakened by a pounding on his door. Groggily he reached for his pocket watch; by moonlight he read that it was nearly two A.M. "What is it?" he demanded fiercely.

"Sir."

Maxwell knew instantly it was Willy. "Come in." His stomach clenched as he assumed the news was about Elizabeth and that it would not be good.

The door opened and Willy entered the room. "Winston's been knocked out cold."

"Elizabeth?"

Willy shook his head. "Missin'. The horses too."

"Castro is missing as well as Velvet?"

Willy nodded slowly, knowing what was coming.

"So, Willy, are you still sure Reign is dead?" Maxwell growled, jumping from bed and seizing his silk robe from the bedpost.

"There was a grave, Sir, and Elizabeth done told me herself she buried him."

Nodding, Maxwell lifted his eyebrows patronizingly. "Oh, so Elizabeth told you, did she?" He walked around the room in his robe, clenching and unclenching his fists as if attempting to cool his temper. The attempt was futile. Descending forcefully on Willy he slapped him hard across the face. "You fool!" Willy received yet another blow to his already reddening cheek. "Never trust a woman, Willy, especially a beautiful woman!" Maxwell sighed calmly, having exerted his anger on the face of the other man. "Well, you're not the first to be fooled by a woman, Willy. Elizabeth will get what's coming to her. My main concern at this point is Paxton Reign." He spewed the name maliciously. The constant defeat this man was inflicting on him drove him into a frenzy. "I want him dead, Willy, dead -- and I want Elizabeth in my bed..." he stopped, somewhat surprised by his own bluntness.

"Sir," Willy eventually broke the uneasy silence. "Ya want us t'follow their trail?"

"Oh, come on, Willy," Stanton admonished. "Track an expert tracker? Do you honestly think Reign would leave us a trail? No. We'll have to wait until Paxton chooses to show himself. We do have possession of his ranch, remember?"

"What if they don't show?" Willy despised having to be patient; he didn't want to have to wait to even the score with Reign.

"They will, Willy, they will. We must concentrate on what we're going to do once he does decide to show himself..."

"Sir?" Willy hated interrupting his boss while he was obviously concocting a plan; but he felt ridiculous standing there with Stanton in his nightdress and robe.

"Willy, we're going to need some backup on this one, I think. Bring the boys in."

The henchman smiled evilly. "Yes, sir!"

Chapter Seven

Once they'd arrived at the cave, Paxton immediately started a fire. Both of them were tired and hungry and appreciated the comfort of the flames. Elizabeth volunteered to go and catch some fish or game to eat, but Paxton informed her he'd brought provisions from town. He cooked a simple meal and as they ate, Elizabeth filled him in on her history with Maxwell Stanton.

Paxton's face darkened as she spoke and when she concluded her tale, he tossed down his wooden plate and left the cave. Elizabeth put her head in her hands. She wondered if she'd been wrong not to tell her husband of the past, but she'd not wanted the past to affect their future; a now apparently futile attempt. If Paxton had known about Maxwell, they probably wouldn't own the ranch, and Paxton would either be dead or a murderer. Mrs. Reign sighed and envisioned the ranch wishing she were back there with Pax, training a colt or planting in her garden. She recalled the first time she'd stepped into the ranch house and surveyed her new home.

Their brand new home, a ranch no less, was located east of the town and had been purchased shortly after their wedding night. Elizabeth had implored her husband not to search for a home too near the town. She desired no future contact with Maxwell Stanton and didn't want to set up a scenario where it would be easy for the mayor to interfere and cause problems for them. Since she'd previously decided to avoid the past, she could not give Paxton a viable reason why they should leave the vicinity of her home town. There were two reasons why she'd not insisted on moving territories altogether: both were on account of her father. One, deep down she hoped and prayed that he might one day return, and two: if he had been murdered, she wanted to bring his killer to justice. One way or the other she'd have some sort of closure.

The ranch was previously owned by one Jack Strom, a retired bounty-hunter and friend of Paxton's. Jack was a tough old man and it was probably his disposition, knowledge and fearlessness that had kept him safe from Maxwell Stanton; that and the fact the ranch was about fifteen miles from town. Strom had heard about Paxton's 'getting hitched' and had sent word that his ranch was for sale. Paxton and Elizabeth had spoken about the prospects of owning a ranch, for Elizabeth the main deterrent was the concern that Paxton might resent having to retire from

bounty-hunting.

"Lizzy, that would not be a problem; I assure you," he'd stated matter-of-factly. "I married you because I wanted to be with you, do you think I'd want to leave you to hunt criminals and perhaps get killed in the process?"

"Well, I wouldn't want you to leave, but I could go with you, Pax, and help you."

He looked at her incredulously. "Not on your life, literally! Elizabeth, Kent was..."

"Paxton, I can take care of myself. I don't want you to give up anything because of me. That lifestyle would be exciting and I could deal with it."

"Could you deal with being shot, stabbed, scalped, kidnapped or sold into slavery? Could you deal with me being dead? Never mind the dangers, Elizabeth, but what about..." his look softened, "...a family? Don't you want to have children?"

She blushed. "Of course, but that could wait a few years."

Suddenly, he grabbed her and held her close. "Elizabeth, I want the ranch! I don't need or wish to chase wanted people any more. That chapter of my life is closed and I'm glad of it. This is what I want, honestly."

"All right, if you're sure," Elizabeth conceded, realizing Paxton was sincere about his desire for a career change. She recalled the searing dread she'd felt when she'd thought Kent was going to kill Paxton and she didn't want to face that feeling again -- ever. "Let's go and look at the ranch, Mr. Reign."

Jack Strom had met them on the porch. His scruffy, rough appearance reminded Elizabeth of her father. He wasn't as tall as Paxton or her father, but he was built like a grizzly with stocky muscles, broad shoulders and a keen alertness. He was all friendliness now, but Elizabeth sensed given the right circumstances the old man could turn lethal.

Jack held out his hand and Paxton shook it. "How have you been, Jack?"

"I'm getting old, boy." Strom glanced at Elizabeth with astute blue eyes. "You must be Mrs. Reign." He nodded slightly. "Truly a pleasure, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Mr. Strom." She held out her hand for a handshake, but he unexpectedly kissed it.

"You were formerly Miss Elizabeth Dalton, were you not?"

She concurred.

"I knew your father." Strom's weathered face tightened and he went quiet as if lost in a memory. After a short moment he blinked and addressed Paxton. "Well, my boy, are you going to buy my ranch? If you do, I'm planning a splendid retirement in New York. Ever been there, Elizabeth? It's a fine city."

The two men immediately engaged themselves in conversation about the city. Elizabeth barely heard a word about New York as she was distracted by her own curiosity. What had Strom meant by mentioning her father so briefly, and then why had he looked so distant? Was he merely sorry for

the situation or did he know something else?

"Elizabeth?" Paxton seized her hand dispelling her reverie. "You there, honey?" he grinned. "Jack wants to show us the house."

"I do apologize." She blushed, realizing they'd been trying to get her attention for some time. "I'd love to see inside."

Walking up the front porch steps and through the front door she saw a plain but clean sitting room, a large oak kitchen with several cupboards, a sink, stove and plenty of counter space. The dining room was well furnished, as was the bedroom.

"It needs a woman's touch, Ma'am. My wife moved up to New York some years ago. She missed the city and I never was home much with bounty-hunting, running a ranch and all," Strom said. "But, from what Paxton tells me you make a fine home. Even from a cave."

"What do you think, Lizzy?" Paxton asked.

"It's perfect," she beamed. "I couldn't have planned a better layout myself."

Jack smiled. "Well, I'm glad you like it. I'll be leaving all of the furniture here and there is room for an addition," he added tenderly. "I never needed more room, but I think you might. Now, I'll show you the bunk house for the hired hands. You know, boy, I don't think I could've parted with my ranch to anybody but you two. I know you'll take care of it."

Jack had been right. Elizabeth and Paxton had worked the ranch for a year. The ranch's prosperity tripled and they loved their home, which Elizabeth had decorated and as Jack had put it -- added a woman's touch. Neither one of them had realized they'd attracted the attention of Mayor Stanton. His ranches were losing business as theirs increased in value. Paxton was an honest, trustworthy, hard-working man and people were drawn to him.

Elizabeth was sweeping her porch and Paxton was out running the horses when Maxwell Stanton and his carriage arrived. Wishing she could go inside and shut the door in his face, Elizabeth greeted him coldly.

"Seems you and your husband are quite the talented ranchers." His tone was cool.

"I learned a lot from my father," she stated acidly. "...and Paxton is good at anything he does."

Maxwell scowled, came closer to her, and whispered, "So, he makes you happy then?"

"Very." She backed away from him and was relieved to see Paxton riding in. "Why have you come here, Mayor Stanton?"

He smiled wickedly. "Why, to see my lovely ward; I wanted to make sure you're being well taken care of." His eyes shifted as he realized Paxton was approaching. He raised his voice. "I also wanted to see the competition."

Paxton did not take Maxwell's outstretched hand; he went straight over to Elizabeth. "Is everything okay?" he asked her.

"Of course it is, my dear fellow," Maxwell answered for her. "The lovely Elizabeth and I were just getting reacquainted, that's all. Your ranch is really quite something, Reign. I wouldn't mind owning some of it."

"I understand your sentiments, Mr. Stanton. I don't mind owning all of it," Paxton said firmly.

Maxwell grinned, calculating how he'd love to be rid of Paxton, and take Elizabeth and the ranch for his own. "I actually came out here to warn you both; there has been some cattle thieving in the area. Several of my own ranches have been hit, and the sheriff and I have been unable to catch the perpetrators."

"Did you try looking among your own people?" Elizabeth asked slyly. Both Maxwell and Paxton picked up on the insinuation.

"I like to believe that the men working for me are trustworthy, Elizabeth," Stanton drawled. "But, perhaps, you are right and I am being too idealistic. And, yet, I've heard your cattle numbers are doubling and I was just wondering if maybe your employees are the ones I should be investigating."

"How dare you bring your veiled threats here..." Elizabeth steamed, but Paxton quickly intervened.

"Naturally, you and the sheriff are welcome to come and investigate any time, Mr. Stanton. I was just out with my stock today and they're all of my mark, I assure you. I've purchased some cattle from down south; the number of cattle is outlined on the deed and Jack Strom included the number of horses and cows he sold to us in the deed to the ranch as well. The number is no more or less than what is indicated in those two deeds."

The mayor's face darkened. "Deeds can be forged, Reign."

"Yes they can," Paxton agreed amiably. "That's why I thought it was important that three witnesses and a justice of the peace oversaw each transaction."

"How clever."

Stanton assessed his enemy, and realized once again, that it would not be easy to bring down Paxton Reign. Certainly he'd have to resort to more devious means than his usual methods of intimidation.

"I believe in honest business, Mr. Stanton. Your stock is safe from me. But, by all means, bring the sheriff if it would rest your mind as to my innocence."

Maxwell considered planting some of his cattle, and framing Reign, but as he glared into his eyes he realized Reign would be expecting this. The truth was there had been no cattle raids and the town's people were aware of this. Reign was popular among the people and Stanton didn't want to damage his own reputation by a weak attempt at framing. Anything he got on Reign would have to be pretty solid or pretty secret.

"No, Mr. Reign that will not be necessary." He skimmed the rim of his hat with his fingers then replaced it on his head. "Good day to both of you. Elizabeth. Reign," he nodded sharply and turned to leave, but stopped. "By the way, Elizabeth," he grabbed her hand, kissed it fervently and noted with satisfaction how Elizabeth flinched and Paxton shifted uneasily. "You look enchanting, my darling." Heading toward his carriage Maxwell grinned to himself as a plan of vengeance formed in his mind. Destroying Paxton would be easier than he'd first thought.

When Paxton finally returned to the cave his demeanor was somber. He sat down across from Elizabeth, picked up a long stick and poked at the fire.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, Paxton. I was just afraid it would endanger our lives together. I didn't want Maxwell to have any power over us," she explained anxiously, distraught by the length of his absence and his now solemn silence.

He looked her way and remarked quietly, "I'm not angry at you, Elizabeth. You believed you were right not to tell me. Your reason being that you feared I'd have wanted to avenge your father's death, and might have caused more harm than good in the process." He plunged the stick firmly into the fire, knocking a propped up log down onto the fiery red embers. "You did what you thought was right, that's all. The man has injured you immensely, and your personal vendetta perhaps overshadowed your knowledge of my character. I think..." he glanced at her warily. "I hope you now realize I would not act against Maxwell Stanton without careful and purposeful consideration beforehand. If all you've revealed to me about the mayor is true and he actually murdered your father, then he is a malevolent adversary indeed. We're already aware of how well he manipulated us and almost cost me my life." He tossed the stick into the fire and watched as the flames engulfed it. "To think, I was jealous of him and all of this time you really did despise him." His mind flashed back to the day Maxwell first visited their ranch and the jealousy that had seared him.

Stanton took Elizabeth's hand and kissed it. "You look enchanting, my darling."

Elizabeth had visibly trembled. Paxton had believed that reaction was out of chemistry and not disgust. He watched Maxwell leave and looked at Elizabeth. She didn't say anything, only turned and went into the house. That night he'd lain awake pondering his wife's relationship with Stanton. He'd heard that Elizabeth's father had left his ranch and the care of his daughter to Stanton, and Elizabeth had stayed there under his roof for several years. She left at the age of seventeen, probably because they'd had a lover's quarrel; that explained her cool attitude toward the mayor. He remembered that Stanton claimed Mr. Dalton wanted Elizabeth to marry him. His stomach twisted painfully as he wondered why his wife told him so little about the past which involved Maxwell Stanton.

Elizabeth stirred and rolled over to face him. "Pax?" she said sleepily. "What's wrong?" She nuzzled close to him and kissed his shoulder. "Is there anything I can do to help you get to sleep?" she asked seductively, smoothing her finger tips over his chest.

He seized her hand and squeezed it lovingly. "Exactly, what was your relationship with Stanton?"

She stiffened instantly, remarking tightly, "Nothing. I hate him, Paxton."

He looked at her. "Love and hate are on a thin line, Lizzy."

Her eyes had widened. "Paxton, please don't ask me about that horrid man, just rest assured I love you and only you." She kissed him ardently, which caused him to forget his concerns for that moment.

Two months later he'd returned from the fields to discover Elizabeth was gone. She'd left a note informing him she'd gone to town and said she'd be back late. It was well after dark when a man wearing a sheriff's badge appeared at his door, and told him he was under arrest for the theft of the mayor's cattle. He knew this was a trap and would've struggled if the impostor hadn't pointed out that Elizabeth was waiting for him at the jail house. The implied threat was evident to Paxton, and as the bogus sheriff had intended, Paxton went with him quietly. Upon entering the jailhouse he was brutally struck on the back of the head and knocked out cold.

He awoke locked in a cell with Maxwell Stanton glaring at him. "I warned you I was aware of your illegal activities, Reign. If you had only refrained from stealing my stock you would not be here right now."

"I never stole from your stock, Stanton, and you know it," he steamed as angrily as he could with a pounding head. "That's why the real sheriff isn't here, isn't it?"

"There are three witnesses; they saw you leading several of my cows off my premises and they will testify to this." He continued when his adversary did not reply. "Elizabeth wants to speak with you now, Mr. Reign."

Elizabeth entered just after Maxwell left; her face was pale and extremely grim. Refusing to look at him, she denounced him as her husband and rebuked him harshly. Cruelly, she'd declared she wanted to marry Maxwell and to be rid of the last name of Reign. She begged him to sell the ranch to Maxwell and to leave town. It would be better for everyone concerned, she'd said icily. Each phrase she used stabbed at him deeply, leaving him feeling increasingly bereft. It was as though his will to live was draining away with every insult. If she no longer wanted him, what was left? It was just a day later that Paxton's food had been drugged and he woke up in the process of being tied to that oak.

"You were jealous of him?" Elizabeth asked blankly, bringing her husband back into the present. "But, I thought...I thought you knew how much I hated him."

"It's a lot easier to understand when I know the reason," he replied. "I assumed you'd had a relationship with him and he'd jilted you or the two of you had a lover's quarrel or something."

Elizabeth laughed coldly. "No."

"Well, tomorrow we need to discuss what will be done. I bet Stanton's taken possession of our ranch and will not rest until he has his way -- until..." Paxton looked meaningfully at his wife. "...until he has you. But, right now it's late and I'm tired."

He admired her for a moment relieved he'd followed her after she'd rescued him from the oak tree, despite what she'd told him in the jail.

Aware all these troubles would still be present tomorrow, he decided he didn't want to spend any more time contemplating what was to be done about them. Right now he wanted to show his wife how glad he was to have her back and how much he'd missed her. He smiled mischievously at her and huskily commanded, "Come here, beautiful."

Chapter Eight

Fenton Stanton was the cleverest man on earth, at least in his humble opinion he was. At dinner parties he gleefully boasted about the fact that he, himself, had never been outsmarted by anyone. "Even my younger brother Maxwell, who..." he paused as if considering what he was about to say, "...is quite clever in his own right, could never get the better of me. I always knew what he was up to."

Fenton absolutely relished the fact that any plans he'd implement went almost exactly as he'd foreseen with only another person's defects to blame for any difficulty. Growing up, Fenton regularly competed with his brother in horsemanship, charismatic cons, girls; well just about everything; and he, Fenton Stanton, always came out on top. Maxwell was totally undone; but Fenton, being the eldest, liked to assure himself he was teaching his younger brother important lessons for life, rather than bullying him and taking advantage of his, well, shall we say, less than adequate intellect. Fenton called it, 'Survival of the Fittest' which was the one valuable lesson his father, having had little time for children, managed to bestow upon him. In his prayers Fenton reassured his dead mother that Maxwell would one day thank him for his tough love.

Ultimately, Fenton conceded the rivalry between himself and his brother caused Maxwell emotional issues, so many in fact, that the two hadn't spoken in nearly fourteen years. If it had been left up to Maxwell, Fenton would have absolutely no idea what his brother was doing, where he was living, or if he indeed was living. That's why he was so surprised and delighted, albeit in a mischievous way, when he received a letter from his brother requesting a visit as soon as possible. Although the letter indicated that Maxwell's intensions were merely to get reacquainted with his brother, Fenton was good at reading between the lines. There was no doubt in Fenton's mind that Maxwell desired and needed the cunning wit that only his brother possessed to get him out of a current dilemma. In short, Maxwell needed Fenton's help. With great amusement and satisfaction Fenton replied to the letter, stating he'd be there within the week.

Maxwell Stanton was furious. He'd never had this much trouble acquiring something he wanted since living with his confounded brother. Elizabeth and her troublesome husband had been missing for more than a fortnight and his patience was beyond thin. What if Willy was right and

the Reigns never returned to their ranch. Maxwell couldn't stand the thought of losing Elizabeth, particularly to a man like Paxton Reign. To be outdone by a mere bounty-hunter was definitely belittling to Maxwell's stellar reputation with the ladies. Since coming to this town he'd never had a woman refuse him, Elizabeth was the first. Women, even married women, threw themselves at him. He'd most certainly had his share of beautiful women and why not, he was handsome, alluring, and rich.

There was something about Elizabeth though that stained and haunted his memory. As a fourteen-year-old she'd possessed looks and personality but little else to attract his attention. He was too busy with all of his schemes and business ventures to notice her. At seventeen, entering his dining room with an intrepid air about her, she had been breathtaking. Utterly shocked that he had not noticed her beauty before, he rebuked himself for paying so little attention to her; however, she'd vanished before he'd had a chance to rectify this neglect.

His searches for her were futile, and with time, his thoughts focused on other matters and he continued with his life. But, as soon as he'd seen her with Reign walking down the street in that stunning white dress, with her beautiful hair elaborately done up, all memories of desire came flooding back to him and he ached for her.

He cherished the way she'd looked at him with those piercing hazel eyes that bore into him with such dazzling personality and passion. He had to have her -- plain and simple. His need was supplemented by his request for Fenton's presence; nothing but the direst circumstances would have prevailed upon him to contact his elder brother for assistance.

Maxwell sat alone in his parlour, his back supported by a couple of cushions, as he rapped his fingers against the wooden arms of his plush armchair. The letter, having just arrived, informing him of his brother's imminent arrival, lay loosely on his lap and it was evident he was contemplating its contents.

His nerves were raw and his business affairs deserted, as he schemed and planned a way to entice Elizabeth and humiliate, or preferably, annihilate Reign. To his great consternation, Jack Strom appeared at Reign's ranch two days ago, with a document stating he was the legal guardian of the ranch and all of its entreties if Reign disappeared unexpectedly. Unfortunately for the mayor, Strom had a large party of men with him, as well as a justice of the peace. Maxwell could do nothing in retaliation; he'd no choice but to order his men off the ranch. He hoped this would lead to the Reigns' return, but as of yet, he'd heard nothing from his spies.

The mayor had cause to be doubly concerned. Foremost, he wanted Elizabeth for himself and Reign out of the picture, but he didn't want his reputation to suffer in the process, and people were beginning to talk. On the other hand, if some of the more illustrious, ambitious townsmen, that (at the moment) Maxwell held under his thumb, were to become fully aware of his circumstances, they might devise a way to use his conundrum to their own advantage. The entire situation was frustrating, but even more so, was how he'd approach explaining the problem to his wretched brother.

Paxton sat comfortably against a large tree watching his wife swim leisurely. Elizabeth took a deep breath and dove under the water and swam as hard as she could to the bottom.

When she surfaced she looked at Paxton and exclaimed, "Maybe, we should forget all about the ranch, Maxwell Stanton and the whole world and just stay here." She smiled and exited the water, quickly wrapping herself in a nearby cloth.

Paxton smiled lazily. "Yes that would be wonderful, my darling. But, the world will eventually come to us. Besides we own the ranch, this land we have no claim to, and it's not likely to remain as unblemished for very much longer."

Elizabeth sighed. "You're right I guess. I just wish we could escape."

"Running from your problems? What would your father think about that?" Paxton admonished somewhat sharply.

He felt edgy and irritable partly because he was tired of trying to figure out how to deal with the mayor and partly because he was hungry. He regretted his statement immediately when Elizabeth visibly paled.

"If my father had run from Stanton he might be alive today," she replied quietly.

"Perhaps, but he'd have to live with his cowardice and from what you've told me of your father I don't think he could. There are times, Elizabeth, that you have to make a stand and sometimes it is worth your life. You were willing to sacrifice yours for me..." He stood up, dusted off his pants and continued, "...marrying a man you hated more than anything on this planet? What kind of life would that be?"

She smoothed her hands along the top of the sunlit water enjoying the warm resistance. "All right, what's the plan?"

"First, we must eat! I'm absolutely starving!"

They returned to the cave where Elizabeth prepared venison stew from the provisions that Paxton had brought. It was delicious. With his belly full and his beautiful wife singing as she tidied up, Paxton felt his sour mood dissipate and a feeling of utter contentment, even exuberance replace it.

Once satisfied with the cleanliness of the cave, Elizabeth repeated her question from before, "What's the plan?"

Paxton shrugged, still feeling at a loss, but unlike before he wasn't overly concerned. Offhandedly, he concluded he really didn't care at the moment. "You ever heard of the phrase 'Divide and conquer', dearest?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "What history lover has not?"

He laughed gently, "Forgive me, I should've known. Elizabeth, my sweet wife, I believe it's time for us to return home. As we ride we can discuss what could be done about Maxwell."

Elizabeth appeared confused and worried. "But our ranch, Pax, how are we to regain our ranch? Are we just going to ride in and reclaim it, with all of the mayor's goons there to greet us? That would be disastrous!"

"Oh!" Grinning, Paxton assumed a teasingly authoritative tone and began a theatrical monologue, "I forgot to enlighten you as to certain details, Mrs. Reign. You see, after you so obligingly freed me from the most unpleasant death of exposure..." He nudged her jokingly, "I decided to follow you to town to see if you'd likewise free me from the most unpleasant life of a broken heart; however, before locating you at the mayor's home I felt it prudent to telegram Mr. Jack Strom (as he'd asked me to do should trouble arise) to alert him that Stanton had brazenly taken over our ranch. Therefore, my beloved Lizzy, if all has gone according to plan, the ranch should now be in the very safe and accommodating possession of Mr. Strom."

Elizabeth giggled with delight and clapped her hands as Paxton jokingly bowed, and laughed at his own bizarre behaviour. These days, the days since Stanton had entered their lives; it was a rare occasion to see the dramatic and fun-loving side of her husband. His sense of humour made their ride home pleasant and light-hearted even though the discussion was supposed to be of a serious nature. Elizabeth found the weight of all of their troubles lifting with her husband's bright attitude.

Jack Strom greeted them upon their arrival back at the ranch. Paxton dismounted and shook Jack's hand. "Thanks for coming to the rescue, Jack. I'm sure glad you warned me about Maxwell Stanton's tactics, otherwise we might not have a ranch to return to."

"Maxwell sure wanted it that way, but even he is subject to the law."

"At least to some degree," Elizabeth retorted darkly. "I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Strom. I would've hated losing this place to Stanton; he's already in possession of my other ranch."

Strom nodded. "Come inside and we'll have a talk about recent events."

Fenton Stanton, tall, dark and handsome, arrived in town with an illustrious, if small, entourage of a pedantic footman, a buggy driver and a personal servant. He stepped down from his carriage with a pompous air that made Maxwell cringe.

"Brother!" Maxwell cried, too exuberantly for how he felt. "You are very welcome."

"Thank you, Max."

No brotherly embrace was exchanged, just a handshake and a slap on the back.

Fenton smirked slightly at his brother's frustrated expression. "Oh, I know how you hate it when I call you Max. I will endeavour to call you Maxwell -- it's just so formal."

Despite the subtle belittlement, Maxwell straightened his back, reminding himself he had expected nothing less from his older brother.

"Please come in and we'll have a drink. You can update me on all of your news."

Fenton did not wait for a second invitation; on the doorstep, however, he did pause turning to look at his brother and quipping, "Come

now, my dear little brother, we both know you aren't the least bit interested in my affairs. I am here to solve a problem that you cannot. Well, aren't I?"

At that moment, Maxwell cursed himself for ever having invited his brother, and even considered sending him on his way when Elizabeth's dazzling features, her exquisite figure, soft, silky hair, and that impassioned personality of her's flashed in his mind. Fenton was toying with him, as was his habit, and apparently a pastime he had thoroughly missed. Maxwell knew he must not allow Fenton to even suspect that he was irritated; he must behave in a fashion befitting a mayor and consequently, the most powerful man in the immediate area. Maxwell would certainly not give his brother the satisfaction of knowing that he'd got to him, not on this visit at least.

The mayor addressed his butler, who was dutifully waiting on the stairs to welcome his master's guest, "Ellister, show my brother to his room and see to his every need."

Ellister nodded and suggested, "Afterward, would Mr. Stanton enjoy a tour of the mansion?"

Fenton's eyes lit up at the opportunity to slight his younger brother in front of his staff. "You call this a mansion, little brother? Why, it's not nearly big enough...a mansion must have at least..."

Maxwell quickly intervened to save as much face as he feasibly could under such an onslaught, "Oh, I am sure my home is nothing compared to your vast estates, brother, but I do hope it will provide you with enough comfort during your stay."

Fenton nodded briskly. "Yes, let us hope."

Ellister appeared mortally wounded and as respectfully as possible piped up, "Sir must be accustomed to very large estates indeed, but from this town's standards, this is certainly a mansion and one of the most illustrious homes in the region."

Fenton snorted. "I suppose every place has its level. Ellister, is it? Well, Ellister, the prestige you have earned here must be quite impressive to your local peers, but I assure you were you to come to my city; you would be in awe at the size of our grand estates. Why, in my city, this mansion would be considered a mere lower class abode." As he followed the butler up the central staircase, he turned to his manservant who was trailing with an armload of luggage. "It's true, isn't it, Johnson?"

Johnson blinked and nodded quickly, but it was rather obvious he had not been listening to a word of the conversation, and simply knew better than to contradict his master.

Ellister stopped and faced them. "It sounds very grand indeed, Sir." He smiled icily. "Forgive me, but my memory is somewhat unreliable, of what city are you mayor?"

Fenton's eyes narrowed, but then he laughed. "Cheeky. Bravo, Ellister, I applaud your loyalty."

"Your room, Sir." Ellister opened the guest room door, and for the first time was concerned the room would not meet with the approval of the guest. Apparently, in the absence of his brother, Fenton Stanton was not as critical. He nodded and entered the room.

Ellister always enjoyed showing people this room as it was beautifully furnished. A large four poster bed lined the eastern wall and was complimented with a dresser, bench and wash stand. Directly opposite the bed was a magnificent and ornate fireplace, flanked by a doorway which led to a dressing room. A hand-woven Agra rug covered the unfurnished section of the dark hardwood floor.

"There's a cast-iron tub in the adjoining room, as well as..." Ellister paused for dramatic effect, "...a modern water-closet for your personal use. You will find a reserve of reading material in there also." He bowed slightly and indicated a row of silk strings by the bed. "If you should need anything, just pull the first string and I will be able to assist you. Enjoy your stay, Sir."

Ellister turned to go when Fenton asked, "The other two strings? What are they for?"

"They call the cook and the housekeeper, Sir. But I do believe Mayor Stanton would wish me to take care of all of your needs personally." Ellister nodded curtly, and took his leave.

Fenton sighed loudly and plopped down on a plush armchair and glanced at Johnson. "Everything's so beige," he complained.

Chapter Nine

Jack, Elizabeth and Paxton sat at the kitchen table, Jack and Paxton with a glass of stout whiskey and Elizabeth slowly sipping a cup of warm herbal tea. Elizabeth was aware that their hitherto cheerful dispositions had disappeared as soon as they'd returned to the ranch and been fully informed of the situation at hand. Jack had given them complete details regarding the onerous removal of the mayor from the Reign property. He'd fully disclosed just how incensed the mayor was when he finally accepted that he'd lost the battle. Elizabeth knew as well as everyone else at the table that Maxwell would be back. She shivered inwardly at the thought. The realization that she'd almost become Stanton's wife, a distant reality that had been so repugnant to her, was now foremost in her mind. A picture of Maxwell in bed and in the throes of passion with her as his unwilling companion invaded her mind. Her body shook so violently with revulsion that even Jack and Paxton noticed and looked at her inquisitively. Explaining that she'd felt a bit of a chill, she took another warming sip of tea.

She considered her intimacy with Paxton and how gentle he'd always been with her and soon the unwelcome image of the mayor was replaced with a pleasant memory of her husband. It had not taken them long after the wedding night to thrive at perfecting their physical union. Everything about their intimate lifestyle was completely satisfying and exciting. Elizabeth considered herself very lucky for she'd heard it wasn't like that for everyone.

Her whole body cringed again as she inwardly acknowledged that had she married the mayor, intimacy would've been an obligation and probably one he'd require frequently. Certainly, he would not have made as caring a lover as her husband. Regretfully, Elizabeth concluded that it'd been entirely irrational for her to have considered marrying Maxwell Stanton, even to save Paxton. She peeked at her husband and contemplated his thoughts. Secretly, Elizabeth wondered if he'd ever imagined her in bed with the mayor, particularly after her false declaration of love for the latter. She conjectured what that must do to a man -- to picture another man making love to his wife. What must that have done to Paxton? Since Elizabeth knew how much she truly detested the mayor she hadn't considered that Paxton would come to any other conclusion than the true one. That she was being forced to do all of this in order to save him.

She immediately thought of Paxton in a fond embrace with another woman; of him doing to another woman what he did with her and she felt an

intense jealousy overwhelm her.

'My poor Paxton, what my ignorance put you through,' she empathized silently.

"Jack, what am I to do about Stanton?" Paxton blurted suddenly, snapping Jack and Elizabeth out of their private contemplations and back to the circumstances at hand.

Elizabeth glanced first at Paxton, noting his furrowed brow, and then at Jack who appeared composed but concerned.

"I mean, I was a bounty-hunter, I'm used to tracking outlaws across various terrains and when I catch my prey, I'm used to the law being on my side. I guess I'm not much good at sitting and plotting or sitting and waiting for my adversary to make the next move. This battle with the mayor, it's new territory for me and I'm not clear on what my next course of action should be. I feel frustrated!"

Jack folded his arms and exhaled. "Well, lad, you should really pat yourself on the back because you've lasted longer than most people who've gone up against the mayor; saving your father, of course, miss."

The mention of her father stung and gave Elizabeth the courage to confront Jack. "Mr. Strom, I couldn't help but feel that you had something to tell me, when we first met; do you know anything about the disappearance of my father?" She touched Paxton's hand affectionately, an obvious gesture of regret for interrupting his line of conversation.

Jack looked as if he was suddenly inundated with worry and it took him quite some time to reply.

"Your father was a good man and friend. Before he disappeared he came to see me at my ranch. He said Maxwell was up to something but he couldn't be sure of what. Naturally, as any father who feared for his life would, he asked me to watch over you. The only unnatural thing, which perplexed me a little, was that he insisted you remain at the ranch until you were ready to leave on your own or until you were kicked off. When Maxwell took over the ranch I could do nothing but leave you there, since it didn't seem to me that your safety or well-being was at risk."

Startled, Elizabeth blurted, "But, why would my father want me to stay at the ranch if he were gone?"

Strom shrugged. "Your father yielded no clues as to his reasoning. Perhaps he hoped you'd inherit when you came of age, or that Stanton would entrust the ranch to your care eventually."

"My father hated that man! I wouldn't have expected him to want me to stay with Stanton and gain his trust."

"Enemies go as far as you keep them, Elizabeth. Your father would've wanted you to have that ranch if at all possible." Jack sighed loudly. "When you were older, he instructed me to tell you word for word, and he made me memorize it so I could recite it to you: 'Keep your chin up, there is always a star to be found in the darkest of places.'"

Jack Strom pondered Elizabeth's lovely face and realized what he'd hoped for so long; the phrase meant more to her than just mere encouragement from her long lost father.

Fenton Stanton finished his meal and wiped his lips disdainfully. "Well, little brother, now that I have been adequately fed, I suppose you might as well fill me in as to why you have summoned me."

Maxwell cleared his throat uneasily. "Yes, but not here. Let's go into the parlour and talk." He stood up, directing his attention to the servant waiting for any additional requests. "We'll have our brandy and cigars in the parlour."

"Very good, Sir," the servant left the dining room to relay clean-up orders, and Maxwell led his brother into the parlour.

The parlour was dimly lit with four wall lamps and a fire that crackled menacingly in a large stone fireplace. Hardback books encumbered finely crafted bookshelves lining the eastern wall. Fenton noted with a twinge of jealousy that each bookshelf had been constructed with the convenience of a column of drawers just underneath the shelves. An elaborate chesterfield flanked by two side tables sat in the middle of the room, angled toward both the fireplace and a baby grand piano. A bar flanked the back corner of the room, and from what Fenton could see, was well-equipped with an assortment of wines, liquors and ales. A pair of beautifully etched glass doors opened into what Maxwell referred to as his living room, where an ornate chess set and a sitting area could be seen.

The sitting area was featured in the center of the living room with a throw rug which matched the room's rosy hues. The living room had a much brighter atmosphere than the parlour, which was a dark maroon colour with a slightly darker toned carpet. Fenton wondered at his brother's obscure motives when it came to his interior decorating. The parlour was evidently the room in which Maxwell preferred to entertain, so why was it less inviting?

Maxwell offered his brother a cigar, which he accepted, and lit it for him with a match.

"This is very good," said Fenton, obviously surprised.

"Yes," Maxwell replied snootily, taking a deep puff. "I buy the tobacco from a friend in Virginia, who is a skilled tobacco farmer." He delicately tapped the end of the cigar into an ashtray and smiled at Fenton. "Although my territory is not without benefits, brother, the hint of peppermint you taste, that, is grown and refined here."

"Indeed." Fenton relished another taste of his cigar. "Now, Maxwell, why am I here?"

Maxwell contemplated how he would present his situation to his clever elder brother and decided candid honesty was the best course of action.

"You are here, Fenton, because of a woman," he stated.

Fenton grinned, enjoying the strain he perceived on his sibling's face. "Isn't everything because of a woman?"

Chapter Ten

With his elbows perched on either side of his armchair and the fingertips of his pale, pristine hands pressed against each other in an arch underneath his chin, Fenton Stanton listened intently as his brother related the details of his dealings with Elizabeth Dalton and her husband. He grinned sardonically from time to time, much to the annoyance of the mayor. Indeed, at certain points during his narrative, Maxwell seriously wondered whether his elder brother was even listening. Naturally for a Stanton, Fenton was secretly hanging on each and every word, relishing both Maxwell's obvious aggravation and the fact that he was clearly perplexed. Fenton almost, if not quite, wished to congratulate this female on the plight with which she'd managed to ensnare his sibling. He'd chosen to appear only slightly interested, a sneaky pursuit that would rattle his brother and perhaps give him an edge over him later on.

He'd remained silent thus far but when Maxwell cursed the name of Elizabeth's husband, Fenton, his nonchalance abruptly vanishing, interjected, "You don't mean *the* Paxton Reign? Paxton Reign the bounty-hunter?"

Maxwell's eyes narrowed. He was dismayed his brother had evidently heard of his nemesis. "The very one!" Maxwell wasn't sure, but he thought he saw his brother twitch. "Fenton?"

"Hmmm." The eldest Stanton had begun to lace his fingers in and out of one another in deep thought.

Finally, he sat upright in his chair and cleared his throat. "Well, you certainly know how to pick your adversaries, Maxwell." He seized the glass of brandy beside him and took a sip. "I am afraid that I cannot advise you until I do some research on my own. I'll need to know the location of the Dalton ranch. I want to go there."

"How do you know him?" Maxwell had noted his brother's subtle evasion.

"I used to play poker with him. The location of the ranch?"

"It's not far, I'll have someone take you there..."

"No!" Fenton said sharply. "Simply give me the directions as I asked." He immediately regretted the loss of his cool countenance seeing the look of inquisitive surprise on Maxwell's face.

"I think best on my own," he explained, regaining his calm. "Anyone who came with me would just be a distraction, not to mention a nuisance."

"As you will..." Maxwell proceeded to give his brother the

directions to the ranch which used to belong to the Daltons; a fact he staunchly pointed out to Fenton. "You will find no one to distract you there," the mayor emphasized the word 'distract' disdainfully. "I have concentrated on the Reign ranch and most of my men are in that area, at least the ones that don't have duties here in town."

Fenton thought this somewhat foolish as there was no doubt in his mind from the sounds of Elizabeth, that she would want her ranch back and might take advantage of the fact that no one was there; he was pleased though that not a single soul would get in his way. Deciding to wait a couple of days before visiting the ranch, he redirected his attention to his little brother, "To where would I go to send a telegram?"

Paxton was more than slightly curious when Elizabeth jumped up from the table and went into their bedroom without a word to anyone. It would be rude for him to follow his wife and leave Jack sitting at the table alone, but he was anxious to speak to Elizabeth and find out what was going on.

Jack seemed to have noticed his predicament because he ushered Paxton away from the table with his hand, "Don't concern yourself with manners on my account, boy, go and talk with your wife."

Paxton knocked softly on the door and was startled when it swung open to reveal a travel-ready Elizabeth.

"I've got to return to my father's ranch," she announced, exiting the bedroom and heading for the kitchen. "I can't believe I forgot," she said to herself as she rushed about, hastily shoving food and supplies into a little sack.

She stopped suddenly and addressed Paxton, "I don't know how long I'll be."

"What?!" he was entirely confounded.

"Pax, that was a message from my father. What Jack just told me -- it reminded me of something. I have to go!"

"Back to Stanton's ranch? You most certainly are not! What if the mayor were to find you there?"

Elizabeth put her hands on her waist and stared at him and Paxton noted the impish twinkle in her eyes as she declared, "My dear, dear husband, it's the last place on earth that he would expect me to be right now. Please Pax, you must let me go or I'll never know what my father wanted me to. I've missed him each and every day since his disappearance and I can't let this go. I just can't! I must find out what he wanted me to know!"

There was an urgency in Elizabeth's eyes Paxton knew would remain until her curiosity had been placated. He took a deep breath feeling torn between his concern for Elizabeth, and his desire for her to have all that she craved. Naturally, he was curious himself for any news of Elizabeth's long-lost father.

"At least wait until morning; you can leave at daybreak and make it to your destination in the early afternoon. You do have to sleep, my dear."

She tapped her foot impatiently. "You're right. But sleep will not be easy no matter where I am."

"Allow me to accompany you then." He realized even as he uttered this request it was useless; this was something his wife wished to do on her own. Without waiting for a response he clasped her in his arms and hugged her tightly. "Take care, return to me as soon as you can."

"I will!" She smiled, grateful for his understanding. "Thank you." She kissed her husband and then nodded at Jack.

"Be cautious, Elizabeth, you can be sure Stanton's spies are everywhere. Glad to see you're wearing chaps and a hat, from a distance no one will guess you're a gal. Don't take Velvet, neither. Stanton knows the horse and it might be that his spies do too," Jack warned.

"Good point. On second thought, as anxious as I am, I think I ought to wait until dawn. You're right, Pax, if I hurry I'll make it there in the afternoon and be much safer."

"Smart girl." Jack sighed in relief.

The next morning before the sun's rays had even had an opportunity to penetrate the horizon, Elizabeth was up and eating breakfast. Paxton joined her at the kitchen table, dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," she mumbled emphatically in between bites of food.

"I'll see you off," Paxton said, as soon as breakfast was concluded and she was ready to go. He followed her to the stables and quietly watched her saddle up a horse named Ginger, and warned, "Remember, Stanton is tricky. Be on your guard."

She nodded, mounted, and bent down to kiss him farewell before she rode off into the dawning light.

Paxton shook his head as doubts crept into his mind. He began to feel he'd done the wrong thing in letting her go. He worried she'd be discovered by the mayor, or attacked, or worse.

"You really had no choice, my boy," Jack said, entering the stable and sensing his friend's consternation. "Elizabeth can take care of herself. I'm sure she'll be all right."

"I hope so, Jack. I sure do hope so."

Desiring to get to the ranch as quickly as possible, Elizabeth reminded herself that her destination was more than a half day's ride at a gentle pace, and strained to restrict her impetuous nature. She refused to gallop the mare she rode for two reasons: the first one being that pushing an unfamiliar horse for selfish reasons was both cruel and foolish, and secondly, attracting unwanted attention by appearing too anxious would be unwise. She endured the horse's steady clip clop as she searched the terrain for any sign of undesired spectators, or suspicious circumstances that might alert her to the presence of Stanton or his spies. As the horse idled onward, Elizabeth's mind was racing with the possibilities of what she might discover at her childhood residence.

The sun's glistening light and its potent heat were growing stronger

as noon approached. After what seemed like a lifetime, she started to recognize landmarks that indicated she was close to her targeted location. She entered the vicinity of what she still considered to be her father's ranch just after noon.

The house was in visible disrepair, the roof was caving in at one corner, and most of the whitewash had peeled off what remaining siding there was. Magnificent flowers overcame the odds and bloomed beautifully in a weed infested, narrow garden patch, which ran along the front of the wrap-around porch. Elizabeth remembered planting the garden with her mother when she was very young. She had few memories of her mother and her father had rarely spoken of her.

She dismounted and tied up her horse. The outer appearance of the house gave a strong indication she wouldn't encounter anyone in the abode or on the grounds, but she had no wish to be spotted unduly. As she approached the main house, her fear of having company was mollified; there was absolutely no sign of human activity. The door was locked but she wasn't discouraged yet. There was a large tree off to her right with magnificently gnarled roots and her father had always hidden a spare key under one of those roots. Her search revealed that the mayor had not discovered this secret. She tried the key in the lock and was highly satisfied when she heard a distinct click and the door swung open.

She was unhappily greeted by a musty odour and a very messy entryway. Elizabeth hesitated as a feeling of overwhelming sorrow swept through her at the unpleasant view of where her family had dwelt for so many years. Cobwebs drooped from the window frames and partially caved in ceiling. Her mother's homemade curtains were moth-eaten and subjugated to a heavy film of dust. It was obvious the ranch had been abandoned for some time. If her father were not already dead, this would have killed him. For an instant she considered whether she'd been right to leave, but then she thought of Stanton and what he might have done to her had she stayed.

Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth reminded herself of why she was there. She walked into the kitchen, and immediately threw back the large rug covering the trap door to the cellar. A cloud of dust emanated from the rug as she tossed it aside. She coughed and then cautiously climbed down. The cellar was dark, as the only light was coming through the cracks in the floorboards above. Curiously, Elizabeth felt more at home in the cellar than she did in the rest of the house. Perhaps it was because she was almost certain that Maxwell Stanton had never discovered the room and even if he had it was untouched, which meant her father was likely the last person to enter it. That reflection caused conflicting feelings of pain and comfort.

She reached into the pack she'd brought with her and retrieved a little pocket lamp and a match. Once the lamp was lit, she cringed at the unpleasant evidence of all types of insects and rodents. To her right were storage shelves, an empty cask, a canning table and a stool. She went over to the storage shelves, and raised her chin as per the instructions from her father. She saw her quarry on the top shelf. A small Mason jar with a large, faded picture of a star sat alone and dust covered. The label, now barely visible, read 'Star Cocoa: For All Your

Baking Needs'. She pulled the old stool over to the shelf, dusted it off and climbed upon it. She reached for the jar, and felt the stool teeter on the uneven ground. Regaining her balance, she seized the glass container, placed it in her pack and dismounted from the stool. She smiled to herself, enjoying the sensation of feeling closer to her father than she had since his disappearance.

Elizabeth froze when she heard the front door swing open and someone step over the threshold; seconds later the door closed, the hinges complaining loudly. There was a brief silence and then the sound of heavy, directionless footsteps above her.

Panic at being discovered filled her as she strained to see the intruder through the floor cracks. A list of the possible identity of her unwelcome guest hurtled through her mind as she blew out her lamp. Could Paxton have followed her? Had Maxwell returned on a whim or had her tailed? Was it a mere traveler seeking shelter in an abandoned house? Suddenly the cellar door slammed shut and the latch clicked into the locked position. Oddly enough, the first thought to occur to Elizabeth was a wish that her father hadn't designed a locking latch on the cellar door, and the second, sequentially, was the realization that very lock meant she was quite irrevocably trapped in the cellar.

Chapter Eleven

Fenton smiled to himself cheekily, anticipating the various ways the girl could react to being locked in the cellar. He'd watched her from a distance -- she'd arrived at the ranch just before him. Judging by the description his brother had given him, he was pretty sure this young lady was Elizabeth. He guessed by her actions this was the first time she'd returned to the ranch since leaving, and had come back with a specific purpose in mind. Certainly, she'd wasted no time in locating the basement, a part of the house which Fenton believed Maxwell was ignorant of, or else had neglected to mention (it would've meant little to him).

"Who's there? I know someone is close -- I can hear you breathing. I'd prefer it if you would face me instead of attempting to intimidate me like a coward!"

Fenton's thoughts dissolved upon hearing the surprisingly authoritative tone. Immediately, he unlocked the trap door and pulled it open to see Elizabeth Reign scowling up at him. He knew she must've been expecting someone else because her look softened slightly when she saw him.

"My dear lady, I do apologize. I was not aware anyone was down there."

Her eyebrows rose skeptically, indicating she did not entirely believe him, but rather than call him a liar, she nodded curtly, and refusing his proffered hand, climbed up the stairs. He watched thoughtfully as she dusted herself off, and wondered how best to approach this situation.

"I am here by permission of the owner inspecting the ranch for a possible sale. Your business here is?"

Elizabeth assessed him scrupulously. Dark hair, immaculately trimmed, set off the sharpness of his eyes, and complemented his well-chiselled features, which (for some mysterious reason) reminded her of something unpleasant. He was tall, his frame thin, but his well-tailored suit obscured anything weedy about his build. His tone of voice and demeanour denoted a man with more confidence in himself than most, but Elizabeth wouldn't go so far as to say he was conceited -- she hardly knew the man after all.

"If you mean you are here by the authorization of Maxwell Stanton, then you are not here by permission of the owner. Sir, I am the true owner of this ranch!" Her lips were taut and her lovely eyes smouldered with anger and resentment.

Fenton was struck unexpectedly by her beauty. He had expected the woman who'd so entangled his brother's affections to be beautiful, but he'd not thought to be attracted himself. Fenton's attraction to the opposite sex had been dormant for quite a while, and it'd been years since he'd seen a woman he found truly enticing. Unable to resist the impulse, Fenton swept a rebellious piece of her hair from her forehead. She flinched, not anticipating this gentle gesture from a complete stranger and an immediate threat no less.

Fenton cleared his throat, mastering his emotions and setting himself back on his predetermined course. He'd dedicated himself to studying the art of manipulation, and prided himself on his impeccable ability to control the feelings and actions of others. He would not now allow his record to be tarnished because of a woman. Especially by a young woman who was married to the one man he'd not been able to defeat.

"Unfortunately, the previous owners abandoned this ranch and the mayor has current ownership. But perhaps, if you spoke to the mayor yourself, you could come to some sort of arrangement. I'd recommend this course because as of now, you're trespassing."

Elizabeth visibly paled, feeling again that the mayor's powers were too complicated for her to deal with. "My name is Elizabeth Reign, and I am the mayor's ward, and as such, I am no trespasser."

Fenton smiled inwardly, instantly comprehending she'd never before used his brother's claim she was his ward to her advantage, and she had a distinct revulsion in doing so. However, he was pleased that she evidently had some brains as well as good looks. "Miss -- is it Miss?"

"Missus," she corrected quickly.

"Ah, I see. Well, if you are married then you are no longer a ward of the mayor, and without his expressed permission you should not be on his property."

She set her shoulders squarely and stared him down. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Admiring her audacity, he shrugged casually, and slowly and deliberately said, "It's of little consequence, unless of course, you have taken something from this location."

"Search my bag, if you will. I've only my provisions. I assure you, Sir, what is in this bag belongs to me."

Fenton was fascinated with her reason for visiting the ranch, and why she'd gone straight to the cellar. He had a suspicion that it was not merely for nostalgic reasons. "Why are you here then, Mrs. Reign?"

"I came for cocoa -- homemade cocoa," she clarified, seeing his cynical look. Elizabeth didn't hesitate, having resolved that she was not being dishonest in the least. After all, she thought indignantly, this was still her ranch, everything there belonged to her. She didn't doubt what was in the jar of cocoa was homemade, in a manner of speaking, either.

"May I see it?" He held out his hand and seeing her hesitate, said mistrustfully, "I cannot in good conscience allow you to leave this property without ensuring you have taken nothing of value from Mr. Stanton."

"This was made before Stanton even acquired the ranch."

"Stanton might enjoy a good cup of cocoa now and again." Fenton wiggled the fingers on his outstretched hand toward himself mercilessly.

Elizabeth, understanding the gesture, sighed in exasperation and dumped the contents of her bag out onto the floor. She silently prayed that he would not open the jar of cocoa. Fenton saw a pair of riding chaps, extra clothes, some food, a small lamp, matches, and a Mason jar of Star Cocoa. He picked up the jar, examining it impishly. "This says Star Cocoa. That's a company..." he began, peeling apart her story.

Quick witted, she explained defiantly, "We reused the jars." Crossing her arms behind her back, Elizabeth feared his curiosity was now piqued.

With some effort, Fenton opened the jar (it made a sucking sound as the seal was broken) and stuck a finger inside. Elizabeth gasped in despair, as she had not yet opened the container herself and had no idea what its contents were.

He licked his finger and uttered a sound of pure enjoyment. "It is good! I would've expected it to have gone stale by now."

Believing Elizabeth had gasped due to his bad manners in sticking a finger into the cocoa; he closed the lid, seized her bag and repacked it.

She appeared relieved, though somewhat confused, he supposed it was because he'd cleaned up her things for her.

"You'd best be on your way now. I will have to inform the mayor of your visit though."

Her eyes flashed mutinously, but she made no argument.

"Good day, Mrs. Reign."

"Good day, Sir."

Fenton watched as Elizabeth rode away, unable to shake the sinking feeling that somehow she'd snuck something by him. Despite reasoning that he did not detect any deceit in her demeanour, the lingering possibility that she'd in fact tricked him irked him. He knew this encounter would bother him incessantly, or at least until he'd managed to discover the real reason for her visit to the ranch. He closed and locked up the door with the key his brother had given him and headed back to town.

Ellister had just finished dusting the grandfather clock in the hallway when he heard the distinct sound of the front door's large brass knocker. Dutifully and purposefully, he walked to the door and opened it. Expecting to see the mayor's brother, he was quite surprised when he instead beheld a most fashionable and beautiful lady. Her lavish gown with its ruffles, trims, and expensive fabric was clearly well-tailored and fit splendidly. Indeed, the butler was not too abashed to appreciate the way the gown accented and generously defined her feminine figure. He noted immediately her posture was as flawless as her milky white skin. A gentle breeze played with a few golden wisps of hair that had escaped her elegant, lace-brimmed bonnet cap, and were now dancing about her beautifully defined cheekbones.

Ellister, though a confirmed bachelor, was not blind to beauty, and

he smiled appreciatively upon seeing this lovely creature. Despite inconspicuous signs of hard travel, which only a shrewd eye could have detected, she was, in his estimation, the epitome of high society loveliness.

She smiled demurely at him and the entire effect of the lady was dazzling.

"I was sent for by Mr. Fenton Stanton." She displayed a brief telegram requesting her presence at the home of Mr. Maxwell Stanton: 'Come without delay'.

"Please do come in." Ellister stepped aside so she could enter. "I will fetch Mr. Stanton right away, Ma'am."

"Thank you."

Before shutting the door behind the lady, Ellister assessed the street, which he was in the habit of doing every time he admitted a guest into the mansion. He noted Lester Bingham surveying the house, his notepad and pencil in hand. This was nothing new. Ellister rolled his eyes, wishing the tedious man would tire of spying on the mayor and go away. He shut the door with a decided thud and led the lady into the drawing room.

A few moments later Maxwell entered to witness for himself the allure of his unexpected guest, who was avidly examining a petite corner book shelf. He cleared his throat and she turned to greet him. She was extremely beautiful, but there was something depicted in her face that mysteriously bothered the mayor, and he could not decide just what that was. She looked surprised to see him. Ellister informed him that she'd said Fenton sent for her.

Maxwell nodded to himself as he deduced his brother's game instantly. He meant to tempt Paxton Reign with this girl, or at least plant a seed of jealousy in Elizabeth. Paxton may be able to resist the temptations of a beautiful girl, but the seeds of jealousy would multiply and grow like a weed in Elizabeth, agitating her to such a degree that eventually her trust and love for Paxton would be significantly diminished, if not downright destroyed. If this woman played the game correctly, it wouldn't matter in the slightest if Paxton did or did not pursue her. The jealousy would be the ruination of the marriage and he, Maxwell, would step in to succour his sweet, heartbroken Elizabeth. He laughed wickedly and the woman directed an odd look at him in reply.

"Do pardon me; I am Mr. Maxwell Stanton, mayor of this town. I suppose you expected to meet with Fenton. He is out running an errand but I do expect him to return at any moment." He took her proffered hand and kissed it, aware of the sweet fragrance that wafted from her person. "May I have the pleasure of your name?"

With his usual sense of impeccable timing, Fenton entered the drawing room and bounded over to her declaring, "My sweet, dearest Amelia!" He kissed her cheek. "I am so happy you have finally arrived."

With charming reserve she smiled. "Finally arrived? Fenton, only a hand full of days have passed since I received your telegram. I believe I've made excellent time in getting here. Under normal circumstances it takes much longer to travel here."

"My sweet, you know that each day without you feels like an

eternity." He grasped the lady's delicate hand, ignoring her doubtful reaction to his compliment, and turned to face his brother triumphantly. "Brother, I would like to introduce you to Amelia Stanton, my wife."

Maxwell's eyes widened with utmost shock; he'd definitely not predicted this. After the concept began to sink in and his surprise dissipated, he faced his newly disclosed sister-in-law and bowed politely. "I am honoured. I suppose I should also welcome you to our family," he managed as cordially as possible.

He felt a deep surge of anger he couldn't explain but knew it was directed entirely at Fenton. Maxwell considered what possible good Amelia would be to this situation and perceived that his brother had her come merely for his own comfort.

"I doubt I'm wrong in deducing that you are a great comfort and aid to my brother, Mrs. Stanton, especially for him to have you come all the way from New York." He directed his attention to Fenton who stood there with a smug smile on his face. "I must ascertain from her speedy arrival so soon after your own, that this lovely lady helps you to think and plan better than you do on your own!"

Fenton's smile broadened as he caught the undertone of his brother's snide statement.

"Do tell me, Fenton, that she will be of some assistance in dealing with the Reigns."

All of a sudden, Amelia gasped, "Oh, Fenton do you mean that you have finally discovered Paxton?" Her face had positively illuminated, though Maxwell felt that there was something mischievous hidden in the recesses of her happy expression.

"You know Paxton Reign, do you?" Maxwell's mind reeled as he tried to put the pieces together.

"Amelia was formerly Amelia Reign before she became Mrs. Stanton," Fenton informed his brother.

"Ah," Maxwell said slowly, beginning to understand. "You were previously married to Paxton then?" Inwardly, he smirked as he schemed at the possibilities of having the first wife of Paxton Reign here and married to his brother; it was delicious. He was almost positive that Reign hadn't told Elizabeth of a prior marriage -- regardless, Amelia could cause problems for them. He snapped out of his inner thoughts when he noticed Amelia's critical scrutiny.

"No, Mr. Stanton, he is my brother."

Fenton laughed gleefully and clapped his hands together. "Do forgive him, dearest, he has been out of the game for some time."

"Oh," her look softened somewhat.

Bewildered, Maxwell glared at her for a moment and finally recognized what it was about her face that bothered him; she resembled Paxton Reign.

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth arrived back home well after suppertime. She rushed into the kitchen and poured out the contents of her bag eagerly. If the jar of cocoa was just that, a jar of cocoa, she would be devastated. Especially, after the hope of some special trinket or important item from her father, but she had to be sure. She was about to lift the lid when Paxton entered the room, Jack trailing him. Her husband looked preoccupied, and Jack's eyes were busy investigating the contents of her bag, which were still strewn about on the table.

"Elizabeth, we need to talk," Paxton said flatly.

Judging by his expression and tone, Elizabeth knew the jar would have to wait.

Elizabeth looked longingly at the cocoa, and then hesitantly redirected her attention to her husband. Paxton's taut appearance and his intense posture were evidence enough that something was deeply troubling him and her curiosity was aroused. Even so, Elizabeth knew she'd have to endeavor to concentrate because her mind would inevitably wander back to the contents of the cocoa jar.

"Yes, Pax?"

"I do hope you can forgive me, Lizzy, but I followed you to your father's ranch." Seeing her mouth opening, he put up his hand in a request for her to remain silent. "I just wanted to make doubly sure you were safe. Can you blame me? I can't lose you again." He suppressed a ridiculous impulse to hold her close. "Do you know who that man was that found you in the house?"

She shook her head. "No. He said he was inspecting the place for a sale."

"That was Fenton Stanton."

Her eyes widened in response to the name and the obvious implication.

"I didn't realize he was related to the mayor," Paxton explained. "See, Elizabeth, we are in quite a predicament, because Fenton Stanton is..." he faltered, "...my brother-in-law."

"What!" Elizabeth blurted, instantly comprehending the connotation and the impact this would have on them.

She was suddenly aware she knew very little of her husband's past other than his career as a bounty-hunter. On the rare occasion, Paxton spoke a little about his father, but never the rest of his family. It was now all too clear she'd been entirely wrapped up in her own past and

had never concerned herself with Paxton's. She felt ashamed, curious and angry all at once.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a sister, Paxton?" Elizabeth asked bluntly, feeling she alone was not totally to blame for her lack of knowledge regarding his family.

Paxton shrugged backwardly. "I didn't see the need to mention it -- until now."

"Why wouldn't you want to mention it?" Elizabeth persisted. "I just assumed you only had a father since he is the only one you've ever referred to."

Feeling downright guilty, Paxton put his hands in his pockets. He had never discussed his sister Amelia, because the very thought of her triggered a considerable amount of painful memories.

Paxton's prolonged silent stare at the floor was increasingly agitating.

"Paxton!" Elizabeth snapped impatiently.

Suddenly his eyes darkened with such a profound frustration, a look she'd never seen before, but he strained to keep his voice civil. "Would you have told me about Maxwell Stanton if recent events hadn't demanded it?"

Realizing where he was going with this line of questioning, Elizabeth flushed. "Point taken, Mr. Reign -- I've absolutely no right to force information from you. I guess I assumed there was no basis for you to avoid discussing your family with me. For obvious reasons, I'm ignorant of any discomfort it causes you." Edging closer, she smoothed her fingertips across his furrowed brow. "I'm sorry."

He collapsed into a nearby chair and sighed loudly, momentarily distracted by the items that had been dumped on the kitchen table. He tilted his head back to look at the ceiling before inhaling deeply and continuing, "First of all, Lizzy, understand I didn't withhold anything from you because I didn't trust you. Similar to your situation, I didn't disclose much of my history because I wanted the future to be untarnished by the past.

My family life is something I tried to escape; it was not a happy one. My father, finding it difficult to make a living in the old country, decided he might have better luck in the Americas; back then the advertisements spoke about how wonderful it was here, how huge tracts of land were simply given away, and how successful and wealthy people were. My father bought into that fallacy wholeheartedly, as did many; my mother however, did not. She was skeptical, realizing they were merely trying to entice people to come over. The more people there were, the faster settlements would grow and there's safety in numbers. My mother fought against leaving. In the end, my father came to this continent with me; my mother and twin sister remained in England. Being particularly close, my sister and I found the sudden separation traumatizing, especially being only six-years-old.

Life here was not what my father expected; in fact it was the direct opposite. He was an educated man, but not educated in the way you needed to be to survive America. He was stubborn though, and had made up his mind to succeed here. He was too proud to admit my mother had been

right, and too determined to prove my mother wrong.

I think I adapted to living here much faster than him, which aggravated his already potent frustration. After three years of struggling, he came home and simply announced he was going abroad to, as he put it, 'broaden his career prospects.'"

"Yes, I remember you telling me he came back full of news about soapstone," Elizabeth interjected, glad she knew something of his past.

"Yes, I told you that much. But, what I didn't tell you is what I did during his absence. My father didn't leave me any way of surviving while he was gone. I was left entirely on my own with only a roof over my head -- which wouldn't last long if I couldn't find a way of maintaining it.

I ended up going north a ways from my home and working at a lumber camp. As I was still very young, the men had me running back and forth with equipment, food and medical supplies. I'd often travel into town in order to get those supplies. The men in the camp rationalized I was too tiny to be a target for the Indians in the area. Of course, if I were captured, it was of little consequence to them. But, even as a boy, I was stealthy, quick and adept. I'd made many successful trips to town and back, but on one such trip I experienced the most significant adventure of my youth. Little did I know I was about to come in contact with my first major adversary. It was an encounter that would forever change my life.

I was walking back to town to collect some new tools for the lumberjacks and restock the medical supply bag. It was a beautiful, sunny day and I wasn't as focused as usual -- paying little attention to what was going on around me. Suddenly, I was hit with a spear, oddly enough in the toe of my shoe. I was not wounded. I looked around but saw nothing; I didn't expect to. However, since there was only one spear thrown I judged my enemy was alone. I also assumed my enemy was young; the spear was obviously well-made but poorly thrown indicating lack of experience. I knew little of the original occupants of this continent, but I'd heard stories of how tribes initiated their young. One such tradition was to send a youth out on some sort of conquest. I knew instantly I was just that -- a conquest. My foe was alone and striving to prove himself -- he wouldn't stop until I was dead."

Elizabeth pictured a young Paxton alone in the woods, pitted against an unknown enemy with little hope of survival. "You must've been terrified!"

"Yes, you would think so, wouldn't you; but I wasn't. Surprisingly enough, even to me, I was boyishly excited. I prepared for a battle. True, little of the traditions and values of my adversary were known to me, but well-educated in my own right (my father had seen to it that I continued my studies); I felt I had a chance. Retreating to a small hollow enclave where I was sheltered from unseen eyes, I considered my options and reviewed what I'd learned about the battles of Troy, Greece, Rome and Carthage (well, I was just a boy). The obvious way to overcome the Indian was to ambush him, but how? That question puzzled me. I had a spear -- a spear I was sure would be wanted back, but I had nothing else; no shovel to dig a pit, no rope to hang a trap. I was unprepared,

vulnerable, and completely perplexed. I almost opted to run for it, but concluded that I'd probably be waylaid and killed.

I sat there frustrated for what seemed like hours, when I heard a loud crash and a heartrending scream. My instincts told me the scream was made by my pursuer, and I moved to investigate the cause. Cautiously, but quickly, I followed where the noise had come from and saw that a large tree branch had dislodged itself and crushed my opponent to the ground. My first and strongest impulse was to help and I did, rushing down and hoisting the branch from the young boy's pinned legs.

My time with the lumberjacks had acquainted me with many different types of injuries from broken bones, to sprains, to deep gashes. The doctor at the camp, grateful I refilled his medical bag for him, had shown me several tactics of the healing arts. It was clear to me the young Indian boy lying in agony before me had two broken legs -- not difficult to surmise since the branch had landed on them.

Removing the spear from my back, where I'd secured it to my belt, I knelt down. I didn't realize the implications my movements had to the injured until I saw his eyes widen. A second later he seemed to relax as if stoically accepting his fate. I suppose he might've been glad of the release from pain. I hurled the spear away from us, hoping he would realize I meant him no harm. 'You are fortunate,' I said slowly, ascertaining the seriousness of the breaks and not caring if he understood me. '...very fortunate! These are clean breaks and I can help you.' I got the medical bag from my supplies and began to work on binding and splinting his legs. I even gave him some brandy to help ease his pain.

Once I was finished, he eyed me warily still believing I meant him harm. I sat down and watched exhaustion overwhelm him.

In the morning, I prepared a simple breakfast for us from my supplies and fed him. He looked remarkably well and I was relieved that he seemed to have a strong constitution. Then he spoke, which surprised me, as I'd assumed he didn't know my language. 'You think I not kill you now?' he asked.

'No,' I replied, smiling congenially. "You've two broken legs and bad aim. Wait till you're better and then you can try again.'

He watched me inquisitively for a while. I suppose I was looking at him the same way -- sizing him up. He was strong, lean and agile, and probably about a year or two older than me. I'd been working at the lumber camp for three years by that point, and had just celebrated my twelfth birthday.

'You stop unexpectedly, you lucky. My spear would have killed you.'

'It is a beautiful spear.' I understood his insinuation -- his missing me was due to my unexpected change in movement rather than his own inaccuracy. Even then, knowing hardly anything about him, I'd a feeling his failure to hit me bothered him immensely because it illustrated a lack of skill. I choose not to provoke my patient with this line of conversation, however, and instead inquired, 'How did you learn English?'

'Missionaries visit my tribe and teach us English. I was very young. Missionaries leave; years later white man come kill many of my

tribe. Now my tribe broken up, I am alone.'

'As am I!'

I informed him of my story, and he seemed a bit intrigued in my details of English life. In time we became friends; at least I felt that way. He never did tell me his true name." Paxton laughed at this. "I guess by the time we were friends it didn't matter. I'd nicknamed him the Lonesome Stalker; eventually it was Lonny for short."

Elizabeth smiled at the obvious pleasure Paxton had in this memory.

Sobering, Paxton continued, "I brought him to the lumber camp with me and promised to take care of him, and pay for his upkeep until his legs had completely healed. Over the time I nursed him he taught me a lot about nature, wildlife and tracking.

After he'd healed, Lonny stayed on at the lumber camp, and as we grew, we took on more responsibilities. Lonny, being older, learned many things before I did, even though I tried hard to keep up with him. Often, after a good days work at the lumber camp, we would spend our free time playing what the young boys call Cowboys and Indians. We became stronger and stealthier day by day; in fact, I owe much of what I know now to those days in the woods. Lonny and I were always fierce competitors."

Here, Paxton's smile drooped until it was non-existent. Elizabeth knew this expression; she'd have to probe if she wanted further information.

"What happened? Why haven't you mentioned Lonny to me before?"

"I was fifteen when my father returned," Paxton spoke as though in a trance. "The lumberjack camp was moving to a different area and since my father had returned I decided not to follow them; Lonny decided likewise. My father didn't mind the addition of a strong, healthy, young man. He was starting a new business selling soapstone, and believed Lonny and I would be useful in his business venture. So, for a couple of years that's what we did -- sell soapstone.

My father had us educated, not only in academics, but also in building and installing soapstone fireplaces and sinks. You might remember I enjoy working with soapstone, but it was sculpturing that really captured my interest, not fireplaces.

Both of us hated working for my father, it kept a roof over our heads and food in our bellies though. I must admit we were beginning to resent my father, and one another. My father had made his fortune and knew neither Lonny nor I wanted to spend the rest of our lives building fireplaces. Just after my seventeenth birthday, we were commissioned by a very wealthy merchant to build a soapstone fireplace. My father promised this would be our last job; he'd release us with a substantial bonus if we completed the work to his satisfaction.

Unfortunately, this merchant had a daughter, a very beautiful daughter, just about our age. Her name was Rachel."

Paxton paused in his story long enough for Elizabeth to guess at what he was about to confess.

"Lonny and I fell head over heels for her; after all, we'd had very little experience with women. Quickly infatuated with her, I tried so hard to impress her. Lonny had always been better than me at everything,

and wooing an attractive girl was no exception, despite inexperience. Soon, it was obvious that, regardless of my attempts to gain her affection, Lonny and Rachel had become romantically attached. Searing jealousy enveloped me every time I saw them together. One day just as we were about to finish the fireplace, Lonny confided in me he was planning to elope with the girl.

Mixed emotions plagued me as he spoke of his love and devotion and their plans to escape to Mexico with the bonus my father promised. Not only was I losing Rachel, who I felt then was the love of my life, but my only and best friend. My hands began to tremble so badly that I dropped the tool I was using on my foot. It hurt badly, and when Lonny started laughing at me, I lost my temper. I hit him as hard as I could, and naturally, a fight ensued.

The merchant, hearing us, rushed in. Finally managing to pry us apart, he demanded to know what was going on. I, my nose bleeding and my heart broken, blurted the entire story without thinking. I confessed I'd discovered Lonny was preparing to elope with his daughter, and that I wouldn't allow it to happen. Of course, I didn't word it quite like that." Paxton paused his reminiscences again, and looked at his wife's shocked expression. "I know what you're thinking, Lizzy -- don't think I didn't punish myself every day for years after my betrayal and stupidity. I was just so enraged; I was beyond all intelligent thought.

Hearing this news, the merchant glared contemptuously at Lonny as if he were an evil plague and left the room. Lonny turned to me, a look of complete outrage and disappointment on his face. I'd just started to realize what I'd done when we heard a horrible scream from the upper level of the house. Instant recognition of what was occurring sent us flying up the stairs. The commotion was coming from the master bedroom. Rachel and her father were in a physical struggle. The merchant was holding a shotgun in one hand, which Rachel was desperately gripping, although he was viciously attacking her with his free hand. Her lip was bleeding and her right eye was already swelling. Clearly, he'd been beating her even before he'd grasped the shotgun they were currently wrestling over.

The merchant was obviously intent on killing Lonny, and Rachel was bravely battling to prevent him. Lonny lurched forward to rescue Rachel from her father's brutal blows. Grabbing the shotgun, I attempted to wrench it from his hand. Lonny freed Rachel and hurried her out of the room and down the steps. I struggled with the enraged merchant until he re-gripped the shotgun and brutally whacked me with the blunt end of it. It was a fierce blow; I saw stars and collapsed but I was surprisingly still conscious, a fact that further infuriated him. He was not at all pleased that I still had my wits about me and was preparing to hit me again when a horse whinnied from outside, drawing his full attention.

Readying the shotgun, he rushed to the window, knelt down and positioned the barrel on the sill. I toppled over, endeavouring to catch my breath and move my legs. I tried desperately to get closer to him when I saw he was preparing to fire the gun -- I was just too far away to stop him. I heard one deafening shot, and then, after an agonizing cry, another shot sounded, echoing through the room and the air outside. I

heard women screaming and people scrambling to find safety. For an instant, the merchant sat frozen, the commotion outside not fazing him in the slightest.

Even as I lay there immobilized with dread and apprehension, I sensed his remaining stationary wasn't because he was recovering from the shock of what he'd just done, but because he was busy concocting a plan. A moment later he stood up; the gun firmly grasped in his hand, and walked over to me.

'I can't believe what you just did -- shot those lovers in a fit of jealous rage. I knew jealousy was a powerful feeling but to murder your best friend and the girl you supposedly loved?'

A cruel laugh rumbled from his throat when he saw comprehension dawn on me. He knelt down and whispered so low that I could scarcely hear him. 'Yes, I knew you fancied Rachel as much as the other boy did, and I savoured the friction it caused your friendship. But listen, I'm gonna tell you a secret -- you listening?' His eyes sparkled with malevolence. 'I'm not a wealthy merchant at all, and that girl, Rachel -- she wasn't my daughter.' He glanced up as the shouting outside got louder and the certainty that he didn't have much time became evident.

'I'm sure you'll want to know the name of the man who so cleverly dodged judgment and death. You'll want to know, so you can curse it while you're rotting in a cell, or hanging on the gallows pole in my place. Jeremiah Shearer, famous swindler and outlaw at your service!' He bowed insolently and then cautiously placed the shotgun at my side. 'Well, I must be off now before the sheriff comes. Bye-Bye.' He patted my shoulder and I remember his boots scuffing the floor as he made his escape.

As I was getting to my feet, the sheriff and his posse rushed into the room. My mind still reeling from shock and grief, not to mention the stunning blow I'd received, my reactions were naturally very mechanical as they pelted questions at me. Eventually, being very suspicious of both my behaviour, and the carefully planted evidence, they arrested me for the murders of Lonny and Rachel."

Paxton stopped talking, a look of tremendous grief clouding his features. Shocked, Elizabeth stared at the floor feeling profound heartache for her husband's obvious anguish. It was now quite clear to her why he'd never discussed his past and had chosen a life of solitude before meeting her. She knew she'd have to wait patiently now until Paxton felt composed enough to continue his tale.

Chapter Thirteen

After Amelia's unanticipated announcement, Maxwell stared blankly at Fenton, unable to think of a single thing to say. Anger was definitely swelling up inside him and he was now absolutely positive sending for his brother had been a huge mistake. He'd just been informed in a dreadfully abrupt way that the man he hated more than any other adversary, was in fact related to him, albeit distantly. Still, he had to admit to himself that the situation, were he a mere spectator, would've been rather comical and entertaining.

Fenton, feeling the awkwardness of the moment, decided to take advantage of his brother's sudden vulnerability. "As you can imagine, my dear brother, my wife and I have missed each other greatly these past few days. You wouldn't mind if we retired earlier than usual, would you?"

"Not at all," Maxwell grimaced to himself, the innuendo not lost on him. "Is there anything I can do for you, Amelia? You've had a long journey, perhaps some refreshment before you retire?"

"I will see to her needs, little brother," Fenton condescendingly replied. "Goodnight," he took his lady's hand to lead her from the room.

Amelia stopped, turning back and smiling graciously, "Thank you for the offer, Maxwell. I am glad to meet you at last. Goodnight."

"Good evening, my lady; Fenton."

Maxwell watched them ascend his spectacular, mahogany staircase with an acerbic look upon his face. His brain hurt with all of his now obliterated schemes and plans. What was to be done now? Why did his brother not inform him of this connection? Was Reign aware of it? Did Reign know now that his sister would be sleeping beside the mayor's brother in the mayor's own home? What had Amelia exclaimed upon his mention of her brother's name? 'Oh, Fenton do you mean that you have *finally discovered Paxton?*' The implications of this question revolved in his mind. Obviously, Paxton and his sister weren't communicating with one another, and even more obvious was the fact that Fenton had everything to do with it.

Once cozily situated in their room, Fenton sat in the armchair by the fireplace and watched his wife as she unpacked her belongings. She was, he supposed, very beautiful and intelligent, but he was convinced he'd never really loved her. He had, despite his true intentions,

started to like her and perhaps even admire her, but he had no qualms on using her to destroy her brother.

Memories of the past stirred in his imagination and he clearly recalled the events that had led up to that first meeting and consequently his first impression of Paxton Reign. The year was 1857, and Fenton had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday. His father, in a rare display of affection, had patted him on the head and told him he was a boy who seemed to possess an innate talent for outwitting people.

"It's truly a shame, my son, that you'll probably never play a game of Bluff -- you would've excelled at it."

His father was referring to one of his favourite pastimes, a game played with twenty cards and known as Bluff. Romulus Stanton had been an avid Bluff player and prided himself on his own ability to destroy people. Unfortunately for Romulus, Bluff had been replaced by a fashionable fifty-two card game called Poker. Mister R. Stanton had, on a few occasions, attempted this new game. He detested it, saying it lacked the danger, challenge and thrill of Bluff. Fenton, however, was sure that his father's dislike of Poker was due to the fact he was not as good at it as he was at Bluff.

In the years that followed, Fenton devoted himself to learning the game of Poker in all its forms. Not only would he prove Romulus right about his skills, but he'd also rise above him in a sense, since he'd never mastered the game of Poker.

Fenton was, as his father had predicted, naturally drawn to the game of Poker because it was a game of power and it encouraged his aptitude for manipulation. It didn't take long for Fenton to become obsessed with the game. He played it constantly -- morning, noon and night. His mother often chided him, frequently reminding him of the evils of gambling and obsession. In rebuttal to her recurrent complaints, her son would nonchalantly belittle her concerns with comments like: "Mother, I wish you wouldn't worry -- I'm the best Poker player in the city," and, "I win practically every time I sit at a table; I wish you knew my reputation," or his personal favourite, "I'm making more money this way than I'd ever at a regular job."

Although this fact was indisputable, she wasn't placated, and even on her deathbed in the winter of 1865, she begged him to stop playing the game.

Fenton, repressing the urge to roll his eyes, lifted her hand patting it softly with his own. "Mother, if it will ease your passing I promise you if I ever lose more than one thousand dollars in a week, I will stop."

This was a reasonable promise in his mind, because he'd never lost more than five hundred. He prided himself on his inherent wisdom -- he knew when to play his cards and when to withdraw. She'd shook her head sadly and sighed but changed the subject nonetheless. Not long after her death, Maxwell had run away, and it was years later that the eldest Stanton boy first encountered Paxton Reign.

1872 was turning out to be a very successful year for Fenton Stanton; he was at the top of his game in all respects. He played Poker almost every other night; the money and fame it was affording him was

very much to his liking.

One evening, Paxton Reign had causally entered the saloon and sat down at his table. Mr. F. Stanton had stiffened visibly. He'd read about this bounty-hunter and his famous exploits in the newspaper, but it was not his fame that was intimidating; there was a subtle aura of power about him, one that Fenton realized with trepidation, rivaled his own.

After the game was over and everyone vacated the table, Fenton sat there contemplating that Paxton Reign was possibly the only man in his world who could pose a threat to him. The bounty-hunter indisputably endangered his unmarred record of eventually out-bluffing every player. Following that evening, Fenton and Reign met at several of the same establishments where the game of Poker flourished.

Reign was always a worthy opponent, and despite his previous assertions of the danger this man posed to his reputation, Fenton was glad of the challenge. After all, when you're one of the cleverest Poker players in the land, worthy opponents were few and far between. Yet, as time progressed, Fenton Stanton's fears were realized and Reign's fame seemed to overshadow his own. Even with Paxton's rare participation in the game (due to his occupation, he was often gone for weeks at a time) men had begun to mention him when he was absent and talk about his exploits. His adversary's good reputation was driving Fenton into a jealous frenzy.

Fenton became determined to become the talk of the town once more and not this side-show tracker. He had to find a way to obliterate Reign from the minds of his opponents and the general Poker playing population. This would be no easy task, and so, Fenton had unwillingly found yet another obsession. In time, he'd invented an uncomplicated scheme to not only rid the saloons of talk about Paxton Reign, but to catapult his own reputation beyond simple saloon gossip also.

Fenton Stanton, being the wealthy and influential man that he was, traveled in upper-class circles and hence had many affluent connections. Conveniently, he was a personal acquaintance of the owners of a new and exclusive resort on Lake Mohonk, in New Paltz, New York. The Smiley twins, Alfred and Albert were, as Fenton put it, in awe of him and were ambitious in their own right. They'd certainly be open to any scheme that would elevate their reputations, or the repute of their resort, Mohonk Mountain House. Lake Mohonk was aptly nicknamed Lake in the Sky and had recently become one of his favourite getaway spots. Quite incidentally, this resort also happened to be a perfect location for his devious designs. Upon receiving Fenton's request to allow him to sponsor and arrange a modest Poker Tournament to be held at Mohonk Mountain House, the Smiley twins were overjoyed. This would be the ideal opportunity for them to mark their little getaway on the map and make a hefty profit at the same time. They promptly wrote back, assuring Mr. F. Stanton that Mohonk Mountain House would welcome any and all of his guests.

It was decided there would be one hundred elite Poker players invited to join this tournament and that the buy-in would not be preposterous. Fenton's main goal was to interest Reign but he needed others and, in all fairness, players would be shouldering the expense of

the weekend accommodations as well. So Fenton decreed that each player would pay one thousand dollars to purchase a position in the tournament. There would be no buy-back; once you were out, you were out.

Specifically, the tournament would be two days in length and consist of ten tables each with ten players, and a grand prize of one hundred thousand dollars. Fenton publicized the news and soon most of the people with whom he claimed an acquaintance were advertising the weekend Poker Tournament for him. It was soon the talk of the town and he only had to make sure that Reign was there.

Personally sending Paxton a telegram, requesting his presence at the tournament and indicating that he wouldn't need to pay for any expense was Fenton's ultimate decision. His stomach had literally clenched when he received word that Reign had accepted his invitation. A guaranteed strategy that would prevent Reign from winning the tournament was all he needed now. Upon consideration he had smiled to himself, positive there were no chances of Reign beating him. A strategy would be a waste of his valuable time and effort. He would win.

The weekend of the tournament finally arrived and as Fenton had previously arranged, the invited players and their families journeyed to New Paltz together in a large, eye-catching caravan of fine horses and elaborate carriages. They arrived with unforgettable style, in the late afternoon and spent the rest of the day relaxing, eating and preparing for the following day.

Saturday was a long day. Fenton remembered they played the whole day through with only four one hour breaks. Finally, well into the wee hours of the morning, each of the ten tables had a single winner.

The final table was assembled the next day and Fenton was dismayed, and yet strangely pleased, to find that Paxton Reign was one of his opponents. He'd hoped Reign would lose early and fade into oblivion, but no such luck was awarded Mister F. Stanton.

The sun had set and Fenton was relishing the challenge laid before him and eager to win. There were only four players left of the ten who had started that day and unfortunately, Paxton was one of them. In a fury of impatience, Fenton had taken a risk, a big risk and went all in on an ace high. To his pleasure, all the other players folded, fearful of a hand that would make the host of the tournament go all in, but Reign -- Reign had stayed in and crushed him with a mere pair of fours. This of course, illustrated that Paxton had seen right through his bluff when none of the others had. When Reign had lain down his hand revealing that he had won with practically nothing, Fenton had gone through various emotions. First, he'd felt surprise, once that had worn off, he'd actually reddened with embarrassment.

Seconds later, when the referee called a break and Reign had collected his earnings, expressed humble gratitude for the game thus far, shook Fenton's hand and left the table, Fenton experienced the worst rage that had ever come over him. No one at the table would have known it though; he was certain of that because he had made some witty remark which made them all laugh, stood up, bowed his head in a respectful gesture and left the table, his dignity intact.

Before the tournament had even ended, Fenton Stanton knew Reign

would win the one hundred thousand dollars and all the fame that came with it. With a shiver of regret, Fenton allowed the experience of complete and utter failure to wash through him. It was at that very moment he remembered the promise he had made to his mother, which he had always intended to keep, and the pain intensified tenfold. Not only had Fenton been deprived of his fame and additional fortune but also of his only love -- Poker.

As he walked alone in the beautiful gardens that night he schemed on yet another plan to completely ruin his newly dubbed arch nemesis -- Paxton Reign. He no longer desired to merely erase Reign's name from the lips of common and illustrious Poker players alike, but to attack the man's soul, heart and mind. In short, Fenton schemed to totally annihilate Paxton Reign!

This proved to be more complicated than Fenton had originally anticipated. Paxton didn't gamble, except the occasional game of Poker, he rarely drank; he was honest in his dealings and was well liked by everyone. Fenton contrived to have him assassinated, but he stopped short of this plan. Paxton was a well-known bounty-hunter and his skills would likely prevent any such plan from being accomplished. Fenton also rationalized that having a man murdered simply because he beat you at your own game seemed beneath a Stanton. No, he would wait and, soon enough, a way to invoke his revenge would present itself; and so it had when he had the good fortune of meeting Miss Amelia Reign.

Chapter Fourteen

"So, have you really found him, Fenton, my dear?" Amelia asked quietly, rousing him from his thoughts of the past.

"It would appear so." He stood up and approached the bed, nearer to where she was unpacking.

She lifted an eyebrow slyly. "What do you plan to do with him?"

He glanced at her inquisitively.

"Do not suppose I'm ignorant of your dealings, Fen," she smirked. "Surely, your estranged brother had more reason than mere cordiality to summon you after all these years. He needs you for something and it seems to center around Paxton."

Fenton sighed and smiled at her. "You were always too shrewd for my own good, Amelia," he teased, wrapping his arms around her slender waist. "Oh, my dear, you smell so sweet." He purred as his cheek caressed the wisps of hair that had escaped captivity and now rested along the length of her cheekbone.

She laughed tauntingly. "That doesn't answer my question. I know you didn't send for me simply because of my fragrance."

Momentarily, Fenton considered continuing his attempt to distract her with physical pleasure, but thought better of it. His eyes flashed, illustrating his annoyance, and he reluctantly released her. His wife had turned out to be a good deal cleverer than he'd first supposed. Secretly, he wondered if sometimes her wit rivaled his own. She always seemed to know what was going on in his mind and what he was up to.

Once, a couple of years into their marriage, he had dallied with a very wealthy lady; he'd had other discreet affairs, but this was the first dalliance with a lady of his own station in life. Her husband, a wealthy merchant named Mister Sawyer, had recently passed away and had conveniently left her all of his money. Naturally, as did every other single man in the city, Fenton wanted a slice of that wealth. He thus determined to win over the widow's lonely heart; con money off her as the affair progressed, and string her along with promises to leave Amelia, which he might even keep, if the right circumstances presented themselves. Other men courted Mrs. Sawyer just for her wealth, but for Fenton, the allurements was as much a chance to annihilate the competition as to gain financially.

True, he was not a single man, though he dismissed this little detail hastily, feeling it was not a compelling enough reason to give up

such a marvelous conquest. The fact that he was a married man infuriated the widow's suitors all the more. She'd often inform Fenton of their warnings against him and he, in turn, would laugh, and then focus his attentions on playing the needy lover. The woman had loved his pretentious desperation for her. He would tell her stories of his unhappiness with Amelia and his dire situation in life, which were, of course, entirely fabricated. He knew women loved to be needed, and it was an added bonus in most women's minds if they felt they were outdoing another woman.

The affair had been going along splendidly for about a year. The widow was tremendously stupid, but very adoring and gullible, the perfect candidate for such a ploy. She had, however, begun to grow impatient with his promises to leave his wife. His tactics of avoidance were growing old even in his own ears. Fenton had to choose between Amelia and the widow soon. Mrs. Sawyer was from a fine American family, while Amelia was from a rather tiresome British line. Mrs. Sawyer certainly had more money; Amelia had only a pittance for a dowry. The choice was obvious, although he'd found it difficult for some unknown and probably absurd reason. One afternoon, he'd left his very prominent and influential job at the bank bound for Mrs. Sawyer's. On the verge of convincing her he'd finally made up his mind to end it with Amelia, he'd been dumbfounded to find the latter sitting in the parlour with the widow! He'd been so shocked to see her there that he'd halted in mid-step.

There was an awkward silence and at an appropriate moment Amelia had spoken, "Fenton, my dear husband, I had no idea you claimed an acquaintance with Mrs. Sawyer."

He had instantly recognized something in her tone that clearly indicated the opposite, at least to him.

"I had just come to ask Mrs. Sawyer to join in our charity auction this week. Many ladies, already on our committee, had mentioned her admirable talents and assets and we're so busy, you know. Finally, I said, 'Ladies, why is Mrs. Nancy Sawyer not a part of us, especially when she has so much to offer?' Everyone just shrugged and so here I am, as you see, to ask you to join." Amelia had given a very uncomfortable Mrs. Sawyer a gracious smile. "And we've had such a nice time getting to know one another, haven't we? But, Mrs. Sawyer, why didn't tell me you knew my husband?"

The widow had visibly paled and Fenton knew no adequate answer would slip from her lips.

"I suppose, you didn't put the two of us together did you, Nancy?" he'd smiled jovially at her and then turned to his wife. "I've been assisting Mrs. Sawyer with the investment of her late husband's funds and with her choice of suitors as well." He then turned to Nancy hoping that she would be accommodating enough to verify the tale.

"That is true," she'd admitted somewhat sharply. "I'm lost when it comes to marriage. So many men are after my late husband's fortune, truth be told. I've no idea who to trust." She'd fairly glared at him and right then his relationship with the widow Sawyer was over; no amount of smooth talking from him could change that.

Amelia nodded and her tone was dry as she'd declared, "No one knows people's characters and what their true intentions are like my Fenton. Have you chosen a prospective husband?"

Nancy had looked directly at her and stated firmly, "I believe I'll remain single. No one even holds a candle to my late husband at any rate. I prefer to have his memory be my last." She'd stood up. "Thank you for thinking of me for the committee, Mrs. Stanton, I'll definitely consider it. If you two will excuse me now I have some things that I need to do." With that she had, with a few more courtesies, ushered them out the door, and with a final scathing glance at Fenton, closed it quite firmly behind them.

He had looked at Amelia and she'd said, "Interesting woman."

The rest of the trip home had been in silence, but once they'd got home, reaching the privacy of their bedroom, he'd had to ask her, "How did you know?"

She'd looked at him coyly. "The same way I knew about the others. Oh, don't act so surprised. Do you think I'm blind, Fen? No, have your petty affairs if it makes you happy, but don't for one moment think that I'll let you go without a fight."

He hadn't a clue what to say next, he was outright flabbergasted, not to mention caught red-handed. Amazed for a moment he'd considered, with some wonder, why he didn't even feel angry that she'd become involved. Perhaps he was relieved, though he couldn't quite figure that out yet.

"What did you say to her?" he'd asked, unable to utter Nancy's name.

"I just spoke about how happy I was with you and how we were just starting a family."

He'd looked at her sharply. "You told her what?"

"That we're going to have a baby."

"Ah," he'd grinned with admiration. "Very clever, Amelia, she didn't have a chance; what woman in the world could stand up to that tactic?!"

"You like my little ploy, do you? Yes, I rather liked it myself," she'd conceded, "particularly, because it happens to be true."

"Fenton, what on earth are you thinking about?" Amelia snapped her fingers in front of his eyes to bring him back to the present.

He realized he must have been out of it for quite some time as she had finished unpacking.

"Nothing important. Now, my darling, why don't you come over here and show me just how much you've missed me?"

She shook her head. "I want to know what's going on."

He removed his suit jacket and began unbuttoning his vest.

"Dearest, I know how tenacious you can be, but it has been more than a week since I saw you and more than a month since I..." he looked her body up and down relishing her appearance, "...truly appreciated you. We can discuss things tomorrow."

It had been a long while since he'd desired her this much, and he

would not be deterred. Amelia, perceiving the potency of his passion and, likewise, realizing this opportunity did not happen often, dropped the subject and melted blissfully into his welcoming embrace.

Paxton had been sitting at the kitchen table drumming his fingers back and forth along a board of wood thoughtfully for about an hour when Elizabeth placed a hot bowl of stew and a plate of hot buttered bread under his nose. He was completely unaware of how long he'd been sitting there, recalling all of the unpleasant memories that accompanied thoughts of his youth.

Elizabeth gently touched his hand. "You don't have to tell me the rest of your past, Pax, not if it causes you this much pain."

He grimaced, picked up the bowl, and wolfed down his stew and bread as if he hadn't eaten in days.

There was a loud crash and a flash of light. Elizabeth got up and went to the window.

"A storm," she stated folding her arms and noting the commotion in the barn. "The animals are restless."

"Then it's likely to be a big one," Paxton commented, feeling much better with some food in his stomach.

He stood up, walked over to his wife and wrapped his arms around her. Together they both watched as the wind whipped through the trees and lightening rent the sky.

"Do you think things will be all right?" asked Elizabeth.

Paxton could smell the soft hint of lavender on her hair and skin. "I hope so, Lizzy."

She turned back slightly and tilted her head upward so she could see his eyes. "Paxton, I love you."

His grip on her tightened affectionately. "You don't know how it makes me feel to hear you say that," he whispered tenderly.

Looking back out the window, she took in a deep breath of the crisp, damp air. The rain started to fall in intense sheets, and pounded heavily on the roof.

"Oh, I think I do," she replied softly.

They stood there for some time and watched the raging storm, both content to listen to the rhythm of the rain.

Chapter Fifteen

The air was thick with a heavy mist that almost evaded the tinted light of approaching dawn. The cemetery, with its vast rows of headstones and moss covered statues, was barely visible; still he knew exactly where he was going. The sharp spikes of the imposing wrought-iron fence seemed to pierce even the elusive mist, which swirled away from him as he walked silently up to the gate. On his third attempt the rusted gate relented and with a squeaky whine allowed him access to the cemetery grounds. The grass was bright green and his footsteps were light, almost weightless on the damp, soft ground cover, a complete contrast to how heavy his heart and soul were.

Finally, he reached his destination. Bending down, he gently, almost lovingly, ran his fingertips over the names etched onto the tombstone. He turned to the next plot and stared solemnly at the second grave which had no marker. He'd paid for the funeral expenses out of his own pocket, consequently draining his life's savings and still he could only afford a single tombstone.

He felt it was the least he could do, after all, it was his betrayal that had ultimately led to their deaths. It was only right he cover the entire expense of their funerals. Unfortunately, the cost of the tombstone, the gravesites and the epitaph he wished to have, had been too much for his limited pocket. In the end, he'd had to accept something simple: Lone Stalker and Rachel R.I.P. He'd wanted to write so much more about his dear friend and the young woman they both loved. He also wanted it written, for the entire world to see, that he, Paxton Reign, would find Jeremiah Shearer and bring him to justice.

Anger welled up inside him and he pounded his fist, swearing aloud to the graves, as he had so many times before, that he would see them avenged.

"But you haven't avenged me, Paxton," a stony voice proclaimed from behind him. He whirled around and gasped, faltering backward as he looked into the pallid face of his long dead friend. "You haven't avenged me or Rachel."

The hollow voice seemed to resound around the whole cemetery rather than come from the rigid figure standing there.

Memories swirled within his mind and confusion overcame him; he felt there was something he desperately had to remember. He struggled to recall what he so urgently wanted his friend to know, and then the memory returned so suddenly that he almost yelled. "But, Lonny, I *have* avenged

you! I brought your killer to justice. I hunted Jeremiah Shearer for years. I hunted him down and found him incoherent in some seedy, derelict outpost. I brought him to the authorities and they sentenced him to death for his many crimes. I watched him hang -- I watched him pay for killing you both!"

A small, white hand slid up onto Lonny's shoulder and Rachel stepped out from behind him, her beautiful, pale face etched with tears. "Look what your betrayal cost us, Paxton Reign."

She turned her back to him and slowly removed her traveling cloak. Paxton saw clearly what the traveling cloak had concealed, a large blood stain and holes, their fringes burnt and bloody, where the shot had penetrated the fabric of her pretty dress.

Tears threatened as he remembered her appearance just before they nailed the coffin shut. Her slight body was wrapped in that same traveling cloak; her unwashed face was bruised and tilted toward the heavens and her dainty hands were folded neatly across her chest. All laid out to rest, her delicate form did nothing to ease his anxiety or guilt. There was nothing restful about her; indeed, her very corpse seemed to exude unease and bitterness.

"Why haven't you avenged us?" Lonny repeated in the same hollow voice, which sent tremors of grief through Paxton.

"I have! I have, Lonny! Jeremiah Shearer is dead!"

"Jeremiah may have pulled the trigger, Paxton, but you are the true murderer at heart." Rachel's face was contorted with loathing. "You wanted us dead because I didn't love you and I was taking Lonny away. You wanted us to die."

"No!" Paxton's voice quivered with anguish. "I never wanted either of you to die. I cared for you both!"

"You killed us! You told on us!" Rachel persisted; her large eyes were accusatory and seemed to protrude from their sockets.

"Why haven't you avenged us, Paxton?" Lonny repeated, disjointedly.

"I have!" Paxton pulled old, worn pieces of paper from his pocket and spread each one open for them to see; the wanted advertisements that Paxton had collected. "Jeremiah Shearer murdered, conned and kidnapped all over the country. He had many aliases; I spent years of travelling and researching to bring him to justice. As you can see from his picture and description on these posters, he was wanted for many crimes. I did it all for you two though! I avenged you both by capturing him and watching him hang!" He brought out a copy of Jeremiah Shearer's tattered death warrant and forced it into their faces. "For his crimes he was sentenced to death."

"You're the murderer!" Rachel's voice had risen to an eerie pitch. "You sentenced us to death."

"Why haven't you avenged us, Paxton?"

The ghostly figures vanished without warning.

"Don't you see...?" Paxton's voice trailed off as he succumbed to his guilt and grief.

Suddenly his body was seized by unseen hands and he felt as though he was being forced toward the ground. To his horror he realized there was a gaping hole in the earth and he was being drawn into it. He could

not move; his body was being completely controlled by some invisible entity, all he could do was claw at the ground in dread.

Then he heard an almost deafening voice declare, "You must pay the price for our deaths. You are the murderer!"

"No," he groaned over and over again, as the hands yanked and dragged him down.

"Paxton!"

His eyes flashed open and as his vision adjusted the reality that he'd been dreaming dawned on him. Elizabeth, obviously alarmed, was shaking him and pleading with him to wake up.

He touched her hand, noting the sticky sweat which clung to his skin, and said shakily, "I'm awake." He shook himself, trying to regain his composure. Glancing at Elizabeth, he saw the concern on her face and explained, "I guess I'm being forced to remember the demons from my past as well as to remember the events of it."

"How did you escape being hung for the murders of Lonny and Rachel?" she asked. "I'm sorry, I just have to know. You cried their names over and over again and called yourself a murderer."

He sat up and ran a hand through his damp hair. "I understand. It is an intriguing story if you didn't have to live through it."

Paxton closed his eyes tightly as an image of Shearer leaning out the window with the shotgun invaded his mind. "Lucky for me there were several witnesses who saw Jeremiah Shearer at the window, especially after the second shot. I suppose he'd hoped no one would identify where the shot had originated, and hence would not know where to look. Or perhaps he believed everyone would be too distracted by the bloody bodies lying in the street. Fortunately for me, as soon as they saw me in custody, the ladies that had seen what really happened told the sheriff I was not the shooter. The sheriff, overwhelmed by evidence contrary to my being involved in the murder, let me go with no hesitation.

Our sheriff was a good, intelligent man and he was devoted to his job. I suppose he intuitively sensed my closeness with the victims and my own guilt at the events that transpired, because he kept me up to date on all the developments he had on Jeremiah Shearer. It was through him that I met Jack Strom. In actuality, the three of us worked together and collected a lot of information on the villain. Shearer turned out to be a devious and notorious outlaw, known by several aliases and with a record of misdeeds longer than my arm.

His most common ruse was to pose as a rich investor, or the like, in need of a new home and new opportunities. He would bide his time while building up a good reputation and eventually winning the trust of the locals. The details always varied, but ultimately he'd swindle almost every last dime from the people and then disappear.

Through some luck, I discovered he'd found Rachel Winsome when she was fourteen-years-old. Her parents had died of typhoid fever and she was orphaned with no living relatives. He took her in, not out of the goodness of his heart, I'm sure, but because he thought having a sweet, beautiful daughter would give his façade a beneficial angle.

I hazard a guess he grew to like her in his own way and shared his secrets with her, probably hoping she would follow in his footsteps.

Then, when Rachel threatened to leave with Lonny, Shearer feared she would or had already betrayed his secrets and so he killed her. If I am correct, he killed Lonny out of the same fear. I'm sure there was probably some spite and jealousy involved too."

"You mean he'd fallen in love with Rachel as well?"

"No. I don't think so, though he may have had a hidden agenda. When I say jealousy I don't mean a lover's jealousy, but a wicked, possessive man's jealousy. My studies of Shearer led me to realize he was the type of man to resent anyone who could take something he considered his property, and he definitely believed Rachel belonged to him. I became a bounty-hunter then, and I eventually found Shearer and brought him to justice."

"I see." Elizabeth folded her arms as a chill ran over her body. How like her own nemesis this Shearer sounded. "This Shearer has a lot in common with Maxwell Stanton."

"Yes, perhaps that's the reason for all of these memories. I sometimes feel just as helpless as I did then."

"But, you overcame Shearer -- you can overcome Maxwell."

"I don't know, Lizzy. Unlike Maxwell, Shearer was a wanted man. Eventually, he'd become too indiscrete a con-man, and after he had committed murder, every lawman in the country was looking for him."

"But you found him! You were the man to bring him to justice. That's something, Pax!" Elizabeth jogged his hand passionately, as if to persuade him this was the most positive contribution he could have made under the circumstances.

Paxton nodded, feeling exhaustion overwhelming him. It had finally clicked as to why he was feeling all of this guilt. "As much as I made out that vengeance was my reason for chasing Shearer, I didn't bring Shearer in because he'd killed my friends," he admitted slowly, "...but because I wanted to stop him from killing or hurting anyone else. I also wanted to stop his cycle of crime, and then after all of my work, watching him hang didn't give me any sense of satisfaction or justice -- only a kind of emptiness. What kind of man am I that I would feel that way at the demise of a man who had slaughtered two of my dearest friends? Do you remember you once told me that people needed to feel a sense of justice and retribution?"

Elizabeth nodded mutely.

"I have never felt that -- only grief. I feel grief for the criminals who might have been something different if they'd had better opportunities in their lives. Many of them were children when they turned to their lives of crime and why -- because their parents neglected them or had died and they were forced to find a way to fend for themselves. Or, like Jeremiah Shearer, they saw the rich getting richer while doing nothing, and got tired of working so hard and seeing no benefits. They wanted an easier way.

Elizabeth, there is so much wrong with the world. I felt that I was helping by stopping the cycle of crime, of demonstrating to other would-be criminals that the consequences were severe, but I've never felt justice."

Elizabeth smiled slightly. "You are so compassionate, Paxton, and

that is hardly something to be ashamed of. You realized Shearer dying would not bring Lonny or Rachel back, and I have no doubt that realization contributed to the sorrow you felt that day too."

She patted his cheek affectionately, and then her voice became more insistent, "But, you need to understand that some people choose to be wicked no matter what. There are people out there who've had every opportunity and still turn to lives of crime or wrong doing. I think sometimes they get too much and are so used to getting their own way that they can't stop. A good example of this would be Maxwell Stanton."

She paused to let this fact sink into his mind. "Then of course, you have people who, despite their bad lot in life, decide to stay good. Just look at you! Abandoned by your father at a young age and left to fend for yourself...did you turn to a life of crime? No, you went out and found a decent way of life.

I also had some tragic things happen to me when I was young. My father is gone and I don't even have the peace of mind of knowing whether he is alive or knowing how he died. I am left to speculate that he was murdered by the man who now rules my home town, wishes to murder you, to take over our ranch, and force me to be his wife.

There were several times I wanted to commit murder, to take vengeance on this man, who in so many ways ruined my life and yet I did not.

Just because you didn't bring Shearer in for vengeance doesn't make you a bad man. It actually shows me how good a person you are. People lose their lives to their desire for vengeance -- believe me, I know."

"You didn't, Elizabeth. You've gone and lived your life and lived it well so far."

"You think so?" It was a rhetorical question requiring no response. "There has always been that nagging feeling deep down that I have not avenged my father."

"Part of that nagging is the not knowing, Elizabeth."

"True, but I hate Maxwell Stanton, Paxton, so much! It's almost devouring me now." She sighed, wrapping her arms around herself and wanting a change in subject. "So, tell me more about your time in England."

Chapter Sixteen

Amelia sat in a winged armchair, hugging her knees to her chest and resting her chin on top of them. Although it wasn't cold out, she'd pulled the chair close to the fire for warmth. She was garbed only in a sheer, silk robe; a wedding gift from Fenton. Her mind was too preoccupied to care that her robe, in its present location, covered very little skin. The fire's glow, even in broad daylight, was mesmerizing and drew her gaze into its dancing flames. Fenton had been standing in the doorway watching her for several minutes and he was very interested in knowing what she was thinking. He'd risen at sunrise and left her in bed resting while he went down to breakfast. Slowly, so as not to interrupt her reverie, he approached her. Her face flashed upward at the sound of a creak in the floor.

"Good morning, my love." Fenton gave her the glass of orange juice he'd brought for her.

"Thank you, Fenton. Good morning." She received the drink and took a sip.

"How did you sleep?" he inquired, admiring the way the robe had slipped seductively down her arm.

She followed the path of his eyes and grinned impishly. Standing up, she let the silken robe slip from her shoulders and drift to the floor. She'd never been a prude and Fenton always appreciated her risqué femininity.

"Was last night insufficient to placate your appetite, my dear?" she asked, as silkily as the robe that encircled her feet.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and massaged gently, drew her close, relishing her fragrance and kissed her.

"When it comes to you, my sweet, I don't think my appetite could ever be placated," he replied, and scooped the robe off the floor, delicately replacing it around her shoulders. "I don't want you to catch a chill. You looked so contemplative just now. What were you thinking about?"

She turned from him, en route to the window, took a long drink of orange juice and placed the glass on the extended sill. "Oh, I was thinking about how we met."

His eyebrow rose. "I suppose the proximity of Paxton has brought on these memories."

She glanced at him warily and then stared out the window. "I was also thinking about..." she hesitated, "Miles."

Fenton cringed at the name. He looked down at his empty hands and remembered when they'd held his stillborn baby boy. He shook himself deliberately. "Amelia, I asked you never to mention that name to me again!" he growled quietly, and marched over to the window to draw her away. He didn't want her to be seen in her present attire.

When he reached for her arm Fenton immediately noticed what had drawn her attention. The view from their room showed the neighbours' stables and there sitting on a wooden fence was a young boy of about six, with dark, curly brown hair. He was swinging his legs back and forth while singing a song and petting a large Stallion. It was instantly obvious to Fenton what had triggered his wife's thoughts of their deceased child. Miles would have been around that age and probably very similar in his appearance. Just then a woman wearing an apron (likely the boy's mother) stomped outside. Hands on her hips, her eyebrows furrowed, she vehemently scolded the boy for disobeying her orders to stay away from the stables. Carelessly, she seized his arm and dragged him from atop the fence. Spanking his bottom firmly, she instructed him to run along and get his chores done or else.

The woman visibly rolled her eyes as the young lad ran off to do as she'd told him. She turned to go back into her house and then glanced backward at the very window Amelia and Fenton were watching from. Noticing them there, she greeted them with a friendly wave and a smile. Shrugging her shoulders, she laughed as if the entire scene were quite common place and therefore humorous.

Fenton inclined his head in acknowledgement of her greeting and then the woman went back into her house. "Maxwell has interesting neighbours," he mused.

There was a long pause.

"Amelia, my dear, I thought it might be a good idea for you to go and visit your brother today. What do you think?" Fenton asked, refusing to give further thought to the little boy.

Amelia finished her orange juice and left the vicinity of the window. "Whatever you think is best, Fenton."

"Aren't you excited? You haven't seen your brother in years."

"It has only been so long because of you," she stated blatantly. "I have no doubt it was your..." she paused deliberately and gave him a sly look, "...well, devious ways that drove him away from me, and now we have the reverse. Your mischievous intentions have brought us together again."

Fenton put his hand in his pocket and watched her very, very, very carefully.

"I just don't know -- these circumstances, they're very mysterious. What exactly is it that your brother wants with my brother?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Maxwell doesn't care about your brother...that much."

"Ah, then it is his wife?"

Fenton nodded. "He is quite besotted."

"Do you honestly expect me to be part of a plot to deprive my brother of his wife?"

"Not only do I expect it, I demand it," Fenton said calmly, but the flash of his eyes sent tremors up her spine. Over the years she had seen what he was capable of.

"And if I refuse?"

Fenton sighed. "Then I can do nothing..."

She lifted an eyebrow and waited, knowing he was far from finished.

"...to stop Maxwell from disposing of Mr. Reign. You see, my most illustrious wife, Maxwell has already attempted to murder your brother and he will not hesitate given another opportunity; if that is the only avenue he sees. If you really love your brother, you'll do everything in your power to separate him from Elizabeth Dalton."

Amelia, who had been standing close to the fireplace, now tapped a finger deliberately on the mantle. "I do not think I'll go and see my brother today, Fenton." She stifled his imminent complaint by announcing, "I will go tomorrow after breakfast. Today I wish to be a tourist and do just what tourists do and take a look around your brother's town."

Fenton's lips curved into a victorious grin. "Very good, dearest, I knew you would come to see the circumstances just as I do. I shall call our footman to assist you with your plans for today."

His wife deftly slipped into his lap before he had a chance to rise and do what he intended.

"Perhaps, before you go..." Her lips found his and he soon discovered she had other plans before fulfilling her role as a vacationer.

Elizabeth awoke to the rooster's crow, immediately noticing that Paxton was nowhere to be seen. Quickly, she washed, threw on some clothes and went to the kitchen. The jar of Cocoa was exactly where she'd left it and beckoned to her from the large oak table. Elizabeth glanced through the window immediately ascertaining why there was so little light in the room. There was a thick fog hanging ominously in the air, disabling the daylight and blocking her view of the corral.

The gloomy weather didn't help to hush the uneasy feeling that was constantly present in recent days. She felt her stomach growl and decided she could wait just a little longer to investigate the jar; breakfast seemed more important at this point. She lit a fire in the stove and prepared some left-over porridge.

Elizabeth was fully aware she was partially afraid to open the cocoa. As things were now, she didn't know what it held; whether it held news of her father, or incriminating evidence against Stanton or anything else. Although the unknowing was torturous, it was also nurturing what remaining hope she had. Once that container was opened all mystery would be removed and there was the possibility she'd be disappointed by what was revealed and her hopes shattered. That glass jar could hold absolutely nothing but cocoa, as Fenton Stanton had supposed.

Patting her fingertip on the lid of the jar, she slowly pulled the container closer. She sat up abruptly when a minuscule mound of what could only be cocoa powder built up along the bottom edge of the jar.

Her mind raced to figure out how the cocoa had escaped. She hadn't opened it, at least to her memory. Perhaps one of the men had come in and helped himself? That was doubtful, since the men were very respectful of the Reigns' privacy and only entered the house when invited. It was possible some had spilt when she first dumped it out onto the table with all the other contents of her bag.

"Lizzy?" It was Paxton calling her from outside.

"Yes?" She stood up and went over to the window.

A sudden shiver of appreciation coursed through her when she saw her husband waiting for her just a foot away from the sill. His hair was tousled, and a substantial layer of dirt was caked onto his boots and pant cuffs. His chin and cheeks were covered with stubble and the entirety of his face was smeared with dust. Yet, with all of this, he still appeared to her to be most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on. He came up to her and she leaned out of the sill and kissed him. When she'd stopped kissing her husband, her nose crinkled and her brow furrowed. She had to resist the temptation to wave her hand under her nose.

Paxton smiled sheepishly. "The boys and I had a real tough time mucking out the stalls after the storm. Sorry."

"Pax, why'd you let me sleep in so late? You and the boys are probably famished and ready for lunch and I just barely finished breakfast."

"I wanted you to get as much rest as you needed. Did you sleep well?"

She shrugged and changed the subject. "I'll get lunch on. Tell the boys fifteen minutes."

He nodded. "Thanks, sweetheart."

She blew him a kiss and went back into the kitchen.

The jar of Star Cocoa sat more ostentatiously than ever and she was sorely tempted to simply grab and open it. Just then she heard the noises of hungry men approaching the house and remembered she'd promised to have lunch ready in fifteen minutes. Seizing the cocoa, she stashed it almost resentfully into a cupboard and started preparing lunch.

Chapter Seventeen

Maxwell Stanton was in a bitter mood and it did not take Willy long to notice. He sat very still while he watched his boss mangle the food on his plate. Usually, two Eggs Benedict with a side of hash browns and four strips of bacon was enough to coax the mayor out of any surly mood. Willy had already made two attempts to speak with Maxwell and was rebuffed almost the instant he opened his mouth. The mayor was simply glaring across the room with, what Willy considered to be, the surliest expression imaginable.

The henchman had been contemplating the consequences of his exiting the room for about ten minutes, when an unknown voice penetrated the menacing silence.

"No appetite this morning, brother?"

Willy's head snapped round to see a beautiful woman glide into the room with an elegant swish of skirts. He'd heard tales of Mrs. Amelia Stanton's beauty from the other servants, but he now judged them grossly inadequate. Willy, who'd seen many a pretty lady, had never seen her equal in grace or beauty. Although he was not the most perceptive of men, he relished the trace of mischievous deception that he read upon her countenance. He could pick up on these traits in another as he was well practiced in these qualities himself.

Maxwell promptly stood up at her entrance though the scowl on his face deepened even more. Willy followed his example, although he omitted the scowl. Pulling a chair out for her, and waiting with rather impatient decorum until she'd seated herself, Maxwell assisted by tucking her in closer to the table.

"My appetite is fine, thank you -- sister," the mayor had hesitated on the last word, and when it finally came out it oozed absolute rancour. "Willy, don't you have work to do? You've certainly eaten more than your fill."

Willy bowed slightly and reluctantly excused himself; he slowed at the exit to take one more look at the exquisite woman.

"I will call you if you are needed again, Willy," Maxwell grated, instantly dismissing the man, and then abruptly turning to Amelia, "Shall I call for your...," he glanced at the ornate cuckoo clock on the wall, "...brunch?" Rising from his seat and turning toward the kitchen to notify the servant, Maxwell was surprised when Amelia's hand flew to his arm, halting his departure and gently guiding him back into his chair.

"Maxwell, I hate pretences," she began earnestly, ignoring any previous conversation. "I know you do not trust me, or even like me for

that matter, I'm not asking you to. Only know that your wanting my brother's wife does not revolt me in the slightest."

Dumbfounded by her straightforwardness, Maxwell could not immediately think of a reply, and after a brief pause managed only, "How so, Madam?"

He realized her hand was still on his arm and the place where it touched was warm and tingly. In that instant a desire for her whelmed up inside him. Seeing the object of his distraction, she quickly removed her hand and placed it coyly in her lap.

She looked around the room suspiciously. "I will not mince words with you, Maxwell. I hate my brother, just about as much as you hate yours."

He pushed his chair back hastily, wanting nothing more than to escape this unpredicted intensity of emotions from both the lady and from himself. "Excuse me, Madam, but I believe you're hungry."

This time her hand secured his thigh calmly pinning him to his chair and there was no disguising the bolt of energy that shot through his body at her touch. Heat rose to his face as signs of comprehension dawned on hers.

"Stay put and hear me out!" she commanded, disengaging her hand and leaving no room for polite excuses.

"It's no secret you despise Fenton and I do not blame you. Excuse me while I cite my favourite piece of literature and state that my life, Maxwell, holds few distinctions, but I feel I may safely confide that I have been most unfortunate in my choice of husband and the good Lord's choice of brother. Fenton, well, he certainly deserves a hefty comeuppance. I'm sure I need not go into details of what a selfish, arrogant, contemptible buffoon he is! As for Paxton...", she hesitated momentarily, "...to cut a long story short, he is the reason I've wasted several years of my life with that very buffoon.

You and I, we aren't so different; we both covet something beyond our reach. You want my brother's wife, although rumour has it she despises you, and I want my husband humiliated, disgraced and reviled by all decent society." She smiled wickedly. "It's obvious to me we'll both benefit from what the other one wants and desires. If we work together, what we want will be easier -- much closer. There is only one thing I demand."

He waited, his face expectant.

"No harm must come to Paxton," she stated firmly.

He opened his mouth to protest but she silenced him with a mischievous grin. "No physical harm that is. I want him to live for years to come with nothing but the feeling of bitter disappointment, grief and sorrow, so he'll experience first-hand just how I have suffered."

Maxwell clapped his hands together delightedly and his chagrin at his brother's summoning his wife quickly evaporated.

"My lady," he chuckled melodiously. "You are a gift from God."

This foolish woman would help in getting everything he wanted and in the end he'd have absolutely no scruples against pinning every evil deed on her.

The sun was shining gloriously on Amelia's hair, which was loosely pulled into a tousled bun with soft curls seductively outlining her delicate face, when Fenton quietly leaned against the door jamb of the breakfast room. Maxwell had an absurd grin on his clean shaven face as he stuffed golden hash browns into his mouth.

Amelia, sensing her husband's presence, glanced up and smiled warmly at him. "Ah there you are, my dear. Maxwell, your brother Fenton rose much earlier than either of us did." Naturally she didn't want to indicate what had occupied him during the period between his breakfast and his appearance for lunch. "He's already had breakfast, but perchance you are hungry again, my dear?"

"Did you sleep well?" Maxwell inquired politely.

"Tolerably," Fenton conceded slowly, feeling something was amiss.

Amelia lifted her cheek slightly as he bent down to kiss her. "I'm glad to hear it. I hope you have an appetite because I ordered lunch for you."

"Thank you, Amelia, I am quite hungry. I ate hours ago. How are you today, Max?"

"I'm feeling a good deal better after speaking with your lovely wife." Maxwell crunched on a piece of bacon. "Are you sure you're quite well, Fenton? You seem agitated."

Fenton's gut clenched, he didn't like his brother's cheerful attitude. "I am. If you are going to have a guest room, my dear brother, you should instruct your staff to make sure the bed has no lumps. I've never slept so uncomfortably in my life. I'm sure my own staff -- my servants would've found it a horrid sleeping arrangement. If you cannot keep a guest room more luxurious than a servant's quarters, then I suggest you don't have a guest room at all."

Maxwell's smile remained though it tightened slightly. "How disconcerting. I'm sorry to hear that your night was not restful, Fenton," he said in a voice that declared differently. "You should've said as much when I first asked you. I shall speak to my staff about it. Amelia, you must have slept in equal discomfort and were too polite to mention it."

Amelia looked directly at her husband and said without the slightest hesitation, "I'm surprised you didn't sleep well, my darling, as for me, I slept like a baby."

Maxwell's grin widened as he saw the irritated flash behind Fenton's eyes. "Well, that at least, is some consolation."

Fenton felt his appetite wane as he watched his wife and brother engaged in pleasant and pointless conversation. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, and it annoyed him that he could not figure out what.

Amelia squeezed his hand tightly. "I suppose, I should go and do some sightseeing today," she announced and then looked at the mayor. "I'm most anxious to have a tour of your empire."

Her jovial giggle and choice of words made Fenton tighten his grip on her hand.

"It seemed like a quaint, lovely town with fascinating shops and establishments when I first drove through in my carriage," she continued

undaunted.

"Perhaps, I should arrange to have someone accompany you and show you around then?"

"No thank you, Maxwell. I must admit I'm a typical lady and wish to admire several locations privately and at a leisurely pace. I do hope you understand."

"She'll be gone for hours and probably spend most of the time in one shop," Fenton clarified. "Do you still plan to see Paxton tomorrow?"

"Yes. In view of the fact that it's been such a long time since I last saw him, I should stay for a couple of days. That is, of course, if he'll welcome me. I really have no idea how he'll react to seeing me."

"Take my carriage, if you decide to stay simply send it back with instructions on when you wish to return," Maxwell offered genially. "I'm in no rush to have it back."

"Thank you, Maxwell, I accept your kind offer. Excuse me gentlemen, I should go upstairs and prepare for my tour as it's well past noon already. Shopping does take a lady's time, you know."

Fenton and Maxwell stood up politely as Amelia excused herself and went upstairs. After she'd left, both men finished their food in silence and Maxwell ordered more coffee. By the time the gentlemen were drinking their freshly brewed coffee, Amelia was standing gracefully in the doorway, her dainty handbag in one hand and her pink parasol in the other.

"I believe I'm ready to go," she announced demurely.

Fenton escorted her to the entrance way and kissed her gently on the mouth. For an instant he looked at her in a way that made Maxwell, who'd trailed them (after downing his remaining coffee), feel uneasy.

"You take care of yourself, my sweet Amelia," Fenton said sincerely, squeezing her hand.

She seemed rattled by this heartfelt attention and murmured something about being fine and not to worry.

"Will you be home for dinner?" Fenton asked.

"I believe so. Good-bye." With that she descended the front stairs and traipsed up the street toward the town centre.

Maxwell touched his brother's arm, distracting him from the dwindling view of his wife's lovely figure walking away. "I have some matters of business to attend to. Please make yourself at home. Ellister will see to any requests you have."

"Thank you," Fenton said darkly, already feeling bored.

When Amelia returned to the mansion, Ellister advised her dinner was about to be served. She hurriedly acknowledged her husband and brother-in-law, who were waiting in the dining room, and then went upstairs to wash. Taking a few moments to refresh herself, she checked her image in the mirror. Completely satisfied, she rushed down the massive staircase and pausing briefly to compose herself, calmly entered the dining room.

Every time she came into this room she couldn't help but be impressed. Two beautifully crafted ceiling medallions featured

intricate, crystal chandeliers which were perfectly situated above a long, mahogany Chippendale dining table with matching chairs. The chairs themselves drew the eye with such well-designed details as a skillfully carved splat back, and off-white damask upholstered seats. Whitewashed panels covered the outer wall and the three other walls were covered in a deep burgundy flannel trellis. The designs on the wallpaper made Amelia visualize several antelope antlers all coming together in a unique and alluring pattern. The room itself was very welcoming as were most rooms in the house. Amelia was accustomed to such luxury, yet she simply adored the mayor's home with all of its lavish and tasteful décor.

The two gentlemen stood when she arrived and Fenton helped her into her chair, mentioning her beauty with a rehearsed air. Obviously, full of excitement about what she'd seen, and bought, and done while she was touring the town, Amelia exploded into chatter the moment she was seated. Both Maxwell and Fenton listened with feigned interest and casually commented when occasion called for a response.

When the dinner was concluded Amelia excused herself, claiming she was quite tired and wanted to be fresh and alert for her journey the following day. Fenton and Maxwell enjoyed a couple of glasses of brandy and one cigar before calling it a night.

Morning arrived and everyone in the house was up earlier than usual. Shortly after breakfast, Amelia announced she was ready to leave. Fenton and Maxwell decided to see her off at the door. Rushing through the hallway, Amelia pulled on one of her dainty white gloves and adjusted her travelling bonnet. She kissed her husband affectionately and nodded at Maxwell. Ellister, holding one small, flower-embroidered valise, opened the door for her, assisted her down the steps and into the awaiting carriage. Her beautiful face was framed in the black box window of the coach, as she waved her gloved hand. She called her goodbyes as the horses towed the carriage from view. All three men went back into the house feeling somehow bereft.

Chapter Eighteen

Maxwell Stanton's coachman, Gus Myer, having had instructions to take the lady to Paxton Reign's ranch, was quite astonished when she tapped the side of the coach to get his attention. Courteously, Amelia asked him to first take her to the sheriff's office. Gus was an aging, amiable man, who liked the ladies, and had never really liked working for the mayor. But as the mayor reminded him so often, with his age and the absence of any real qualifications, he was not likely to find another job with as decent a pay check. However, over the years of driving the mayor's prissy friends around, he'd learned that if he listened to what they wanted, instead of strictly obeying the mayor's orders, there was often a substantial tip involved. Gus nodded and steered the horses toward the sheriff's office.

Sheriff John Scythe was sitting in his office contemplating his upcoming retirement when there was a knock on the door.

"The door's open," he called gruffly, angry that someone was disturbing his peace.

As the door opened, he prepared to show his utmost nonchalance at whatever complaint this intruder (in his mind at any rate) might have. He sighed loudly enough so the person could hear and lifted his feet nosily onto his desk, careless of the dried mud which flaked off his cowboy boots and onto the wooden surface.

"What?"

The instant John beheld the figure entering his office his boots slammed down and he stood up. His shock at seeing such a beautiful woman in his domain left him entirely speechless. Generally his daily repertoire of tasks consisted of booting drunkards from the local saloon and advising petty neighbours on how to get along without the use of guns. Then, of course, there was the occasional, very occasional, bounty to be paid and the even rarer hanging.

The sheriff was a man who knew everyone and everything there was to know about the town and some of the surrounding areas too. Despising how often he was misunderstood as caring, he thought of himself as a power-hungry diabolic and he was proud of it. Being such a man, how could an unknown and beautiful woman in his realm not leave him astounded?

She held out a dainty, gloved hand. "Good morning, Sheriff, I'm sorry to disturb you so early. My name is Mrs. Amelia Stanton. The mayor, Mr. Maxwell Stanton, is my brother-in-law; I'm married to his

brother Fenton."

He was reluctant to take her hand for fear of getting dirt on the immaculately white glove, so he tipped his hat instead. "Good morning, Ma'am. Sheriff John Scythe at your service," he greeted her with an unabashed smirk, his wits returning.

The sheriff had known Maxwell for years and had in fact, helped put him where he was. He'd had few qualms with doing this, because the mayor compensated him more than adequately. He'd continued to pay handsomely for extracurricular activities, as well as John's typical duties as sheriff. In all these years, he'd never known Maxwell had a brother until he'd shown up, and now the wife of that same brother was here in his office. He was rattled and suddenly uncomfortable as he considered the reasons Maxwell Stanton's sister-in-law would have for visiting him.

"What can I do you for?" he asked amiably, indicating a chair placed strategically in front of his desk.

She smiled graciously and sat down, folding her hands in her lap. "Sheriff, I need to have a private word with one of your deputies please."

John stiffened visibly.

"Please don't misunderstand; I've a task that would be a waste of your valuable time and," she fairly purred, "...your superior skill. I believe, oh, do let me remember who Maxwell suggested, Deputy Howard was it?"

The sheriff relaxed with a chuckle. Howard definitely had his uses, but his talent wasn't in the same league as John's. Maxwell often hired Howard for extraneous tasks that required little wit and few questions asked.

"Well, Ma'am, you're in luck," John commented, as the door opened and Deputy Howard entered the room.

Taking off his hat, Deputy Howard placed it on a hook and meandered over to his desk. He sat down and almost stood up again when he noticed Amelia. His eyes roamed over her with conspicuous pleasure, but he didn't smile or even greet her.

"Don't get too comfy, Howey, sounds like you've a job to do." The sheriff laughed.

John stood up, tucked in his chair, winked at Amelia and left the building.

"Deputy Howard," Amelia began guardedly, "I'm Mrs. Amelia Stanton."

Recognition dawned on Howard's smug face. He leaned back and the chair moaned in protest -- he was a big man. "You related to the mayor then?" he asked impassively.

She arose, paused and then when nothing happened, started to lug the heavy chair over to his desk. Clearly hoping for him to assist her, she was disappointed. He was content to watch her struggle devoid of any manners or, she wondered, he was just that oblivious. She sat down striving to remain dignified.

"I understand from my brother-in-law, that you're a man of many talents."

He nodded appreciatively, enjoying the compliment.

"And, that you can use your talents to assist those in need," she

leaned in closer and continued, choosing her words deliberately, "...regardless of the nature of that particular need -- for a price, naturally."

"Fer a price," Howard confirmed, crossing his arms.

"For a price," she repeated, studying him scrupulously.

"You got a need, Mrs. Stanton, sure as I'm sitting here."

"I do."

His eyebrows furrowed and he rubbed his thumb against his index and middle finger. "Do you got the means?"

Her posture became rigid, as if she were offended that he dare ask. "Certainly! Money is not an issue. But what I say here, Deputy Howard, mustn't leave this room. Can I count on that?"

Howard tilted toward her and whispered, "Rest that pretty, little head of yours, Ma'am, wild horses couldn't drag your secret from me."

Amelia pulled her chair closer and placed her hands on his desk. "Well then, let's stop dilly-dallying and get down to business."

Elizabeth fell into a cozy chair feeling completely exhausted. She'd cleaned the house, fed the animals, milked the cow, gathered eggs from the hen house and cooked two full meals for Paxton and the men. Paxton, right in front of the men, had kissed her cheek and praised her for being the most efficient worker he'd ever met. But now that the sun dyed the western horizon pink and the nearby wisps of cloud mauve, she felt utterly spent. No sooner had she sat down than she heard a carriage approaching. Her stomach clenched as an image of Maxwell Stanton's carriage flashed in her mind. She rushed to the window to get a look at who was approaching and froze as the coach she recognized as the mayor's stopped in front of the barn. The barn was situated approximately thirty feet from the side of the house, and was consequently across from the sitting room window where Elizabeth was perched.

Elizabeth noted her husband as he advanced warily to the carriage window. He stood there silently for some time as if surprised, and Elizabeth felt the moments lurch on like hours as she wondered what on earth Stanton was saying to Paxton. Slowly, she removed herself from the window and walked to the entrance of her home, deciding to wait there for Paxton.

When his distant voice uttered, "Well, guess you might as well come in then." And she heard the carriage door opening; Elizabeth flung the front door open and rushed outside.

She steeled herself for the upcoming confrontation with her arch-enemy. She intended to tell Maxwell in no uncertain terms that he could get right back inside his fancy carriage and carry himself and his threats off the Reign ranch for good. He wasn't welcome there and never would be. She was even prepared to add that if he came back she'd shoot him herself, but as she rounded the corner she froze in her tracks.

It was not Maxwell Stanton that Paxton was assisting out of the carriage but a magnificently tailored and exquisitely attractive woman. Elizabeth immediately assumed that this was Amelia, Paxton's estranged

sister. Suddenly she realized that Paxton hadn't yet disclosed the reason why she was 'estranged' in the first place. Upon looking back, Elizabeth wondered if the story about Lonny was a diversion to avoid talking about Amelia. For her, there was no known connection between the story of why her husband had become a bounty-hunter and the reason he'd not spoken with his sister in several years.

Amelia had, despite his protestations, thrown her arms about her dirt and grime covered brother and given him what appeared to be a heartfelt hug. Elizabeth faltered considering her shabby attire and worn apron and was about to retreat into the house to change when Paxton spotted her.

"Elizabeth!" he called jovially enough. "Please come here. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

She cursed inwardly, feeling grossly inadequate and wished she'd thought of changing just an instant or two earlier. However, she was pleased to discern the note of pleasure in Paxton's voice. He was happy to see his sister again.

She walked over and smiled as Paxton made the introductions and was shocked when Amelia threw her arms about her and gave her just as heartfelt a hug as she had her brother.

"I am so pleased to meet you, Elizabeth." She turned to Paxton. "I always thought you'd marry some fancy, aristocrat, Paxy, but upon seeing this pretty, little thing I can understand why you settled." She dusted off her dress and looked Elizabeth up and down appraisingly.

Amelia smiled at her and said, "Elizabeth, I don't mean to be rude, my dear, but would you mind if I spent a teensey-weensey iota of time with my brother -- alone? It's been so long."

"Not at all," Elizabeth replied, watching as Amelia opened her purse and handed a substantial tip to the driver of the coach. "Thank you, Gus, I think I'll be staying the night, perhaps even for a couple of days."

Slowly, she turned her face toward her brother, and Elizabeth noticed that her expression was apologetic. "That is, of course, if you two don't mind."

Paxton looked at Elizabeth who shrugged, "It's fine with me, Pax."

Amelia's bright eyes bore into Paxton as he deliberated for a moment and then he pocketed his hands and conceded.

"Oh, thank you both so much. Good bye, Gus. Send my regards to the Stantons." She waved at the coachman and took 'Paxy's' arm, ushering him toward the house heedless of Elizabeth.

Paxton gently removed his arm from his sister's grip and turned back gesturing to his wife. "I'm such a lucky man to have two such lovely women to escort," he joked, but there was a significant undercurrent in his voice, which Elizabeth didn't comprehend. "I'm looking forward to hearing all of your news, Amelia, and I'm glad Elizabeth has the chance to get acquainted with you."

Amelia cleared her throat genteelly. "Indeed. You know, Elizabeth, I've always wanted a sister. Do you have a sister?"

Elizabeth was practically oblivious, dotingly lost in her husband's gorgeous blue eyes. When he'd stopped walking and waited for her, making

sure she was included, all of her insecurities had melted away. Even as Amelia prattled on, Elizabeth was feeling a true appreciation for what a perceptive and clever man her husband was. Apparently, Paxton had sensed the meaningful look she was giving him and was basking in it because he seemed just as insensible of his sister's comments as his missus. Amelia glared at them with a tight smile on her face and once again cleared her throat awaking the lovers from their mutual adoration.

"No, I have no siblings at all," Elizabeth replied at last, squeezing Paxton's arm affectionately.

Amelia let go of her brother's arm so he could open the door for them, and at his courteous signal she stepped over the threshold.

"Welcome to our home, Amelia. I suppose you'd you like a tour?"

Elizabeth interjected, "Perhaps, Amelia is hungry after her journey? I do have some left-over roast beef and gravy and I baked some bread today. Would you like a hot, gravy smothered, roast beef sandwich?"

Looking at Paxton coyly, Amelia confessed, "I am rather hungry."

"That does sound good!" Paxton's stomach grumbled in agreement.

Elizabeth, smiling, excused herself and went into the kitchen to prepare their food.

Amelia took a breath. "She's very pretty."

Paxton nodded. "I'm going to go and give her a hand. Why don't you come have a seat at the table and you can tell me about what's been going on with you these past few years."

"Do you always help cook?"

"No. Elizabeth's very efficient. We've both had a very busy day and I'm sure she's just as tired as I am -- I'm sure she could use an extra pair of hands."

Amelia's eyebrows lifted in disbelief. "Well, aren't you the perfect husband. Really Pax, if this is for my benefit, you don't have to impress me." Then she added importantly, "Fenton and I have servants that take care of the mundane tasks. In fact, I don't think I've cooked once since I've been married."

He laughed. "Well, usually Elizabeth kicks me out of the kitchen. She says she prefers her space. Though she is grateful when I help with the dishes, which I admit is rare."

Amelia followed Paxton into the kitchen and sat at the table, quietly observing her brother and his wife as they playfully bantered back and forth. It was almost as if they'd forgotten she was there.

After an absolutely scrumptious meal, Amelia graciously expressed her gratitude and looked directly at her brother. "Paxton, I should give Elizabeth some of our mother's recipes that would definitely help broaden her repertoire. My dear sister, you cook very well for someone so young and despite never having had a mother to teach you too."

"I'd be very happy to have some of your mother's recipes," Elizabeth managed distractedly. Her intended response had been sidetracked by the sudden and bewildering frown on Paxton's face.

Amelia stood up and took her plate to the washing area. "Can I help with the dishes?" She turned back from the basin and faced the couple still sitting at the table and gave a slight, embarrassed laugh. "I'm really used to having servants. I don't think I've ever washed a dish in

my married life."

"Well, lucky you!" Elizabeth quipped.

"I hope that I don't break any." Amelia continued wryly.

Paxton waved a dismissive hand and said, "Nah, don't worry about the dishes, sis. I'll do them later."

"How about that tour you promised then?" Amelia said, not bothering to insist.

Elizabeth trailed the pair of them as Paxton gave his sister a brief tour of every room and explained the quickest route to the outhouse. Amelia had smiled delicately and inquired if they had any chamber pots available. Paxton promptly replied with a question of whether or not she planned to empty it herself. He concluded the tour in the living room and collapsed comfortably on the sofa.

Amelia drew in a luxurious breath and exclaimed, "Oh! Isn't this a quaint little place." She seized Elizabeth by the arm and yanked her close. "Oh, Elizabeth, darling, I have such wonderful ideas on how we could decorate this place to make it real snug and cozy."

Paxton yawned. "No need for that, Amelia, Elizabeth's done a fine job of decorating."

Amelia rounded on him. "Pax, my intention was not to suggest that your fine, young wife doesn't have any taste, I've just had quite a bit of experience with interior decorating myself and thought..."

"I'm sure you have, Amelia, but I like the place the way it is," Paxton bantered playfully enough, winking at his wife. Yet Elizabeth still recognized that undercurrent she had caught earlier. "I wouldn't want you to come on your first visit here and have to do even an ounce of work -- especially where it isn't necessary."

Elizabeth observed Amelia's fallen expression and couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her, but she would not undermine Paxton for the world.

"Amelia, tell us about New York. It must be a very grand city. Do you like living there?" She indicated her favourite comfy chair to her sister-in-law. The chair had been a wedding present from Jack Strom and was the newest, most fashionable piece of furniture the Reigns owned, having decided to live modestly on their ranch. Amelia sat down and Elizabeth noted with some displeasure that with all her grace and posture Amelia made the chair look uncomfortable and somewhat shabby.

"It's a very grand city," Amelia said, but there was a marked disinterest in her tone. "It is very busy and I can't help but admit that Mr. Maxwell Stanton has a very comfortable arrangement. His house is simply marvellous and so tastefully decorated!" She seemed not to notice her brother or his wife stiffen at the mention of the mayor. "He is near all the modern conveniences and yet far away from the hustle and bustle of a large city. He has a sizable estate, since he is in the country, with some lovely grounds. Oh, but then, I wonder if you have been there?" she looked at her audience.

"We have, briefly," Elizabeth said tightly.

"You are on friendly terms with the mayor then?"

"No. Not at all."

Amelia clasped her hands together. "Oh. Well, I wasn't sure. I

did over-hear him talking about you, Elizabeth, and so I thought you might..."

"Really?" Paxton interrupted. "What did you hear?"

"Well, I was reading in the parlour and over-heard two men talking outside the window. The one man addressed the mayor and asked him if he was all right. Calling the man Willy, Maxwell snapped that he wasn't at all alright because his ward and the love of his life despised him. Willy replied that you, Elizabeth, couldn't help but hate him since he'd disposed of your father and tried to murder your husband. Maxwell exploded that he'd been out of his wits when he tried to kill Paxton but it was only because he wanted you so badly. He then said most undeniably that he'd not murdered your father. Mr. Dalton had simply come to him one morning, told him a big change was about to occur, and declared that he'd changed his mind about letting him take over the ranch.

Maxwell admitted that your father hadn't asked him to take care of you or given any indication that he intended to leave you. When you were left behind, Maxwell didn't want to exile you to the unhappy life of an orphanage and so he chose to let you remain. Then, a while later, he received a letter from your father apologizing for his abrupt departure and for leaving things unresolved. The letter requested Stanton care for the ranch and stated he'd eventually receive further instruction about the purchasing of it.

Finally, in the last paragraph, your father entreated Maxwell to take care of you until you were grown. Circumstances had arisen that prevented him from ever coming back for you. The mayor claims that was the last he heard from your father."

Clearly incensed, Elizabeth jumped to her feet blurting, "It's all a horrible lie! My father would never have asked Stanton to take care of me or his ranch, nor would he have abandoned me -- for any reason." Her chest heaved heavily with obvious agitation as she stared Amelia down, like a bull seeing red.

Amelia put her hand to her chest looking quite shocked and dismayed. "Well, my goodness! I'm only repeating what I heard, dear."

"You were set up to hear that."

"Elizabeth..." Paxton began.

"No! Paxton, your sister needs to know what an evil man Maxwell Stanton really is."

Amelia left her chair, and gently prodded the younger woman's arm. "You have no need to tell me. If Maxwell is anything like his older brother -- I already know." She turned to Paxton and wiped a compelling, if convenient, tear from one of her big, blue eyes.

At that very instant, odd timing though it was Elizabeth perceived the similarity in the deep shade of blue that the eyes of both sister and brother shared. Inwardly, she wondered whether that colour had come from their mother or their father, and all at once her blatant ignorance of such a simple fact wrenched her apart even further.

"This is partly why I am here, Paxton," Amelia continued, drawing attention to herself. "I've ascertained that Fenton is attempting to have me killed and has likely enlisted Maxwell to aid him."

This unexpected development caused Elizabeth to close her lips and

stand rigidly in her spot, eyeing the other woman with solemn contemplation.

"Amelia," Paxton shook his head slowly, a small grin teasing the corners of his mouth. "What would make you think that Fenton is trying to kill you?"

"Well, just this -- Fenton used to tell me about his brother and the many crimes he'd committed with no reprisal. Maxwell had no idea that Fenton knew exactly where he was and what he was up to. In fact, he was secretly paying Willy, their childhood friend and servant, to keep him up-to-date on his younger brother. Fenton begrudgingly admitted that his brother had a talent for disposing of problematic people. Then, all of a sudden, years later, and for no apparent reason, other than family accord, he summons me here to meet him." Amelia paused.

Perceptively, Elizabeth noted that Amelia's break was more for dramatic effect than for a chance to collect her thoughts.

Abruptly, as if on cue, Amelia blushed, hung her head and resumed her tale. "I know Fenton has had many affairs, granted they meant little to him -- just a few conquests on the side, I suppose. After much inward debate I decided not to make an issue of his infidelity." She scooped up a small, ornate music box which had been sitting on the coffee table and began fiddling with it. "After all, I figured it wouldn't have been a battle in which I'd have prevailed. A couple of years back, however; he was involved with a very wealthy, esteemed widow and at first I ignored it thinking it was like all the others. A year later, I was informed differently by my sources, of which I have many. They reported that this was no mere dalliance and that he was seriously considering leaving me for her.

Admittedly, I had a great deal to lose if Fenton left me and I was frightened of what my future would be without him." Amelia opened the music box and pretty, melodic notes flew free, like birds escaping a newly unfastened cage. The box clanged in protest as she shut the lid decisively and returned it to its exact place on the coffee table.

"Consequently, I went to this widow -- and -- let us just say I persuaded her eloping with my husband was not a plausible choice. Even though Fenton discovered me in the act of doing this, he seemed to handle it well. And yet, I've this nagging feeling that this was merely one of his brilliant pretences; that he was really displeased and still holds it against me. I'm almost positive he wishes me done away with so I no longer hinder him from his prestigious designs. He wants his freedom again, Paxton, and he hates me!"

Paxton smirked, and then slowly began to clap his hands, a gesture which surprised both ladies. "A performance fit for the stage. It's not hard to see who inherited father's talent for story-telling, Amelia. Like him, you are excellent at twisting and distorting truths to serve your purpose. Lying convincingly is definitely your specialty, sis; which, I have no doubt, is the true reason you are here.

I think it's more likely that Maxwell Stanton wants *me* out of the way. Fenton probably convinced him into thinking that you, my sister, might be some use in the matter. You weren't summoned here to be murdered by your husband or your brother-in-law, but to aide them in

their plans to dispose of me. Am I right?"

Amelia visibly paled. "Paxton! I would never..."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" He got up from the couch and circled her purposefully, like a hawk circling its prey. Elizabeth noticed her flinch when he whispered, "I have a very long memory, Amelia."

Amelia stood as still as a statue, her arms unnaturally straight, her hands balled up into tight, little fists, and her ruby red lips pursed. "That was a long time ago. I was young and impetuous; I didn't know any better!"

"You whacked me over the head with a shovel and robbed me blind. All so you could elope with a man that I expressly forbade you to be involved with."

Amelia grinned poisonously. "You seem to have issues with elopement, don't you Pax? You play judge and jury over me but I seem to remember an incident in your past that involved the death of your dearest friend. Wasn't it because he wished to elope with the very girl that you loved?"

That evening I came for your blessing, I was in love and desired to be married. Instead of wishing me well my brother forbids me to act upon my feelings. I felt I had little choice. The crimes I committed are not so different from those of your past and yet you regard me as a villainess."

"Well, aren't you?"

"No. I'm a woman."

"I'm not sure that makes your point."

"I mean, I have passionate emotions and feelings and back then I felt I was in love. I didn't want anyone or anything to get in the way of my being with Fenton. I was a fool," sighing, she collapsed into a chair. "Fine! It's obvious that you haven't forgiven me and that coming to you for help was a mistake."

"I have forgiven you, Amelia, but you're not the only one who has sources -- you haven't forgiven me. I had my reasons for forbidding you to marry Fenton. Number one: he was only pursuing you to get at me. Number two: he was and probably still is a conniving, selfish, conceited scoundrel. You blame me for ending up with him -- though I did everything in my power to keep you from him!"

"That's it exactly!" Amelia cried jumping to her feet, all semblance of calm calculation gone as hot, angry tears stained her cheeks. "If you hadn't interfered I wouldn't have felt such a strong desire to go through with it. It was because you forbade it that I wanted it so badly! If you had just left me alone I would have come to my senses!"

Paxton pocketed his hands, exasperated. "Oh, I see. Well then, it is my fault! My fault for not deciphering how truly undecipherable a woman's thoughts and feelings are," he said ironically. "How you can blame me is utterly unfathomable to me, sis."

Amelia took in a deep, erratic breath. "I'm sorry, Paxton. I'm sorry for a lot of things. Like I said, I was young and foolish, but past mistakes do not make me a villainess."

"No; but your coming here under the request of the Stantons, thinking that you can separate me from Elizabeth and orchestrate my downfall does. You are no more estranged to your husband than I am to

Elizabeth. You are madly in love with that scoundrel and always will be, I reckon."

Her pretty face displayed a look of incredulity, as if she couldn't believe that he'd deciphered her every design.

"Well, that's why you're here isn't it? To help him in any way you can?"

Amelia once again collapsed into a chair. Folding her arms on top of the armrest, she nestled her face in them and conveniently burst into such a fit of tears that she clearly did not have the capacity to reply.

Paxton took Elizabeth's hand and drew her into their bedroom, walking directly over to the open window.

"How did you know?" Elizabeth asked disbelievingly.

He let out a long, despondent sigh. "Elizabeth you cannot know how many similar schemes I've dealt with from my sister and her ilk."

"But do you really have sources within Maxwell's household?"

He laughed almost frantically. "That thought will cause some discord. Maxwell will be wondering who he can't trust and so will everyone else involved."

"Your own sister against you? How could you have expected that?"

"Well, I never did finish telling you the story about my sister and Mr. Fenton Stanton." He appeared quite reluctant to start.

"Not long after I'd seen the atrocity of what happened to Lonny and Rachel, I decided to dedicate myself to becoming a bounty-hunter; my first hunt being their killer, of course. Jeremiah Shearer was, to say the least, an inimitable challenge and I was very green, even with Jack's help. My pursuit of Shearer was an invaluable education for me, albeit an unpleasant, unpredictable and perilous one.

Shearer was an evil man who delighted in the brutal ruination and despair of others. He was a villain without equal in my estimation. He wasn't particularly hard to track because of the carnage he left behind, like bread crumbs on his trail; murders, seductions, thefts, and swindles among them. I studied his plots in hopes of it being easier to bring him to justice. But he was incredibly difficult to catch or corner. I'd been on his trail for roughly three months when I heard the news that my mother had died of an illness.

The news hit me harder than you'd expect since I hadn't seen her for several years, but we'd kept up correspondence until the time I'd begun to hunt for Jeremiah. I'd been so preoccupied with my search for him that I didn't notice there were no forwarded letters or telegrams from home.

A couple days after I received the news of my mother's passing, I got a telegram stating that my sister was coming to America and desired to see me and my father. Now, I faced a new dilemma; I was so worried about her coming especially after all I'd been through and seen. I wanted to make sure I could protect her, which is a common brotherly instinct, but I believe there was more to it. Perhaps, deep down I felt that it would somehow make up for my failure to protect Rachel. I wasn't necessarily afraid she would be murdered or raped by some outlaw, although the chances of that happening were a reality, but I was more afraid of what was hiding in the secluded recesses or concealed in the

undercurrent of the country. Our means of enforcing the law was then and still is, you must admit, inadequate.

I pictured her becoming victim to the several varieties of prowlers, some more dangerous than the common outlaw, that feasted on innocence and preyed upon naivety. Men like Jeremiah Shearer, who appeared to be upstanding, law-abiding citizens but were not.

Luckily for me, I was able to capture Shearer, which is another story, before my sister arrived. When she finally came over from England, I felt a deepening concern for her. I'd already witnessed and dealt with my share of predators, and I don't mean the kind that walk on all fours and have fur. I was worried my sister, having come from a supposedly more civilized England, would be as ill-equipped to cope with the Americas as my father had been.

I took a very protective stance over her, knowing my father would not. Aside from my reservations, I was very excited to see her again and didn't anticipate any awkward feelings between us. We'd always been so close and had written to one another faithfully. I'd noticed in the last few years before her arrival her letters had been few and far between, but I just assumed that she was busy. I was wrong. When she walked off the ship I felt I was greeting a complete stranger. True, she had grown and become a beautiful, young lady, but I mean more than just appearance. We were two estranged siblings standing on the dock wondering what on earth we were doing there.

You see, as I matured I'd come to the conclusion that my father was a perfect scoundrel. He'd cleverly belittle you and make you feel you'd never quite reach his level or win his approval. Backhanded stabs and wily insults were common with him, but were so subtle in nature that I had been entirely unaware of it through my youth. He was a master manipulator for his own ends. Memory is a funny thing. My mother had known about him and in her own way had warned me. I was too young at the time to understand her; *'You make your own way, Paxton, and watch your father, no matter what he says or does, remember you can do anything, be anything you want. Follow your heart, be strong.'* She'd patted me on the head and told me I was a good boy and that she loved me very much.

It must have literally broken her heart to watch me go. She was a beautiful, wondrous woman, Elizabeth, fair-minded, well-balanced and I say this with no self-conceit, I took after her. My sister, on the other hand, took after my father and I subconsciously realized that -- there on the dock that day. You saw a bit of it tonight, her sly comments on your taste, cooking, appearance and stature. She's very devious. It's interesting how each of us took after the parent we weren't with."

Elizabeth nodded, replaying all of Amelia's comments and remembering her own reactions to them. She realized Paxton was exactly right. Amelia had belittled her and played on her lack of self-confidence in every possible way. Cooking, housekeeping, and appearance were at the heart of every young woman. Elizabeth was certain these three areas were where most women felt inadequate. Well, at least she did, and thinking back to what memories she had of her mother, she was sure she had too. Older women with more experience never stopped bragging about these three skills, which was probably their way of expressing triumph or else their

own deep-seeded insecurities. Amelia either had the talent of sniffing out fear and acting on it, just like a blood hound, or she'd come to the same conclusion as Elizabeth.

"Regardless of our awkward greeting on the dock, I still loved my sister and wanted the best for her. She was very head-strong and obstinate and would fight me on absolutely everything. Her excuse was that we were the same age and ergo I had no right to tell her what to do. Of course, when in trouble she expected me to bail her out, which I often did. Most of her dilemmas were manageable, though painful and/or embarrassing; she'd been taken advantage of by a gambler or romanced by a swindler, who'd tricked money out of her and then abandoned her. I often got her money back, and luckily, because of my status as a bounty-hunter, double benefited. Not only was I getting her money back but I was also collecting the bounty on a thief.

Once Fenton Stanton met my sister I knew I was in for a whole new sort of trouble. He was definitely a villain, but one with false dignity and a singular type of cunning. He wasn't your average crook. I first met him in a Poker game, a game that I actually won. After that, I often ended up playing Poker with him, probably by his own design. I suppose he both resented and admired my skill, because I'd beaten him on more than one occasion, but he still wanted to play me every time he saw me. He wasn't the sort of man who was used to being read well enough to be conquered. My ability to beat him both frightened and fascinated him, I think -- a moth to a flame, you know. Through casual conversation I discovered Fenton's addiction to Poker and that he looked at me as his only challenge. I was remotely flattered; I had no reason to feel threatened.

A few months later, he personally invited me to a large resort where he was sponsoring a weekend Poker tournament. There was to be a substantial prize that obviously everyone was vying for. Both Fenton and I ended up at the final table. A few hands flew by and then he went all in and I just happened to have a pair of fours and the ability to see right through him. Turns out all he had in his hand was an ace high and that ended the tournament for him -- there were no buy-backs."

Paxton kissed his wife's hand gently. "He evidently despised me for this, and took on a new obsession -- revenge against me. Apparently, I was the only player who had ever been able to beat him consistently. From what I heard, he never played Poker again after that; he must have really resented me.

I ran in to Mr. Fenton Stanton quite often after the tournament and in the most uncomfortable ways. He was never rude but had a way of wreaking havoc for me wherever I was. At first things were too petty to worry about, things that only a highly influential man like Fenton could bring about. For example, he caused several store owners and clerks to reject my credit and the sheriff became unwilling to share any information with me about possible jobs, etcetera. Fenton must've found his trivial attempts to cause me trouble not satisfying enough, particularly since I showed no signs of anxiety or discomfort.

I went on the trail for a couple of months to work on my skills and get away from the city and, quite frankly, Fenton. When I returned it

was to the frightening realization that Fenton Stanton was dating my sister. He schemed so vindictively and kept her absolutely fixated with him while treating her abhorrently. I tried to separate them without being overbearing, but he'd done a thorough job of turning Amelia, who was already not very fond of me, against me. I saw that I was just pushing her closer to him with my protests, so I gave up and hoped that she would come to her senses. Then, as you may remember from the conversation earlier, my own sister waylaid me, whacked me over the head with a shovel knocking me out cold, and stole every last cent I had on me.

Following that incident, I decided I needed to get as far away from my family as possible. So, I ventured out away from the city and wandered in the wilderness or rural areas; capturing criminals, investigating landscapes, properties, anything to remain elusive and undetectable to them. I heard word my sister and Fenton had eloped, which disturbed me but what could I do?

Those were wild times for me, Elizabeth; times I'd rather not remember. At least now, you have the long and short of it, and perhaps can understand why I'm so quick to suspect my sister. Her attack on me was unexpected and unwarranted. Yes, I would have fought against her marrying Fenton, but I loved her enough that I would've helped her if she'd asked -- as I always had."

An intense pain crept into his eyes and he was silent for a long while. Eventually, Paxton unfolded his arms and looked at his beloved. "That is in the past and is best left there. Things are quite different now. I'd better go out there and make sure she's comfortable for the night. I guess we have a lot to talk about -- that is if she wants to." He left the room.

Elizabeth waited for several moments, but when the front door slammed she exited the bedroom and found the house empty. Calculating that her dear sister-in-law had probably run off and Paxton had gone in search of her, she sighed. Feeling alone and very anxious, she wanted something to take her mind off the evening's unfortunate events. She hated to see any pain on her husband's face and tonight she'd seen plenty, and she could do little to ease it.

She turned and went into the kitchen, deciding that now would be a good time to see what the contents of the cocoa jar were. She opened the cupboard and immediately realized it was gone and there was no question in her mind as to who had taken it.

Paxton entered the house announcing, "She's gone."

"Paxton!" Elizabeth cried. "She took the jar of cocoa!"

Chapter Nineteen

Maxwell propped his chin on his fist and looked at his brother with mild disapproval as he waited for him to make his next move. Chess had always been a favourite pastime of the mayor's, except when he played against his brother. Fenton was an absolute tortoise when it came to his turn. The mayor often utilized the lengthy amount of time to plot his subsequent stratagem by analyzing the various moves his brother could maneuver; however, Fenton usually took so long to make his move that Maxwell frequently forgot his plans, and ended up losing out of sheer boredom. The mayor was fairly certain this was his elder brother's intention and so comforted himself with the knowledge that he was the better chess player because his brother resorted to devious means in order to win.

Maxwell sighed loudly, causing Fenton to glance up at him and smirk roguishly. "Patience is a virtue, my dear brother," he critiqued.

Maxwell bared his teeth in what Fenton thought was supposed to pass for a smile. "You know, Fenton, I think you would find a timed game challenging enough even for your formidable skills. Perhaps we should play a timed game?"

Fenton slid a pawn forward and leaned back in his chair, "Perhaps."

Maxwell retaliated instantly by capturing the pawn with his knight.

Observing the move, Fenton surveyed the chess board. "Maxwell," he smiled wickedly, "...it is just like you to forget that a pawn, if properly used, can win the game." He moved his queen into a highly coveted position, which was previously unattainable due to the threat the knight had posed and said triumphantly, "Checkmate."

Maxwell sneered, knocking his king over with a careless gesture. "Tomorrow we shall try a timed game and see how much your pawns help you then."

The clock struck midnight and as if on cue, the front door burst open and seconds later Amelia Stanton entered the living room.

"Good evening, Gentlemen." she greeted.

Deputy Howard sauntered in behind her, removed his hat, and enjoyed the bewildered looks of both the mayor and his brother.

Fenton stood up and smiled graciously. "Dearest, we did not expect you back so soon."

Amelia lifted her cheek for him to kiss and then sat down. "I felt that my brother would be slightly suspicious of my arrival after his tussle with Maxwell. So I made sure I had the wonderful deputy here in on the plan. I wanted back-up if there was any trouble; which there

was."

Fenton lifted an eyebrow, "Trouble? Of what sort?"

"Paxton knew everything."

"He knew everything, eh?" Maxwell stood up and walked over to the window. "How is that possible?"

Amelia put a graceful hand to her heart, "Well, obviously, my dear brother-in-law, you have a snitch in your operation."

Maxwell fingered his chin in contemplation.

Deputy Howard, while looking at Amelia, piped up, "True enough, Mr. Mayor! Mrs. Fenton here met me at my office and told me of yer plan to cause trouble between Paxton Reign and his missus. And, just so's you know, I think having Mrs. Stanton pretend Mr. Stanton here was gonna try an' bump her off was a brilliant plan. Anyways, Amelia asked me to come along and keep an eye out. I heard everything."

In his rough, western accent, Howard reiterated what had happened in the Reign's home between Amelia, her brother and Elizabeth from start to finish. "Mrs. Stanton tried to get some sympathy by crying, but Paxton just ignored her and done pulled Elizabeth away into another room. I heard his voice coming from an open window. Since Mrs. Fenton were indisposed, I reckoned I'd go over to the bedroom window and listen in.

Paxton didn't say who the spy was though -- rather hazy on that point. He did tell this big ol'tale about his past with yer brother and Mrs. Amelia. Said he wouldn't trust her again no way, no how. All's I can say, fellas, is that Mrs. Amelia done the best she could. She sure didn't have much of a chance against the likes of Paxton Reign. That fella's more cunning than a wily, ol'fox."

Amelia smiled kindly at the deputy as he finished his report. Her face began to shine with a victorious countenance as she dipped a dainty hand into her small, floral valise and pattered around.

"I did manage to get the coveted item, though."

Fenton's expression brightened with anticipation. "You located the jar of cocoa, then?"

"Yes. It wasn't hidden. I found it in her cupboard."

She lifted the container labeled Star Cocoa out of her handbag and placed it carefully on the coffee table.

"I hope it's something to help our cause," Maxwell said, eyeing the labelled jar sceptically.

"It's what Elizabeth went to the house for," Fenton interjected, "...at least according to her own words. I thought it suspicious that she'd take the trouble of returning to the ranch, daring the odds of running into you, just for a jar of cocoa. I opened the jar then and there, but it yielded nothing but cocoa and very good cocoa at that. I dismissed her, but as I watched her leave I started feeling as though I should've inspected the jar further."

Amelia breathed out a sigh, "Well now you can, Fenton."

Fenton suppressed a childish grin and twisted the lid from the jar.

Maxwell barked an order for Ellister to fetch an empty jar from the pantry. Carefully, emptying the chocolate powder into the other glass jar, Amelia held her breath as Fenton examined the Star Cocoa jar closely. After a brief moment, his face fell and he distastefully handed

the jar to his wife.

"Nothing," he shrugged. "Either it truly was cocoa or Elizabeth has already taken whatever else it contained."

"Maybe we should sift the cocoa?" Deputy Howard suggested.

"No," Fenton mused, taking the jar again. "Elizabeth's had it for a while and probably looted it already. For all we know it might not even be the right jar. Amelia said it wasn't hidden and Star Cocoa is common enough, though this is an old label," he conceded, staring at the jar ponderously. His hands rotated it round and round, and then he placed the scrutinized object on the table begrudgingly.

He put his arm around Amelia's waist, "Don't blame yourself, my dear, you did the best you could. The fault is mine." Inwardly, he cursed himself for allowing Elizabeth's beauty to dull his wits that day at the ranch. "I should've confiscated the container the instant I saw it."

"No matter," Maxwell responded to his brother's self-criticism with a slight grin. "I'm sure the contents of that jar, if they were anything other than cocoa, would've meant little to us anyhow."

Fenton eyed him pessimistically. "Are you? Are you really?"

The younger Stanton stood up, yawned and stretched. "Indeed I am, brother. What could a jar of cocoa hold anyways? A note? A key? Even *dissecting* the jar," he put special emphasis on the word 'dissecting,' "...before the lovely Elizabeth, would've exposed nothing of any real consequence -- I'm sure. Amelia, I appreciate your efforts on my behalf but..."

Amelia's interrupting titter held no mirth. "Deputy Howard, I appreciate your assistance this evening. I'm truly sorry I couldn't offer you something a little juicier at the end of our tiny intrigue." She tilted her head slightly and exhaled delicately. "Please be assured I didn't mean to waste your valuable time."

Recognizing the obvious dismissal, the deputy placed his hat back on his head and tipped it in her direction, "Helping you weren't no waste, ma'am." He expressed his farewells to the others, and sauntered off.

After Howard had left, Amelia addressed her brother-in-law gravely. "Maxwell, I don't think you understand that neither our ingenuity nor resourcefulness can solve your problem."

"Amelia," Fenton began.

"My brother Paxton is a cunning man in his own right and his guard is up," she continued, ignoring her husband. "Whether, through a spy or his own deduction, he figured out my entire plan the moment I arrived at his ranch.

You've exhausted all of your designs, and your attempts to woo Elizabeth are utterly futile because she absolutely loathes you. She's no fool, though she may be more naive than my brother. It was obvious to me upon meeting her that not only is she beautiful; she is a determined and intelligent girl. Your chance of winning her is about as likely as your chance of raising someone from the dead. Might I suggest that you find another preoccupation?"

Fenton shifted uneasily in his chair and Maxwell stared at her in awkward silence.

"Perhaps an unmarried woman, with less ability to reason and think for herself? There are plenty around here surely!"

Maxwell raked his fingers through his dark hair and balled them into fists. His knuckles turned white and the hair between his fingers went taut.

His countenance took on the look of a maniac as he mused aloud, "You are right of course. I should've admitted defeat long before this. I cannot make Elizabeth Dalton -- Reign fall in love with me, and I can't make her marry me. But maybe I don't need to do either..."

Amelia squeezed her slender hands together tightly. "I do hope, Maxwell, that you aren't considering what I think you're considering, because there's no way I will stand by and allow that to happen!"

Maxwell removed a cigar from his jacket pocket, offered one to his brother, lit both of them and looked at his sister-in-law reproachfully. "I would not even consider murdering Elizabeth, Amelia."

"That's not quite what I was referring to and you are certainly aware of that!" Cold icy contempt dripped on every syllable she articulated. "I will not be privy to the ravishing or physical harm of Elizabeth Reign."

Fenton, who'd been listening to the discourse with some intensity, cut in, "Quite right -- Rape is a dreadful business! I will have no part of it!" He patted his brother's shoulder condescendingly. "It is beneath us Stantons to even think of such a thing!"

Maxwell collapsed into the first available chair and sulked conspicuously. "I would never have thought of raping the lovely Elizabeth, or any other girl for that matter. I'm not that evil!" He glared at the two of them accusingly. "I'm absolutely astounded you two would even believe I could concoct such a horrendous plan. I was merely considering banishing them from my town so I can stop thinking about her. If she's entirely out of my reach (in more ways than one) it'd be easier to move on and besides, if I succeed in exiling them, I won't have to feel totally conquered."

"You could order the bank to foreclose on their mortgage," Amelia suggested.

Maxwell waved his hand at her impatiently. "I've already thought of that. The Reigns bought their land outright. They have no mortgage to foreclose."

"Well you are mayor; can't you just ask them to leave?" Ellister, whom no one knew had been listening, broke his silent vigil.

Maxwell chuckled. "You would think so, wouldn't you, however; in this town Paxton has about as much, if not more, respect and admiration as I do. I'd need a very good and convincing reason to force them to leave, and judging by his reactions to our schemes thus far, I highly doubt he'd leave his ranch just because I asked him to." A slight hum escaped his lips as he mused. "I'd definitely have to have a very good reason to banish them..."

Consciously and carefully, Maxwell placed each chess piece back in its original position on the board. "So it's back to the beginning again but with a different end in mind. I'll not have Elizabeth as my wife and her wretched husband dead, but both of them exiled, preferably to some

awful wasteland. A wasteland with crocodiles, mosquito infested swamps, a scorching temperature, and natives willing to shoot them at first glimpse. Yes," he pondered aloud, "...a land in which they can barely survive and then perhaps she will abandon him and come crawling back to me."

"I highly doubt that," Amelia interrupted his delusions matter-of-factly.

Fenton toyed absentmindedly with his pocket watch. "You can hardly control where you expel them to -- even if you should succeed in doing so."

Maxwell expelled an aggravated groan, clearing the chess board with one sweep of his arm. The wooden pieces clattered to the floor and rolled to obscure places of the room.

"I know that, you fools! Can't you just let me have one moment? Leave me!" he commanded tersely. "You're all useless!" He waited with a contemptuous expression until his order was obeyed and then his entire body sagged with total dejection.

Making sure all the living room lights were extinguished, Maxwell closed the etched-glass doors behind him and entered the parlour. He went directly to the bar and poured himself a large glass of whiskey and downed it quickly. His body shuddered slightly as the drink hit him. He slumped against the bar, his head resting on his hand. His mind reeled with the evening's events and what they meant. He wondered if he'd missed anything. Was there really a snitch? If so, who was it? Did Amelia really hate Fenton as she'd previously declared or was this just one of his brother's sick games? Maxwell knew Fenton always set up some sort of plot of his own (a type of insurance policy) but with his head swimming and his senses dulling (due to the combination of exhaustion and alcohol), the mayor couldn't fathom a single conspiracy. He gulped another glass of whiskey and stared at his reflection in the parlour window; Ellister had obviously neglected to draw the curtains.

Maxwell blinked in hopes of clearing his blurred vision. Age must be a factor, he was even more certain of it as he looked at his mirrored image. He was too old for these games; his senses were not as keen as they once were. With yet another sip, this time from the bottle, Maxwell sulkily acknowledged that even his brother was too old for these games and that was the reason all their plotting had come to naught.

The mayor briefly contemplated retirement, not only from his political position, but from his conniving as well; these thoughts left him petrified and totally unsure of what he would do next. What a tragic story his life was turning out to be. Musing over his life, facing himself figuratively and literally was something Maxwell had never done before, at least not without a specific directive in mind. He shuddered again but this time it was not because of the strength of his whiskey.

"So pensive, Maxwell? I hope you're not feeling sorry for yourself." Amelia's voice was soft, and yet, strangely sharp.

He chuckled to himself, swirling his fingertip along the edge of his empty glass. "Not at all, I assure you." Maxwell turned to face her and his heart began to pound at the sight. She stood in the entranceway of the parlour in her robe. Beneath the sheer fabric of the robe, just

barely visible, was a long, satin nightdress. She was by no means indecent, but there was something deeply seductive about the way the pearl white satin caressed her skin and outlined her curves.

"Having a hard time getting to sleep?" he asked, trying to remain nonchalant. "Would you like to join me for a drink?"

Guardedly, she entered the parlour and a line from an old poem about a spider luring a fly into his web sprung to his mind. "*Will you walk into my parlour?*" *Said a spider to a fly...*" he intoned under his breath. Only he was not quite certain just who was the fly and who was the spider.

"Pardon me?" She glanced at him inquisitively as she seated herself beside him at the bar.

"Whiskey?" he sidetracked her with the bottle.

She nodded and he graciously poured her a glass and watched as she drank it.

She gazed up at him with alluring, blue eyes that hypnotized him. He was entirely unconscious of how close he had leaned in toward her.

"What were you thinking so seriously about before I disturbed you?" Amelia turned away from him and smiled peculiarly.

Maxwell, realizing with horror that his lips had scarcely avoided kissing his sister-in-law's, immediately began to examine his glass with false intensity. "Please don't refer to yourself as a disruption," he murmured and then topped up their tumblers. "Nothing of any particular interest to you, I'm sure."

"You appeared so contemplative," she coaxed.

"I was merely pondering my life thus far." His response made him feel vulnerable.

"Indeed?" Amelia's voice audibly perked up with avid curiosity. "No doubt a consequence of the day's revelations; what conclusion did you arrive at, or did I interrupt you before you had come to one?"

"My infatuation with Elizabeth is over. I do not wish to have anything more to do with the Reigns. My entire obsession was utterly childish, not to mention foolish. You alerted me to that." He smiled sadly at her. "I've no desire to conceal that I've been, and probably always will be, a devious man. Admittedly, I have manipulated, bullied, threatened and even injured to get my way, but I've never committed murder."

Amelia decided against enlightening him as to Elizabeth's thoughts on that point.

"At this moment, I'm mortified to think I almost caused the death -- murdered an innocent man," he downed another tumbler full, "...and because of a woman. Everything I've done lately is because of a woman. I've neglected my business and political affairs disgracefully. My father would be ashamed of me -- I'm ashamed of me. No doubt, my brother is entertained by my stupidity," he shook his head ruefully.

"Believe me, Maxwell, you aren't the first man to do outrageous things because of a woman and you most certainly won't be the last," Amelia declared soothingly.

Chuckling to himself, he lamented, "Look at me! Sharing my feelings with a woman!"

There was a brief silence while Maxwell looked at her meaningfully and then the atmosphere became very charged, "...but not just any woman; to the woman who forced me to open my power-hungry eyes and see the shocking reality of what a disgusting soul I am. Amelia, you have...liberated me."

Edging away and feeling somewhat uncomfortable, she laughed, "Maxwell, you've had too much to drink!"

He seized her shoulders dramatically and turned her to face him. "That only unshackles my true feelings and conquers my inability to express them."

"Come to complete your plan, Amelia?"

Amelia gasped at the unexpected question coming from a voice other than Maxwell's. She quickly removed herself from the latter's grip which had slackened at the sound of the voice.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Fenton," she said acidly, redirecting her slight frame to face the entrance where he stood, leaning against the doorway.

Hands in pockets, Fenton sauntered over to the bar. "My dear girl, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Maxwell's explosive guffaw shattered the awkward silence and caused his sibling and sister-in-law to stare at him questioningly. The entire intrigue had just come springing to his intoxicated mind as if he'd known about it all along. In his drunken state, he could not quite figure out how he'd subconsciously dissected the plan or where the evidence was. Foggily, he reasoned he was able to put the pieces together because he was drunk. Enraged at having been so foolishly and obviously duped, Maxwell decided to approach his accusations with a less orthodox method.

"Fenton, if you are referring to Amelia's design to seduce me thereby executing her dual purpose of exacting revenge on you, and distracting me from her brother's wife, well, I don't think such a plan ever inhabited Amelia's mind. Such a devious, perverted, yet extraordinarily adroit plot couldn't have come from a mere woman. Besides, Amelia's conscience would not allow her to carry out such a plan; she loves you too much to sleep with your brother."

Moments after his rather indecipherable speech, Amelia's exquisite mouth dropped open in astonishment. "Is that what you thought I was doing?" she protested feebly.

Maxwell smirked drunkenly, "Furthermore, Amelia would most vehemently deny her resolute declarations of hatred toward her brother have altered somewhat of late, or were in fact falsified from the very beginning. Recently uncovered feelings of deep admiration and love for her brother are absolutely out of the question. It's highly unlikely Amelia subconsciously felt any guilt about the past and the way she treated a brother, who she came to realize had only her best interests at heart. Amelia desiring and succeeding to thwart my ambitions for Elizabeth - incomprehensible!

Inwardly, she must've known better than to allow herself to be torn between her husband and her estranged brother." Maxwell paused for effect and to pour Fenton a glass of whiskey. "Have this; you need it.

Amelia would never have purposefully rebelled against both of our wishes. No, the very idea of Amelia thinking and feeling this way is

virtually impossible. Truly brother, I'd be shocked to discover Amelia deliberately forewarned her brother of our plans and deluded our dear deputy into being her witness of sincerity. She certainly isn't capable of using her talents to inspire trust for her own ends, and with intent to betray. Our snitch, Fenton, is most definitely not your beautiful and reliable wife. Is that the plan to which you were referring, Fenton?"

Fenton sighed loudly. "Maxwell, you were never any good at making elaborate, dramatic or comprehensible accusations when you've had too much to drink. Let me see if I've got this right..." Fenton took his hands out of his pockets, and with a look of complete detachment began to translate his brother's entire speech. "You believe Amelia has secretly hated me all of these years, and feels guilty for past actions against her brother Paxton, which according to you, she feels were facilitated by me. So, she orchestrated a complicated design to spoil our plans, help her brother and cause an even larger rift between us by seducing you? Correct?"

Maxwell took another gulp of his drink and nodded. "Well, isn't what you're accusing her of also?"

"No. Actually, I was referring to Amelia having surreptitiously concealed a bottle of gin from your bar on her way to bed this evening." He displayed a small bottle in the pocket of his robe (as he continued it was apparent that Maxwell's verbosity had rubbed off on him). "I caught her attempting to drink away her sorrow. I can only surmise her distress is a result of having botched her task to aid us, and to dupe her brother. Failing left her with a bitter taste in her mouth, a taste she desired to drown with gin. Since I do not approve of heavy drinking, on any occasion, I confiscated the bottle and ordered her to bed. I fell asleep, but awoke later to find her gone. I immediately supposed she disobeyed me and came downstairs to complete her plan of getting inebriated."

Amelia giggled nervously and then batted her eyelashes bewitchingly at her companions. "Of that, I admit I am culpable." She seized the bottle from the mayor's hand and took a swig despite her husband's look of disapproval. "I'm simply guilty of being unable to sleep and craving some comfort."

My, my, but don't you two talk strangely when drinking. I've had trouble keeping up with what either of you is saying."

Maxwell sniggered callously. "See, Fenton, a total innocent; without any cognizant intention of fully defying your instructions. She certainly is not a deceptive wife with her own agenda."

"Maxwell, your imagination, as well as your language, are truly fascinating." Amelia's voice was light and airy. "Your subtle accusation is preposterous, while being somewhat flattering. Your brother gives me too much credit, Fenton, fancy that," she purred, as she slid the bottle of gin from his pocket. "Maxwell, do you really think so much of me? That I could concoct such a cunning and ingenious scheme and confound not only one of you, but both of you?" She opened the bottle of gin and topped up all of their glasses with ease and lifted her tumbler in a salute. "Fenton, one more drink won't do us any harm."

Fenton chuckled, conceding and clinked his brother's glass

enthusiastically. Maxwell refused to perform the gesture of a toast.

"Yes, Max, be serious! Can you honestly picture Amelia being able to pull the wool over our eyes like that?" He guzzled his drink, unaware of the covert glare his wife was giving him.

Neither Maxwell nor Fenton noted that she avoided her drink while they imbibed heavily on two or more glasses.

Maxwell shrugged, feeling shaky in his resolve. Amelia appeared calm and unruffled by his allegations, and he'd failed to convince his brother of her guilt. Fenton was biased, probably blinded by his intimate relationship with the accused. Certainly, Amelia might be an excellent actress, but perhaps she was innocent. Maxwell's determination was wavering with every passing moment. The mayor was feeling increasingly tired and groggy, uncommonly groggy, as if he could simply lie down on the floor and pass out. He turned his glass upside down on the bar with a loud clank, and swayed a little when he slid off his barstool.

"Well, perhaps my imagination did run away with me tonight. My apologies, Amelia, Fenton; good night all," he managed and lurched from the room without a backward glance.

Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth went over to the cupboard, and just in case the jar had been misplaced, desperately searched its contents.

"It's the only connection I have to my father and now it's gone!"

She felt Paxton's hand on her shoulder. Turning around to voice further complaints, she saw his index finger over his mouth. He led her over to the table and bade her sit down. Jabbing his hand into his pocket, he extracted a folded piece of paper and placed it on the table in front of her. His mouth formed the word 'read' silently. She unfolded the paper and saw three lines written in beautiful but obviously hurried handwriting.

I am coming, a spy in tow to witness my sincerity. Forgive my past, but remember it. I'll be just like daddy.

The ranch's loot must come with me, you understand why.

My love,

S. Wolfe

Elizabeth refolded the paper and handed it back to Paxton. "I don't understand," she whispered. "Who is S. Wolfe?"

Paxton scanned the room and the windows, and once feeling it was safe, replied in a lowered voice, "Stephanie Wolfe was my mother's maiden name."

"But, Paxton, you told me your mother was dead," Elizabeth retorted, exasperated with all the twists and turns she'd been enduring.

"She is! My sister sent this note in code just in case it was discovered. I received it the day before she arrived."

Elizabeth's mouth fell open as she figured out just what the note meant. "You mean that entire show with your sister was an act to fool some spy sent by Stanton?"

Paxton's head tilted to one side. "Sort of, I'm sure some true resentment manifested itself, but the overall episode was a performance for the benefit of a spy, yes.

You see everything I told you in our bedroom about our past was true except that Amelia is apparently not against us. I alone could decipher the note and its true meaning, because only my sister and I know enough of our past to figure it out." He stuck a finger at the signed name at the bottom of the note. "Amelia likely never told Fenton our mother's

maiden name and here..." he gestured to the first line of the note and read it aloud, "'I am coming, a spy in tow to witness my sincerity.' That line alone tells me volumes but when coupled with, 'Forgive my past, but remember it. I'll be just like daddy.' I know everything."

"She is telling you she wants to make peace but her hands are tied because of her husband and his brother. When she says, 'I'll be just like daddy...' Elizabeth paused, trying to interpret the meaning of the sentence.

Paxton was obviously excited that his wife was putting the clues together just as he had earlier. "Amelia, in a roundabout way, was informing me of the scheme. I used to argue with her all the time about father. I tried to tell her what I'd figured out about him. I told her how her behaviour resembled his belittling, his scheming, and his cruel manipulation." Paxton raked a hand through his hair. "Maybe she sees it now. At any rate, I understood the hint instantly. She'd been told to come here, and undermine us and our relationship."

Elizabeth scowled at the reminder the last line contained. "Paxton you might have let me in on your little scheme. Now, the Stantons have the jar of cocoa -- my last hope of contact with my father and I didn't even see it."

"Darling," Paxton intoned, his face flushing with guilt. He scratched his head, evidently searching for a way to tell Elizabeth something important. "Dearest, you didn't know, but I was watching the way you were with that jar, and you know as well as I did it would've taken you weeks to get up the gumption to open it. When I got the note from my sister, I couldn't tell you about it because I didn't know who the spy was going to be or if there'd be more than one and everything had to be as realistic as possible."

Elizabeth's eyes suddenly blazed. "You opened the jar, didn't you?"

He gulped and nodded.

She jumped to her feet, her face emblazoned and her chest heaving with the effort of control. "Why, Paxton Reign, I am...I can't...I just...I don't think I can speak to you right now!" With that declaration she stomped out of the room.

Paxton sighed, both relieved and surprised, considering his transgression, he'd gotten off easily. He stood up, his shoulders heavy and walked toward the bedroom where Elizabeth had barricaded the door. Even though he was male, and admitted to himself freely that his emotions and thought processes would never even come close to that of a woman's, he could somewhat fathom the emotions that his wife was enduring at that moment. He knocked softly on the door, trying to solve a further dilemma of just how he was going to acquaint his wife with even more bad news.

"Elizabeth, I know you're madder than a swarm of bees right now..."

There was a loud thud, resembling the sound of an infuriated woman stomping her foot.

"Timing and secrecy was of vital importance, surely you must understand that. How could I deny or endanger my sister when she'd stuck her neck out in such a way? I'm certain her claim that her husband wanted to kill her would become true if he found out she'd double-crossed him. I couldn't send her back empty-handed." His neck and shoulder

muscles tightened as he contemplated the evening's events. "Her plan was quite clever actually."

Something slammed against the door.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you, and I took away the anticipation of opening the jar yourself."

There was another slam, not as forceful as the first, and Paxton surmised that his wife was kicking the door as a means of dealing with her frustration and disappointment. "Lizzy, if Amelia hadn't come, if she'd refused to have anything to do with the plans, we'd still be in danger, and ignorant of what Fenton and Maxwell were up to. The Stantons would have devised another attack, and we would've had no warning. Perhaps one of us wouldn't have made it through this time. You know what the mayor is capable of. Amelia prevented us from coming to harm. Please, open the door, Elizabeth."

There was a long pause while Paxton waited patiently on one side of the door and Elizabeth dealt with her feelings on the other. Finally, the door opened and Elizabeth, her hands on her waist and her toe tapping impatiently, appeared in the opening.

Paxton remembered his mother looking much the same way when he'd been naughty and she expected an apology and the situation rectified.

He secretly wondered if every woman enacted this stance when they were irritated beyond all expression and were silently demanding some form of retribution or remedy.

"Honey, I found absolutely nothing in the jar of cocoa. I practically dismembered the jar and cocoa was all it contained." He winced at his own words. Having desired to lessen his wife's distress as much as possible, he'd wanted to tell her in a more delicate and gentle manner, but her toe tapping had compelled him into an outright and rather blunt confession. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth."

The type of paleness that only accompanies some form of trauma immediately replaced the red stains of anger on her face.

"Nothing?" she repeated hollowly, squeezing the door handle until her knuckles were white.

"Perhaps your father forgot about the jar." Paxton's voice perked up as he considered another possibility. "Maybe there was more than one jar in the basement and you simply took the wrong one. After all, you were distracted by Fenton's arrival."

She shook her head glumly, went over to their bed and dropped herself onto it. "There was only one, Pax, and the jar I had was definitely the one my father showed me when I was younger. We put it in that exact spot together. It wasn't noticeable unless you already knew it was there."

Paxton sat beside her and rubbed her back soothingly. "Elizabeth, you and I, we have a bright future ahead of us. Perhaps it's time for you to put the past where it belongs -- in the past. You know your father loved you."

Tears streamed down her face as she lamented, "I won't ever be able to bring his murderer to justice, Pax."

When Lonny and Rachel were killed what made you want to stop the man who was responsible? Your fixation with Jeremiah Shearer wasn't only

because you desired to prevent further crimes, but was also the way you dealt with your pain. I'm sure you remember the absolute elation and sense of justice you felt when you brought him in. Now, imagine you were denied that, as I have been denied that.

How can I look forward to the future when we live in an area governed by the very man who murdered my father; a man who seems bent on interfering with that very future?"

"Dearest, Stanton can't hassle us forever. Eventually, he'll see how futile his efforts are and look to other pursuits; I'm sure Amelia will help him in this. Most evil men get caught eventually and so will Stanton, maybe not for the murder of your father, but for some other crime.

Furthermore, your father wouldn't want you dwelling on such depressing things. You must decide not to allow his killer to figuratively end your life as well. That would only add to the tragedy inflicted by Maxwell Stanton."

Sitting up and facing him, Elizabeth inwardly acknowledged the wisdom of his words. She took a deep breath and then in a symbolic gesture attempted to rid herself of all her resentment, hatred and frustration with one elongated exhalation.

"Alright, Pax, it is time to move on with my life -- with our lives!" She squeezed his hand gratefully. "I really wish my Father could have known you."

Chapter Twenty One

Maxwell got up woozily, his head was pounding something fierce and his body was reluctant to move. He shoved the covers off him and winced at the bright sunlight that peeked through a crack in his curtains. Grabbing for his robe, he scowled when there was a knock at the door.

"What?"

Ellister entered the room with a breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Sir; or rather good afternoon. You've slept in quite late today. It is almost four o'clock," he announced, placing the tray down.

Maxwell selected a piece of toast and sipped the cup of tea. "Is everyone else up?" he asked.

"I just discovered your brother asleep at the bar in the parlour, Sir. It was hard to awaken him. You all must have had quite a night."

Maxwell's eyebrows lifted, "Humph." 'Fenton and Amelia must have quarreled or something,' he thought. "Have you seen her?"

"Mrs. Stanton, Sir?"

"No, the Queen of Sheba -- of course, Mrs. Stanton!"

Ellister shook his head, indicating that he had not. "If that is all, Sir?"

Maxwell shooed him away and took another piece of toast from the tray. He was just about finished his breakfast when there was another knock at his door.

"Yes?" He was less edgy now that he had some food in his stomach.

Fenton entered the room appearing just as rough as Maxwell felt.

"Have you seen, Amelia?" he inquired, and there was just the slightest hint of urgency in his voice.

"Have you lost her?" Maxwell teased, enjoying the opportunity to goad his brother.

"Seems so. All of her things are gone."

Maxwell removed his breakfast tray and stood up, a feeling of foreboding coming over him. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted when Ellister entered the room. The servant promptly informed them that the Sheriff and Mrs. Newton were waiting in the parlour.

"Mrs. Newton? What on earth could she want?" Maxwell pondered aloud. "I should get dressed before meeting anyone," the mayor declared brusquely, discouraged by the morning's series of events. "Tell them I will be right there."

"Who is Mrs. Newton?" Fenton asked.

"My neighbour. Now, if you will allow me to..."

The colour drained from Fenton's face so rapidly that Maxwell worried he was about to pass out. He'd never seen his brother so pale in his whole life. "Fenton?"

"Get dressed and meet me downstairs," was all the eldest Stanton said.

Maxwell found Fenton waiting at the bottom of the stairs and when he started to question him, Fenton merely answered that he had an inkling of what had happened to his wife.

Sheriff John Scythe looked extremely aggravated when Maxwell and Fenton entered the room.

"Where's that woman?" Mrs. Newton shrilled the instant they were in sight.

"Now, now, Mrs. Newton, hold yer horses," the sheriff began.

"Don't you tell me to hold no horses," she retorted stiffly. "That woman has my child! I saw her talking with him earlier this morning and now he's gone and one of our most prized horses gone too! Mr. Mayor, I demand to know where she is!"

Maxwell, still groggy from the night before, couldn't quite grasp what was going on. "I am sorry, Mrs. Newton, to what are you referring?"

The woman grunted, and after a momentary lull started to expostulate until the sheriff cut her off.

"Mrs. Newton's son Justin's done gone missing, along with one of their horses. Mrs. Newton saw Amelia with Justin this morning. I came by earlier and Ellister told me Mrs. Stanton wasn't to be found. Struck me as odd."

"That's right. She's missing cause she's kidnapped my boy. As soon as I heard she were gone I knew it were her. She took my boy. Always saw her watching him from that window o' hers, and at daybreak she were talking wit' him. She's done talked him into leaving with her, I'm certain. My only boy gone." Her eyes blurred with indignant and worried tears. "I searched high and low for him -- thought he might be in the stables and that's when I discovered Boston was missin'."

"Boston's the horse," the sheriff clarified. "This morning, at Mrs. Newton's request, I sent my deputy out to the Reign ranch. Thought Mrs. Stanton might've gone there. Even if she didn't, seems fittin' to fetch the best tracker we have in these parts to look fer her and the missin' boy, doesn't it?"

"I just can't believe this!" The mayor's mind was so preoccupied by the previous evening he didn't even cringe when he heard the surname of his arch nemesis. All of his accusations against Amelia seemed more justified now, but this was no time to look at his brother and say, 'I told you so!'; he had a reputation to uphold. Trying to appear as shocked as possible he said, "Amelia a kidnapper? I never thought..." Maxwell looked at Fenton for support but received none. His brother just stood there, his arms folded, a dark grimace on his face.

"Well, Mr. Mayor, you can bet yer bottom dollar that everybody in town will hear about you harbouring a criminal and all," Mrs. Newton threatened menacingly.

"Let's not jump to no conclusions now," the sheriff cautioned. "We don't know what's happened yet."

"Oh, I know..." without concluding her accusations Mrs. Newton collapsed onto the sofa in a fit of sobs. "My precious boy -- gone!"

Maxwell made his way over to the bar and poured some brandy for her. "Mrs. Newton, calm yourself please! If Amelia's guilty and has your boy, no harm will come to him, I can assure you."

Without an upward glance or even an acknowledgement of his kindness, Mrs. Newton seized the proffered glass of brandy and gulped it down.

"Why? Why my Justin?"

Maxwell shrugged in an unsolicited response, and looked at his elder brother. Fenton's lips didn't part once but they did tighten until they were almost white.

Moments later, Ellister announced the arrival of both the deputy and Paxton Reign, and when asked immediately to do so, admitted them into the parlour.

Deputy Martin, greeted everyone, and respectfully removing his hat informed them that Paxton had been fully briefed on the circumstances at hand.

Paxton coolly acknowledged Fenton and Maxwell with a nod of his head. He then directed his full attention to the mother whose weeping had become increasingly audible. He knelt down beside her and laid his hand gently on hers.

"Ma'am, I will get your boy back, I promise."

Mrs. Newton sniffed loudly and let loose a couple more irrepressible sobs, but seemed somewhat comforted by Paxton's words.

"Mrs. Newton, you must tell me everything relevant to Justin's disappearance. Do you remember anything about this morning that was out of the ordinary?"

"Mr. Newton left before dawn and I was in the kitchen preparing Justin's breakfast. He's usually not up before his father goes ya'see. I just happened to look out the window and I saw her (the lady that was staying here) with Justin."

"What time was that?" the sheriff interjected.

"The sun wasn't up yet. I knows what yer thinking, sheriff, and I tells ya that although it were still dark I knew the lady right off. She's a lady that really stands out, ya know."

"What happened next?" Paxton coaxed.

"Well they were just talking, couldn't see no harm in that so I went on with my duties. Tell ya the truth, I didn't think no more about it till I called Justin for his breakfast about half an hour later. When he didn't come I searched for him; went to all of his regular spots -- nothing. I even went to the stables, though I told 'im to stay clear of there. That's when I saw our horse, Boston, was missin' too. The sheriff told me yer carriages are still here, mayor, so that's wot she's done; she's taken my boy and our prized horse. But, I didn't jump to no conclusions then. I even went 'round town a bit asking if anyone seen 'im but no one had. He's only six years old, he couldn't get far on his own now could he."

Paxton nodded resolutely. "All right, Mrs. Newton, I want you to go home and keep a lookout, just in case he comes home or someone's seen him. Sheriff, if..."

"Don't worry 'bout telling me what to do..." the sheriff said dryly. "I'll be doing some investigating of my own. Deputy Martin here can go back to my office and see if any news comes in."

All concerned parties dispersed quietly, their minds occupied with the task at hand. Maxwell and Fenton stood silently.

Eventually the former looked at the latter in utter incredulity. "What is going on here?"

Fenton smoothed his wrinkled shirt and sat down on the sofa. "This is your town, Max."

Maxwell would have loved to explode into a tantrum of obscenities as he usually did when dealing with Willy or Ellister or any of his other henchmen, but with his elder brother he showed some restraint.

"I saw the way you looked when you heard the boy was missing. Do you believe your wife took the child?"

Fenton, who was chewing abstractedly on his thumbnail, shrugged. "I'm not certain. All I know is that Amelia's gone and she's taken all of her belongings with her. The sheriff mentioned all of your carriages were accounted for, but he wouldn't have known to look for mine. My buggy is missing; I looked for it when I saw my wife and all of her personal effects were missing from the house. My driver, however, is not missing."

"Why on earth didn't you tell the Sheriff? Ellister!" Maxwell yelled, not even commenting on Fenton's implication about the driver.

When the manservant appeared in the doorway, the mayor instructed him to find Gus and on the double.

"What time did you go to sleep?" he asked, once Ellister had departed to do his bidding.

Fenton's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "I don't know. It's strange, but all I remember is hearing you say good night and watching you leave the parlour."

"She drugged us," Maxwell surmised quietly, more to himself.

"Pardon?"

"In my..." he hesitated, "...dealings, I've come across powerful medicines, some of which can be used for purposes not altogether beneficial. I've heard of a drug which once ingested causes the victim to fall into a long and deep sleep -- almost as if comatose."

"Yes, yes! So have I! Really, are you suggesting that, not only was Amelia able to obtain such a drug, but that she used it on us? Why? For what reason?"

Maxwell sighed irritably. "And you always beat me in chess? Come on, Fenton! Are you really that blind?"

"You're referring to your barely comprehensible speech last night, aren't you?" Fenton chuckled hollowly. "I'll admit my wife is cleverer than the average female, but the conspiracy you formulated last night was ludicrous. You were, after all, thoroughly intoxicated!"

"You don't find it the least bit peculiar that she drugged us both right after I made those accusations? Does that not tell you anything?"

"If she drugged us at all."

"Fenton! I cannot believe how thick-headed you are. Amelia is gone! We overslept by several hours and I awoke feeling much worse than

I would've with a standard hangover."

"I'm not ruling out drugging, but that doesn't prove all of your other accusations are true."

"You just won't accept that a woman, that your own wife, manipulated us, betrayed us, deserted you, and all under your very own nose. I suppose it would be a huge blow to your pride, wouldn't it -- to admit that a woman could outdo you."

Fenton's eyebrows furrowed. "You would know all about that type of blow wouldn't you brother; considering why I was summoned here."

Maxwell barely avoided flinching at his brother's unexpected retaliation.

There were a few moments of sulky silence before Maxwell asked, "Fenton why did you instantly suspect Amelia might have taken the child?"

At the question, Fenton stood up, went over to the window, stood there for a moment and then began to pace back and forth.

Finally he spoke, "Amelia and I had a stillborn child -- a boy, which, had he lived, would have been named Miles. My wife and I, of course, were devastated, even more so when we figured out after years of trying she was no longer able to conceive. Miles would've been approximately six years old now, like Justin, and, given my dark features, would most likely have looked very similar to your neighbour's son."

The mayor was so completely stunned by his brother's story that all he managed to articulate was a grossly inadequate, "I see."

Fenton exhaled painfully, his nonchalantly powerful façade waning.

"Amelia saw the boy and more or less admitted to me that she was reminiscing about Miles. Her taking Justin in hopes of filling the gap in her heart is not impossible. So, now you understand why I cannot tell you that Amelia is innocent of kidnapping. I can only hope her brother finds her and can..."

Abruptly, Fenton stopped and right before Maxwell's eyes his brother's cold demeanour returned, an icy sneer replaced the look of concern on his face. "Well, she'll have to lie in whatever bed she's made for herself, won't she! If she's taken that child, not even I will be able to bail her out."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Paxton had been riding for little more than an hour, his eyes keenly scanning the landscape before him, looking for clues or evidence that someone had been there recently.

He adjusted his hat to shield his gaze from the afternoon sun and felt sweat trickle down the side of his face. It was obvious this land rarely saw human traffic; it was difficult to navigate because of layers of thick brush, a rocky terrain and the presence of dangerous wildlife. Still Paxton had to admit, the countryside, though rough and rugged, appealed to him. He enjoyed untamed beauty and relished the feelings of adventure and magic that virtually untouched nature consistently gave him. Paxton's eyes roamed the countryside tirelessly and it was not long before they discovered his quarry.

Paxton pulled Castro's reins in, dismounted and was over to the boy in two strides. The boy's body was prostrate on the ground, though his little face was turned to one side. Paxton noted his face was grubby, visibly smeared with tears, dust and blood. Reign knelt down to better assess the situation. The child's eyes were closed but he was breathing rhythmically.

"Justin..." Paxton said softly, not wanting to startle him. "Justin, my name is Paxton Reign, I was sent to find you.

From what I can see you have a broken leg. Are you hurt anywhere else? Is anything tingling or unmovable?"

The boy's brown eyes opened slowly. "No. My head is sore though."

"Can you roll over and sit up?"

"I've been playing dead. The snake might've got me if I moved," Justin explained.

"You're safe now. Tell me about the snake."

The boy winced at the pain in his leg as Paxton assisted him in rolling over and propped him up against a nearby rock.

Justin was now able to really see his rescuer and the sight could only inspire the greatest of admirations in a six-year-old boy. Paxton's cowboy hat was perched firmly on his head but his sandy hair could still be seen. Straight, white teeth (a rarity in those parts) gleamed through a friendly smile that twinkled in his striking blue eyes. His face was rough with stubble (the predictable outcome of neglecting to shave for three days), and damp from perspiration. Strong muscle was apparent, but was even more pronounced in areas where his clammy shirt clung to skin. His appearance was dirty from the combination of dusty air and sweat. Despite all this, Justin thought Paxton was the epitome of manliness,

just like his father.

"I like your hat!" was all he said though.

Paxton grinned. "Thanks. It's practical for a rancher like me."

The boy, remembering that he'd been questioned about the snake, continued his tale. "A huge ol'snake spooked my horse -- guess he don't like snakes much."

"No, horses do not like snakes. Is your horse's name Boston?"

"Yep. 'Cept he ain't my horse, I reckon he's my father's. But, he sure reared up at sight of that snake. I fell off, that's when I got this cut on my head I'm feelin'. I don't rightly remember what happened next, only Boston being gone. I didn't know where the snake was and I sure wasn't gonna go looking, so I didn't move. Good you're here, I was getting real bored."

"It was smart to stay put, Justin, especially with this leg."

Paxton held the boy's chin and rotated his head about as he examined him. Reign clucked, searched in his pack and removed his first aid kit and some water.

"Drink," he commanded, handing over the flask.

He dabbed at a bloody scratch on the boy's cheek with a damp cloth until the wound was clean and then applied some salve on the large bump that had formed on Justin's forehead.

"Well, Justin, you're a very lucky boy -- a broken leg is the worst injury you have." Paxton briefly explained what a broken leg meant.

Justin ran a hand through his thick, dark, curly hair and watched as flakes of dried mud fell into his lap. "You say, I won't be able to walk or do anything fun fer months, I wish I could call that lucky, Sir. My ma's gonna be mad too, isn't she! She's always after me to stay outta the stables but that's no fun. I love the horses. She's always going on about what I shouldn't be doing." The boy pouted. "I can't do hardly anything 'cause of her. Today I thought I'd show her how well I can ride."

Paxton started to work on creating a splint. "Why do you think she asks you not to do certain things?"

"Ma doesn't ask, she commands! And, 'cause she wants to ruin my fun." Justin shrugged under Paxton's admonishing look. "I reckon she's worried I'd get hurt, but I wouldn't..."

Paxton smirked and pulled the wrapping tight around the splint.

Justin winced. "Well, maybe she was right this time, but I ain't got hurt before."

"Why do you think she cares if you get hurt?"

The boy rolled his eyes, grudgingly conceding, "'Cause she loves me."

Paxton put his hand on Justin's shoulder. "That's right, Justin, and I'm glad you know that." He rose and went about collecting materials to construct a makeshift stretcher. "Right now your mother's out of her mind with worry and she'll probably be quite cross with you when you get back, but at least you know she loves you. I hope you'll exercise a little more obedience when you get back home."

Justin's lips slid to one side as he considered the idea. "I'll try."

Gently hoisting the boy onto the stretcher, Paxton secured him and warned, "This is going to be one mighty bumpy ride."

"What about Boston?"

"Boston'll find his own way home, I'll bet -- if he hasn't already."

Instinctively knowing that he had precious cargo, Castro kept an easy pace on the way back to town, and Justin declared he found the ride quite comfortable despite the many jolts, thumps and bumps.

Eventually arriving in front of the Newton residence, Paxton dismounted and patted Castro's neck. "Thanks, my friend," he whispered.

The front door of the house swung open and both Justin and Paxton heard a woman's hurried footsteps as they landed on the wooden planks of the porch. Paxton peered up to see Mrs. Newton running toward them, her arms flailing as she called out her son's name. She'd seen them from her window where she'd kept a nerve-racking vigil. Paxton quickly removed his hat courteously and placed it carefully on the first porch step along with his foot.

"Justin, oh Justin, my dear, precious boy, thank God!"

Justin squirmed uncomfortably under his mother's onslaught of affection. She turned her attention to Paxton though her arms were still firmly secured around her boy's head.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you! What happened to 'im?" she queried anxiously, finally perceiving the boy's condition, stretcher and all.

"I disobeyed ya, Ma," Justin explained reluctantly. "I went out to the stable to play with Boston. Pa showed me how to ride bareback yesterday and I wanted to practice so I could do it on my own when he got home today. I forgot what I was doing and Boston started to run and all I could do was hold on. We went pretty far and when Boston slowed down we startled a snake!" Justin went on to describe in great detail how he'd fallen off and lain on the ground frightened, alone and in pain until Mr. Reign had found him.

Mrs. Newton waited patiently until her son had finished and then proceeded to lecture him, "I sure hope you'll listen to me from now on, Justin. You'd no business going near that horse; your father is the only one who can control him and I forbid..." she stopped abruptly and a smile crept onto her consternated face. "Well, I expect you've learned yer lesson. A neighbour brought Boston back just a few minutes ago -- he'd been munchin' on some grass just outside town."

"I'm glad to hear he's back," Justin said.

His mother lifted an eyebrow at him. "You'd best be, 'cause Pa would've tanned yer hide otherwise. Come on inside, and I'll fix ya somethin' ta eat. Ya must be starvin'! Can he walk?"

"No. I think feeding him is a good idea though," Paxton affirmed. "I'll help you take him inside and then I'll go fetch the doctor and let the sheriff know Justin's been found."

"No need," the sheriff remarked, approaching them. "I reckon all is in order here then? Glad to see ya back, boy, and in one piece." He rustled Justin's hair. "I was just forming a search party," Scythe publicized looking at Mrs. Newton.

"I'll go and let the mayor know the boy's back. Sure he's been

worryin'."

"Sorry, Sheriff, Sir," Justin apologized sincerely.

"Sheriff," Mrs. Newton, her tone of voice rueful, gestured toward the neighbouring house in the distance. "Please apologize fer me. I meant no harm..." she trailed off, unable to continue.

The sheriff tipped his hat. "Will do, Ma'am. Take care of yerselves now."

"I heard that the lady staying at the mayor's house is yer sister." Mrs. Newton's body language indicated how awkward she felt at having accused the sister of her son's rescuer of kidnapping.

Paxton grinned charmingly. "Please, don't worry about that. I see the good doctor has heard the news too. I just love how fast news travels in a small town."

Doctor Philip Manning, dressed in a half over-coat and waistcoat, was sauntering along toward them, his large belly protruding and causing obvious stress on the buttons of his waistcoat. His stethoscope, hung perpetually round his chubby neck, was rarely used. He checked his pocket watch and quickened his step. His shiny, cherubic face brightened when his soft grey eyes alighted on Justin and his company.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" the doctor asked, as he dropped his medical kit and evaluated the boy. "I heard you've caused quite a stir up, son," he admonished, inspecting the splint and the stretcher. He touched the injured leg in a certain way causing Justin to flinch. "Broken, but not too bad I'd surmise. It sure is a good thing it was Mr. Reign who found you. He knows how to treat injuries and create a proper splint." Doctor Manning glanced gratefully at Paxton. "Makes my job easier, that's for darn sure."

"If you would like, Doc, I'll help you carry him into the house," Paxton offered.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Reign."

"God bless you, Mr. Reign," Mrs. Newton said emotionally, after the two men had set Justin up comfortably on a sofa.

"Really, Ma'am, Doctor, it was no trouble at all. You all take care." Paxton nodded at the doctor and then addressed Justin, "I'll come back and see how you're doing in a day or so okay."

Justin shyly thanked him again and waved goodbye as the doctor attended his leg.

Paxton Reign paused for a brief moment on the porch and sighed heavily. The sun was beaming down on him in warm waves and the street was littered with people going about their daily business. As was a habit of his when he had too much on his mind, he raked a hand through his hair and wondered what he should do next. He heard someone say his name and turned in the direction of the street where the voice had come from. Fenton Stanton leaned casually against a lamp-post, his hands in his pockets, and a peculiar grin on his face. Lithely, Paxton descended the steps and seized his hat.

"I heard you were responsible for locating the Newton boy; excellent! Hardly a surprise, mind you. So, Paxton, where does this leave us?"

The latter cringed when his brother-in-law used his first name and

quipped, "'Us' isn't generally in my vocabulary when it comes to you."

Smirking at the comment, the other replied smoothly, "Come now, brother, you must know I'm curious about my wife."

"I don't understand what you're asking me."

"I want to know where my wife is. She, unlike the boy, is still missing, you know?"

"Is she?" There was an intense silence while each man regarded one another cautiously. "I don't know where Amelia is."

The eldest Stanton looked the rancher up and down appraisingly, but he did not detect any dishonesty. "Then perhaps you could find her?"

"As politely as you might ask, brother..." Paxton emphasized the word 'brother' with only a minor hint of malice, "If Amelia wishes to return to you, she'll do so on her own. There were no indications of foul play in the circumstances of her departure, from what I've heard, were there any -- then I'd search for her." He placed his hat on his head resolutely. "Now, I bid you good day."

Fenton grabbed Reign's arm, only slightly surprised by the amount of muscle concealed beneath the shirt sleeve. He waited until Paxton turned to face him and for one moment his voice was entirely sincere and betrayed more than he wished, "Please, Reign, I must have her back!" Mid-sentence, Fenton regained his senses and his entire body stiffened, his face became a derisive leer. He switched his tactic, "I would hate to bring the law into this."

"I doubt the law would get involved. They'd likely refuse for the same reasons as me. I do know, however; that your brother has quite a rapport with the sheriff and you might be able to swindle him into assisting you to find her -- eventually. If she wants to be found that is."

Fenton continued as if he had not heard the response, "You see, Reign, my lovely wife has not only deserted me, but has seen fit to rob me blind also. Superb timing, is it not, that I just received a letter from my accountant, who, in my absence, was authorized to maintain my estate. His letter indicated that when he visited my home to conduct some business he was dismayed to discover my safe had been entirely drained. Strangely enough the letter was dated a couple of days after I left New York. Since Amelia, my accountant and I are the only ones with access to the safe, and I highly doubt it was my accountant; there's little mystery as to who is responsible for the lack of contents. Nor is it a coincidence that my wallet is completely empty, a state it wasn't in when I last opened it. If I were to get the law involved, I'd have no choice but to expose the circumstances, and once my wife is found, to prosecute. So, I suppose I shouldn't hesitate in contacting the sheriff."

Paxton turned away, scuffing his boot in a gesture that didn't convey carelessness, but indignation. "Well now, I guess you know what it's like to be betrayed by a person that you should've been able to trust. At this moment, Fenton, you've personally experienced how it feels to awaken with nothing because of that very person." He tipped his hat, his eyes focusing meaningfully on his brother-in-law. "Best of luck with your predicament."

Fenton yet again seized the rancher's arm before he could get far. "I don't want to go that route. Put our differences aside and help me find her. I'll pay you for your time."

"My answer is no, Mr. Stanton." He removed his arm from Fenton's grip. "I can't trust you! How do I know this isn't another ploy to draw me away from Elizabeth so that Maxwell can get his hands on her? I don't. Excuse me."

Fenton's face reddened and he put his hands back in his pockets as if to keep them from doing something he would regret later. It didn't take him long to conceal his more violent emotions and soon he was grinning. "Deputy Howard wasn't joking when he said you were a wily fox. I only wish that this were a part of our scheme, but unfortunately, it isn't. I swear to you."

"I'd be foolish to believe you, even if I did, I'd still refuse to help bring my sister back from the most sensible move she's made yet."

"Despite what you believe," Fenton ground his teeth, attempting to control the anger his desperation and Paxton's attitude incited in him.

Paxton cut him off, "It's her choice whether or not she wants to be with you; not yours and certainly not mine. I consider this discussion closed. I'm sure you'll cope, you have an uncanny knack at that, don't you?"

Furiously, Fenton watched his foe walk off, calling after him, "I have other means of getting my way, Reign, as you well know. I will not hesitate to use them!" Paxton ignored him, and his whole body shook with an almost unbearable rage. "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elizabeth had just finished feeding the barn animals when she saw Paxton ride in. She winced slightly as she saw the concern on his face. Earlier that day, Deputy Martin had come and explained the situation to them in full. She was aware of Justin Newton's disappearance and of Amelia Stanton's alleged involvement. Her husband's returning in evident distress made her think the worst. He dismounted, starting to remove the saddle and bridle. When he was finished that task, he took a brush and smoothed it along Castro's neck.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked, realizing that Paxton hadn't noticed her presence, which only intensified her anxiety.

"Oh, everything is all right. Turns out my suspicions were correct; Amelia had nothing to do with the boy's disappearance. Justin simply disobeyed his mother, and got into trouble all on his own. Nothing too serious," he amended quickly, seeing Elizabeth's unease. "His horse went out of control and ran into the desert. Justin fell off, broke a leg and bumped his head too. He'll heal and be back to normal in no time."

The sun was flirting ostentatiously with the horizon and its rays were peeking brazenly through the openings in the barn walls. One ray struck the back of Paxton's head and lit his hair with such vibrancy that it seemed like it was ablaze, almost like a halo. Castro whinnied as if the sight was quite humorous.

"I'm glad to hear it," Elizabeth said with a mild smile and a wink at the horse. "What about your sister? Any news of her?"

He shook his head and stepped away from the light. "Fenton wanted me to go in search of her. I refused." He briefly explained the confrontation he had with his brother-in-law.

"Are you hungry?" Elizabeth chose not to remark on the altercation Paxton had with Fenton. She was quite relieved Paxton, despite Fenton's threats, decided not to go in search of his sister. Trust was not in her vocabulary when it came to the Stantons, and it would've been difficult to say an indefinite goodbye to her husband.

"Famished," he replied, his stomach growling in agreement.

"I'll heat up some leftover stew. I wasn't sure when you were coming back, so I didn't prepare anything prematurely."

Elizabeth tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear and looked significantly at her husband. "Pax, are you sure you don't want to look for Amelia? I'd feel horrible if you declined just for my benefit."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her cheek. "Amelia is fine. I don't need to find her. She's quite capable of taking care

of herself.

I'm craving some of that stew of yours, now that you mentioned it, and some alone time with you, dearest."

Her face lit up both figuratively and literally when a sunbeam touched her. "I'd better get started," she hesitated. "One more question, Pax."

"Yes?"

"How come you never told anyone about Maxwell's attempt to murder you and force my hand in marriage?"

The unexpected question startled him. "Where is this coming from, Lizzy? We haven't spoken about that in weeks. I hope you don't hold it against me. I was seriously considering telling the sheriff when Jack warned me not to. He said it would stir up a hornet's nest something fierce, since Scythe was Stanton's man.

Jack envisioned an entire town divided between me and the mayor. He figured we could handle the situation ourselves without upsetting the town." He shrugged, "I was torn myself; torn between empathizing with Maxwell's obsession with you (turning the other cheek so to speak) and exacting retribution. A part of me really wanted revenge on the man who hurt you, manipulated us and tried to kill me and the other part just wanted to let it all go. I was debating the pros and cons of implicating Stanton when I discovered the connection between my sister and Maxwell and then there were new conditions and limitations. I could still expose the mayor for what he is."

She nodded, having all the answer she required. "Well, I guess I'd better go and heat up that stew."

Elizabeth left the barn and Paxton heard a gasp as if something startling had happened. He stepped out from the barn into the orange light of the setting sun. Once his eyes adjusted, he saw the reason for the gasp and the pit of his stomach clenched in response. Fenton Stanton stood just a pace away, his arm effectively pinning Elizabeth to him and the barrel of his gun pointing directly at her head.

Fenton's stature was calm, only his eyes betrayed the desperate frenzy he was endeavouring to conceal. "I will make this easy for you, Reign."

Paxton had already assessed the situation and the ways he could react. His gun was in its holster, which hung on the gun belt around his waist and even attempting to withdraw it might push Fenton over the precipice he was teetering on. It was clear to Paxton that his brother-in-law was edging insanity; he was desperate, and consequently very serious in his threat to shoot Elizabeth.

Raising his hand cautiously in a gesture of peace, Paxton began, "Fenton, let's not..."

The gun was cocked. "I am running out of patience!"

"All right! All right. What do you want?"

"It's really quite simple, Reign, and you know it! You know what I want." He tightened his grip on Elizabeth, "Amelia and my money. I need your help to find them. I will not live without my wife! You'll come with me now, or share my lonely fate and live without yours!" Fenton meant what he said.

Paxton vividly remembered his absolute anguish and despair when he'd been forced to think about living without his beloved before and those were feelings he never wanted to face again. Although Fenton's expression of love was twisted and perhaps just a little wicked, he felt for Amelia as Paxton did for Elizabeth, and his current action compelled Paxton to realize it.

"You have my word that I'll help you find my sister."

Elizabeth, feeling her captor physically relax, took the opportunity to elbow him forcefully in the ribs. Escaping his grasp, she wheeled around and slapped him in the face.

"Next time point the gun at your own head, you coward!"

Fenton coughed, squeezing his arms against his bruising ribs and entirely distracted by the unforeseen onslaught. After several moments, both Reigns heard what sounded like a pained chuckle coming from the accosted man. Paxton, who'd drawn his gun mere seconds after Elizabeth's escape, holstered it again; he kept his hand close though just in case.

"She is definitely a match for you, Reign." Fenton looked amused, and showed no hesitation in putting his gun away now that he had what he wanted. "I know I can trust your word and there will be no trickery." The statement required confirmation.

"Yes, of course. But, I must add a stipulation." Paxton took a protective stance in front of Elizabeth. "I'll find Amelia, but after that you're on your own. Convincing her to stay with you and to return your money is strictly your job -- that is none of my business."

"Agreed."

Paxton glanced at Elizabeth, resisting his emotions. "I suppose I'd better pack."

"I'll heat you," her brilliant eyes fell upon Fenton and narrowed, but her voice was hospitable, "...both some stew for the road."

Fenton smirked. "That would be greatly appreciated."

"I suggest we leave at sunrise."

"No, I want to go immediately after we eat. The sooner we find Amelia the less money she'll have spent."

Paxton shook his head, fully aware that how much money Amelia would spend had little to do with Fenton's urgency. "Something tells me, Fenton, that you'd much rather spend the night in a soft, warm bed as opposed to a blanket laid on rocky terrain, wild coyotes howling, and all manner of things crawling nearby as you attempt to sleep. Or were you planning to ride all through the night?"

Fenton grimaced. "We spend the night here."

The sky was dusty grey, flecked with occasional puffs of cloud as Paxton and Fenton wound their horses along the trail toward town. Paxton's thoughts were of Elizabeth and the way she'd looked when he'd said goodbye. Both of them knew this parting, while probably lasting some duration, would not be forever. Searching for Amelia posed no real threat to his life, only inconvenience. As the trip progressed, Fenton, who was accustomed to fine carriages with padded seats, was distressed by

the soreness of his muscles, particularly those in his rear. It was no small sacrifice that he refrained from complaining; however, one glance at his brother-in-law's face reinforced his decision to maintain his silent suffering.

Eventually Paxton broke the silence, "Fenton tell me everything leading up to and involving Amelia's disappearance. Leave nothing for me to guess at. The more I know, the faster I'll find my sister."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maxwell Stanton sat in his living room, abandoned. His brother and sister-in-law had left mysteriously without explanations or even good-byes. Ellister had found neither Willy nor the coachman, and had in fact himself disappeared during the hunt. Hours ago the sheriff had dropped by to inform the mayor that the Newton boy was returned home by none other than Paxton Reign. Maxwell had not yet decided whether or not to consider that as the only good news he'd heard all day. Suddenly, without warning, Willy and Ellister appeared in the doorway, both breathing heavily and looking frantic. Willy's eyes were wide with frenzy and Maxwell noted a large purplish bruise on the side of his face.

"We're ruined, Sir! We need to go -- now! Get your stuff quick!"

Maxwell leapt to his feet, alarmed.

"What the dickens are you talking about? And, where have you been?" He wasn't the least bit ashamed that it had been Ellister who'd noticed that Willy had been gone for several days, and not him.

Reluctantly, Ellister held up what he'd been concealing behind his back. The flagrant headline of the newspaper was clearly visible between Ellister's two hands:

MAYOR STANTON'S MURDEROUS PLOT: *How he conspired to slay renowned bounty-hunter and rancher Paxton Reign in order to force the hand of his wife, the beautiful Elizabeth Reign. Eye witness report. Shocking details on page two.*

"I got suspicious of that Amelia, Sir," Willy began, perceiving that Stanton would be speechless for several moments. "So I followed her around. She was in cahoots with those two printers of the town newspaper the whole time she was here."

Ellister, irritated with Willy's poor reporting skills, chimed in, "In exchange for a percentage of the profits, Amelia said she would give them the story of a century. They were told how to spy on you and obtain the needed information to sink your administration." Observing the way Stanton was looking at him, he quickly clarified, "That's what Willy told me on the way here, Sir, in not so many words."

They caught him eavesdropping and imprisoned him until they'd finished printing their dirty scoop. I found him heading this way just after they'd released him."

"Yep, I was coming here right away, Sir." Willy confirmed.

"There's more," Ellister winced under Maxwell's furious scrutiny. "Gus helped Amelia escape. Her getaway must have been planned from the inception of their scheme. She asked me to leave the drapes open in the

parlour claiming that the stars were so beautiful, when all along she was helping her associates to spy and preparing for her scheduled escape."

Stanton ripped the newspaper from Ellister's grasp and turned to page two, rapidly scanning the contents of the article. "How do they know so much? This is impossible; Amelia wasn't even here when I did half of this!" he droned dismally.

"Willy mentioned he saw a stack of letters at the printers, one from Jack Strom among the others," Ellister said.

"We must go!" Willy seized Maxwell's arm. "Now!"

"Sir, the paperboys were shouting the headlines all over town. It won't be long 'til the whole town..." Ellister was interrupted by the sound of a crowd gathering out front.

"Quickly, Sir!" Willy shrilled, pulling forcefully on the mayor's arm.

Ellister sprung to the window and lifted the sheer curtain which obstructed his view. "I would advise that you listen, Sir."

Maxwell shook his head and fought against Willy's strenuous grip.

"Please, Maxwell!" Willy begged, using the first name of his boss, something he seldom did, conveying his belief that these were the direst of circumstances.

"I must face this," the mayor said resolutely. "A Stanton does not run from his actions -- nor their consequences."

Willy, trembling visibly, let him go.

Maxwell Stanton pushed his way through the two servants and went directly to the mansion's front door. He could hear the mob outside, could hear some of them calling for him. Opening the door with no trepidation, he stepped out onto the threshold, and the crowd went quiet with surprise.

"Of this newspaper's charge -- I am guilty."

"No! Stop!" Willy shouted, shoving past the mayor as two men ascended the stairs. "Don't touch him!" He abruptly punched one of the men in the head, causing the mob to respond with loud protestations.

Two more men automatically exited the crowd, seized Willy and carried him away kicking and screaming viciously. Maxwell did not fight; he simply let himself be taken.

Ellister stood at the mayor's doorway, refusing admittance, but was quickly overcome as men pushed him aside and entered the mansion.

The mob ushered Maxwell toward the center of town, where he assumed he was to be hung. Suddenly the sound of a gun being fired rang through the air. It silenced everyone as they looked around inquisitively to discover whose gun had been fired. On the sheriff's office porch stood John Scythe, his gun pointed up in the air and still smoking. He cleared his throat loudly, holstered his weapon and said gruffly, "Quiet down! Hand 'im over to me."

The mob propelled their prisoner toward the steps and laughed shallowly when the latter tripped and fell, sprawling before the man who represented the law in their town.

"I understand," the sheriff began as he helped Maxwell to his feet, "...that it might be our mayor has done some wrong. Might even go as far as to say he made some foolish choices." He raised his voice as people

began to murmur complaints, "But what he's done he's done mainly for love. He loved Elizabeth Reign and would've done anything for her."

"Or to her," an anonymous voice shouted from the crowd.

Undaunted, the sheriff continued, "I know when it were my time, I done some pretty stupid things in the name of love. In fact, I still do." He lips quirked slightly when he heard some chuckling in the crowd.

"Hang this man? Why I'll be darned if we ain't all indebted to him. Look around you! See the wealth which this man is sure straight responsible for bringing to our town. Pat the pockets on those fancy clothes yer all wearing and tell me you don't feel your fat wallets. Thankfully no real harm's been done. Why Paxton Reign himself hasn't turned the mayor in, what's that tell ya?" He cleared his throat loudly.

"Let you men decide who among you claims they's never done anything desperate or stupid or wrong in the name of love and let him wrap this here noose around the mayor's neck." He tossed the noose toward the mob and it landed with a decided thud.

The mob, many of them avid churchgoers and bible readers, comprehended his reference to scripture.

Slowly and silently they began to disperse but then a voice cried out, "Well I, for one, think we need a new mayor. Knowing what I know now I wouldn't trust Maxwell Stanton to run a ghost town honestly."

John Scythe spotted the man to whom the outspoken voice belonged. He recognized Lester Bingham immediately, one of the printers and the man who had written the damning article about the mayor.

"Who do ya think should take his place, Lester?" the sheriff snapped, "You?"

Lester smirked mischievously. "I'm willing to run for office, sure, and if I'm the one elected I'll do the job. We must, of course, hold an election to allow the people to decide who is best fitted for the role. That is the law, right Sheriff?"

"You 'xpect to be trusted after publically admitting that you spied on the mayor? Not the most trustworthy use of time."

The people continued the murmur.

The sheriff once again addressed the crowd, "If yer all determined to see another mayor run these parts, then bring me yer nominations. The deputies and I'll sort 'em out and we'll hold an election. Fer now: go home, kiss yer wives, have some dinner."

The townspeople dispersed, leaving Lester Bingham standing alone before the office of the sheriff.

"You had better watch your step, Sheriff. If this town were to find out that you were in cahoots with Stanton your office might also become vacant."

The sheriff walked straight up to the man and glared him down; he did not budge, though John didn't expect him to. "I'd be takin' my own advice, if I were you, Bingham. I don't want ta investigate the printing press with a fine tooth comb. I don't know if yer equipment would last through the process. I'd sure be interested in learning how ya got yer information an' all."

Lester sneered, turned on his heels and walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elizabeth stood on the ridge, the wind whipping her hair. She looked as though she were some tragic heroine watching longingly for her love to return, but knowing he never would. The sky was grey with ominous, black clouds billowing across it. She blinked back tears as she stared at the crudely made graves. Everything with Maxwell, Amelia and Fenton seemed like nothing when compared with the task that she now faced. The grave, strewn with large boulders, seemed to pulsate with energy and a desire for vengeance.

Falling heavily onto her knees, she flung the rocks wildly aside, digging frantically. Tears were now splashing atop the boulders that remained on the unmarked grave.

"It was foolish of you to come here, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth closed her eyes tightly at the sound of his voice. She did not turn to face him but instead replied, "It was foolish of you too."

A gun was cocked. "I cannot allow you to uncover that body."

Slowly, so as not to arouse suspicion, Elizabeth seized a medium sized boulder, then as quick as a flash she whipped around and hurled the rock at his head. She'd always had excellent aim and the rock hit with a decided thud, knocking the victim slightly backward. At almost lightening speed she clutched another rock and lunged at him, knocking him down and freeing the gun from his grasp. She whisked the gun away, and, lifting the rock in her hand, bashed him across the face. As intended, this strike served as a deterrent against further movement -- Jack Strom ceased squirming. He was undeniably aware that she had the gumption to hit him until his lack of movement was involuntary.

Desperately trying to keep her rage from consuming her, Elizabeth cried, "My father trusted you! I trusted you! Paxton trusted you! All this time you were the real villain!"

Although his face was bloody and she'd obviously caused him great discomfort if not outright pain, he began to laugh.

"What is trust to me, you silly girl? You don't think I trusted your father? My best friend! What about my beloved mate and companion? Was my trust not misplaced in her? You speak of trust as if it guarantees good things."

Elizabeth crawled off him and picked up the gun. Her countenance was now marred with tears and dust which had melded into dirty streaks and smeared patches. She held the gun on him as he rose nonchalantly and wiped the blood from his nose and mouth. Reaching into her pocket, she

pulled out a small black, leather bound book, opened it, and while keeping an eagle eye on him for any movement, read the contents on the last page aloud:

Dear diary,

I cannot help it any longer! My feelings are of such an overpowering nature that despite my best efforts I cannot further deny them. My poor Jack; I have been faithful to him in all except my heart. I know we will hurt him desperately but I must be with my darling Eustace. Who knew that forbidden feelings could develop so strongly between us?

I was so young when I married Jack, so unprepared, so naïve. Eustace and I have decided to tell him the truth tonight. I only hope that he'll take the news as well as possible. Once Jack is informed, which I must confess, will be the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my entire life (poor Jack) Eustace will complete the sale of his ranch to that tiresome tyrant Maxwell. He has already begun negotiations. Although he abhors the idea, it would be best to leave this area and start anew.

Eustace believes Elizabeth will adjust well to any changes, though I am worried about this. He says she is a good girl and young enough to adapt to anything. I hope I can be the type of mother to her that Eustace wants. I have only seen her once -- she is beautiful. From what her father tells me she is quite an interesting little girl. I look forward to getting to know her and sincerely hope she welcomes me into the family; but, enough of that now, I must prepare for tonight and the trauma it will bring. Poor, poor Jack, I only hope that he may find someone else and that she will bring him as much happiness as Eustace has brought me. I will make him his favourite dinner and then take him to meet Eustace at our secret rendezvous spot. The Lord and Jack forgive me for my weakness.

Wilhelmina Strom (soon to be Dalton)

Elizabeth's gaze slowly left the page and fell on Jack Strom, who stood there defiantly glowering at her, hatred radiating from his whole being.

"The whore!" he spat contemptuously at the ground. "Where'd you find that damned book?"

"I was doing a thorough cleaning of our bedroom when I located a hidden niche under one of the floor boards. The diary was hidden within."

He snarled, "How'd you know to come to this place? The whore only mentioned a secret rendezvous spot -- she didn't say the actual location."

"I didn't read you the entire book, Jack -- though I read it. Your wife used to come here when she was feeling lonely because you were out hunting down criminals, or gambling, or visiting the saloon, or whatever. It was here that she eventually ran into my father who coincidentally knew this spot too and would come here to mourn my mother. Wilhelmina knew my father through your friendship with him, as you know, but they had never been alone together. According to the entries in this diary, they had such a wonderful time together, innocently of course, that

feelings of a more passionate nature began to develop."

"Coincidentally my foot! Your father lusted after my wife and he followed her here just like I followed you here, Elizabeth."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "You lust after me, Jack?"

His visual response was somewhat humorous as he hadn't realized the implications of his last statement. He rolled his eyes, "No, you stupid girl, I meant I followed you. I've been following you for the past two weeks, ever since Paxton left and at his request, to keep you safe which I fully intended to do. You see, I look at Paxton as the son I never had, thanks to your father, and I hold no grudge against you personally. It's not your fault your father was a loathsome, backstabbing, wife stealing..."

Elizabeth suddenly felt as though the weight of ten thousand bricks had landed on her shoulders as her mind snapped every puzzle piece into place. She swayed slightly and her voice was peculiarly thin as she spoke, "I've known since I read the final diary entry that you met my father and your wife here all those years ago and once you heard of their plans to sell the ranch and elope, you killed them and buried them here, thinking they would never be found. You faked your wife's relocation to New York and you forged the note to Stanton all those years ago. You...!"

Her eyes flashed, as one more piece of the puzzle snapped into place. Glaring and pointing her index finger at him, she accused, "You opened the jar of cocoa that night after I returned from my father's house. Paxton and I had left the room to talk and you rummaged around in what I'd brought back." She absentmindedly clicked her tongue on her teeth and mused, "I remember I noticed some spilt cocoa on the table the following morning, that couldn't have been when Paxton searched it. He didn't open the jar until he received the telegram from his sister, which was later." This point was more for herself since it wasn't likely Jack would know that Paxton had opened the Mason jar.

"Given that Paxton denied finding anything other than cocoa in the jar before he let Amelia take it..." Her gaze rose to meet his and it was obvious she had concluded her monologue as her voice contained a firmer resolve as she spoke directly to him. "I'll venture a guess," Something in her tone alerted him that this was not a guess at all but a statement of fact, "...that you opened the jar that night and if there was something from my father in there you stole it. You certainly had a big secret to protect, Jack!"

He smiled cruelly. "Are you just figuring this all out? How cute!" He mimicked a girly voice as he recited her father's message to her, "'Keep your chin up. There is always a star to be found in the darkest of places.' I always wondered what your father meant by that silly phrase and what it would reveal. Thank you for solving that little difficulty for me."

"What was in the jar, Jack?" She ignored his sarcasm.

"Wouldn't you like to know? Of course, I'm not going to tell you."

She cocked the gun and, through gritted teeth, demanded once more to know the contents of the jar.

"You won't kill me without knowing, so why would I tell you? Never mind that, why *should* I tell you at all?"

"You murdered my father!"

His brow furrowed mischievously. "Yes, I did, and now you want to murder me?"

Jack looked up at the darkening sky and then down the barrel of the gun that Elizabeth pointed at him. "So what now, girly? You going to bargain with me for that tidbit of information you're so anxious for, or are you going to shoot me?"

The wicked smirk was wiped clean off his face when the sound of a gun being fired sliced through the air.

Elizabeth gave him a smirk of her own. "I might."

He hollered in pain and gingerly lifted his foot off the ground, the boot still smoking from the impact of the bullet.

"You're right, Jack. I won't kill you, but I can make you very, very uncomfortable. Why keep the contents of the jar a mystery? I've already discovered your secret. I know your guilt. There could be nothing in the jar that could ruin you any further."

He winced as he put his foot down. Rolling his eyes dramatically at her, he said, "Surely, Dalton's daughter is not that slow? Come on, Lizzy, if I give up my last bargaining chip what will become of me?"

"The same thing that's going to happen regardless."

Jack shook his head. "Now, now, I know you're desperate. You want what your father left for you in that jar, and you'll never get it if I don't tell you. We're at an impasse because you want to know what I can tell you and I don't want to tell you what you want to know until I am hundreds of miles away. You let me go now, Elizabeth, and I'll telegram you the answer."

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to laugh, although her laugh was without any type of humour or malice, just pure irritation. "It's equally important to me to see the murderer of my father pay for his crime. I will not let you go unpunished!"

"Then you'll never know..."

In two strides she was over to him and right in the middle of his sentence she whacked him in the head with the butt of the gun and knocked him out cold.

"I'll take my chances."

Signaling to Velvet, Elizabeth once again looked at the graves and a sense of finality hit her. She'd finally uncovered the truth of what had happened to her father and she'd bring his killer to justice. Velvet nudged her gently, intuitively aware that her mistress needed comfort. Elizabeth patted the mare's neck distractedly, while she calculated what she'd do next.

After locating a length of rope from her saddle bag and using it and a tree branch to hoist Strom onto her horse, she made sure his bonds were tight. Ensuring that they were tight enough to limit his ability to escape should he regain consciousness, Elizabeth peered over the ridge and saw Jack's horse. He'd evidently not wanted her to hear him approach and had left the animal securely tied to a tree. She took hold of Velvet's reins and descended toward the horse. It wasn't until she reached his horse that she felt faint with emotion. She leaned heavily against Velvet as her whole body shook with adrenaline. Her actions had

been dictated entirely by rage and a need for vengeance; she'd been too busy to realize the risks of what she was doing.

Tied to her horse was her father's killer, but also a famous bounty-hunter and the man who'd taught Paxton much of what he knew. She'd single-handedly prevailed over Jack Strom, with only a few scratches and maybe a bruise or two. The reality of the danger she'd blindly faced and overcome was now hitting her and it left her completely exhausted.

Maxwell sat on the front porch of the sheriff's office, a fat cigar in one hand, and a glass of port in the other. Two weeks had passed since his escape from the noose and much had occurred. He'd been removed from office and a new mayor elected. It gave Maxwell a small amount of pleasure that Russell Wilson had been elected to take his place instead of Lester Bingham. The vote wasn't even close; Lester had been annihilated by the competition. Russell had been a good advisor to Maxwell during his time in office and would do a fair job of running the town. He was even willing to take advice from Maxwell and keep him involved (inconspicuously) with what was going on.

Stanton had voluntarily given his mansion and his servants, excluding Willy and Ellister, to the newly elected mayor as an apologetic gesture toward the town. Having accepted his removal from office with all the false dignity he could muster, he now had spare time in abundance. Contrary to his character, and of great surprise to him, he discovered that he was able to relax and enjoy his new-found freedom from scheming. His paradigm was beginning to shift to the ideal of relishing his retirement in peace and perhaps even solitude. He chewed on the cigar and glanced over at Sheriff John Scythe, who was sitting next to him, and felt a type of kindred toward him that was altogether alien to Maxwell. Another person would have referred to this feeling as friendship.

Loyalty without strings attached was a foreign concept to Stanton. He was accustomed to having a use for everyone in his acquaintance and when that use expired so did the association. It had never bothered him that it had always been vice versa as well. John, on the other hand, had saved the disgraced mayor some face, had kept the town from lynching him, and had done all this with no benefit to himself. After all that had occurred, the Sheriff had stood by him when it would have been much easier and safer to wrap the noose around his neck. Maxwell smiled to himself; perhaps total solitude was not necessary.

The Sheriff, oblivious to Maxwell's reverie, stood up suddenly and murmured, "Now, what do we have here?"

Turning his head toward where the sheriff was looking, Maxwell saw her. His heart fluttered at the sight and blood rushed to his face. Even in her obvious distain of female customary fashion, for she was garbed in male riding attire, she was beautiful. She was mounted on an unfamiliar appaloosa and leading Velvet behind her. He noted the bound body that was tossed over Velvet's saddle and his more susceptible emotions were sidetracked by curiosity.

Elizabeth stopped the horse when she was directly in front of them. She removed her cowboy hat, shook her burgundy locks free and directed her attention toward the two men.

"It appears that I owe you both an apology," she declared solidly.

John Scythe spat to one side (not as an insult to Elizabeth, but to rid his mouth of cigar remnants) and descended the porch stairs.

"What'cha got there, Mrs. Reign?"

Elizabeth dismounted and chucked the reins of the appaloosa at him. "My father's murderer."

Tying the horse's reins to a post, the sheriff went to investigate the body slumped on top of Velvet. He took a handful of the unconscious man's hair and lifted his head so he could see the face.

Looking back at Elizabeth in disbelief he exclaimed, "Jack Strom!"

Her voice was clear and precise as Elizabeth Reign related what had transpired between her and Jack up on the ridge. A heavy downpour of rain started just as she concluded her story.

John's eyes were wide with amazement and it seemed as if he hadn't heard a word she'd said as he stated incredulously, "You brought in Jack Strom!"

Elizabeth ran a hand through her now dampened hair and without any apparent difficulty, addressed Maxwell Stanton. "You were telling me the truth, as you knew it, all those years ago. You were both kept in the dark about the true events that occurred. Jack Strom killed Eustace Dalton, and his own wife, Wilhelmina Strom. He forged the letter you thought was from my father. Since you'd already begun negotiations, and because you no doubt knew of my father's intended elopement, you assumed that he'd simply ditched me. You wished to protect me from that knowledge. I guess you understood (perhaps through your own experiences) how devastating abandonment is for an impressionable child. For that part of your dealings with me, I thank you."

She turned to the sheriff. "If he should awaken and deny any of what I've told you, I have Wilhelmina Strom's diary as proof; I'm not quite willing to submit it to you yet. I can also take you to the unmarked graves."

Scythe smirked. "Wonder what Paxton will think. He won't take too kindly to his benefactor being a murderer."

Elizabeth pushed Strom from her horse and ignored the ensuing thump and mud splat his body triggered as it landed hard against the ground. She went right up to the sheriff and looked him directly in the eye.

"That's why I intend to tell him myself when he gets back."

Scythe shrugged and called for his deputy to come and help him move Jack's body into a cell. "So be it, Mrs. Reign."

With a sad smile evidently not meant for either the sheriff or Stanton, she turned, mounted her horse and rode off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Five days passed as Elizabeth waited quietly at home for her husband to return. She was too emotionally exhausted to entertain thoughts of his not returning. The ranch hands were extremely helpful during his absence and all Elizabeth had to do was make sure they were adequately fed.

Evening was rapidly approaching, and Elizabeth sat by candle light trying her best to focus on a novel. She found herself gazing out the window more than reading, however, and during one such gaze she saw a familiar figure riding toward the house.

"Paxton!" she cried, dropping her book. The porch door slammed with a protest as she ran out to meet him.

Paxton grinned and jumped off his horse. Effortlessly, he lifted her from the ground and swung her around once before embracing her.

"Did you find your sister?" she asked breathlessly, as soon as he allowed her lips the freedom to move.

His head tilted back as he rolled his eyes. He let out a brief chortle. "Of course, Lizzy. She wanted to be found."

His wife's eyebrows dipped in bewilderment. "I don't understand. Why would Amelia purposefully permit herself to be found after stealing all of her husband's money and disappearing in the first place?"

A coyote howled randomly in the distance. Paxton started to remove Castro's saddle and said lightly, "That's because you don't know my sister. I had my suspicions Amelia was up to more than was obvious. Turns out I was right; my sister wanted to show Fenton what she could do to him and make him realize just how much he needed her. I guess you could say she was on some kind of vengeance scheme or showing her hand, so to speak.

Fenton and I went straight to New York (that's where Amelia's trail led us). Quite honestly, I wouldn't have needed a trail; I had a feeling she'd gone home all along. As soon as we arrived, Fenton immediately went to check his safe. To his astonishment and relief, he discovered everything was still there untouched. Amelia was sitting in the living room awaiting our arrival.

She admitted to having forged that letter from Fenton's accountant to convince him he'd lost everything. She told us how she drugged Fenton and his brother to make her escape sinister and highly suspect. She knew Fenton would assume she was on the run with his money, and that he'd

persuade me to help him find her -- which was also a part of her plan. She wanted time to explain things and make peace with me.

Her secondary motive for bringing me to New York was our father -- he's getting old and has little time left. Amelia claimed that he'd been asking to see me for quite a while. I admit that although she schemed and manipulated to make this come about, I'm glad she did. My father was pleased to see me, and apologized for being so selfish and unreliable during my youth. I forgave him, said I loved him, and put some demons to rest, as it were.

Amelia very vaguely alluded to a surprise from the printers here in town. She hoped it would compensate for what happened between us all those years ago. Tomorrow I plan to meet with them and figure out this puzzle piece -- if that's all right with you. Now, how have things been here?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath and told him the whole story. She explained the newspaper article, which was what Amelia had hinted at. She filled him in on Maxwell's removal from office, and then despite the difficulty, she unveiled the discovery of Wilhelmina's diary and the revelation of her father's true killer. With quiet composure she informed him about the graves on the ridge and how Strom had followed her there. She told him about Strom's outraged confession, how he'd stolen whatever the jar of cocoa had contained, and about his murderous intentions. She described in detail how a fight had ensued and she'd miraculously overcome her father's killer and brought him to the sheriff.

Her remarkable story concluded, she stopped talking and peered up into Paxton's eyes. He'd listened in complete silence while he'd cleaned up Castro and returned him to his stall. Now, he sat on the porch resting his elbow on his knee, chin propped on his hand and staring blankly in front of him. For a time the crickets and the occasional howl of a coyote was all that could be heard.

Elizabeth sat snuggled up to her husband. His body was warm but he was trembling and she realized she was too. She'd had days to ponder what had transpired; to go over the entire betrayal in her mind several times, to relive the sense of disbelief, the resulting anger and grief. At this instant, seeing Paxton digesting such devastating news all at once, she felt a deeper turmoil than before.

"Paxton," she whispered, "I'm so sorry about..."

He placed a gentle finger to her lips. "Don't say anything just now, Lizzy."

She obeyed and cuddled as close to him as she could, trying to diminish the tremors that rocked both their bodies.

Finally, he stood up and sighing exhaustedly, took her hand and led her into the house. He shook his head when she opened her mouth to speak. "Lizzy, please just come to bed. Don't mention anything more to me now...please!"

The rooster crowed at dawn and Elizabeth, coming slowly to consciousness, realized instantly that Paxton was gone. Muddled though she was, having just woken, her mind snapped back to all the revelations Paxton had endured the evening before, and a feeling of foreboding came over her. Jumping out of bed and dressing as quickly as she could,

Elizabeth rushed out into the yard in search of her husband. A further sense of urgency gripped tighter when she noted Castro was gone.

Quickly, she prepared Velvet for a ride. "You must help me find them," she begged, hoping that her faithful horse would be faster at tracking them than she would.

Velvet snorted in reply, and as soon as Elizabeth was in the saddle she trotted toward the town. It was not long before Velvet was galloping fast with Elizabeth alert to every passing thing. There was more a feeling of relief than annoyance when Elizabeth spied Castro tied up outside of the sheriff's office.

The sun was shining brightly overhead and small chickadees chirped merrily from the rooftop. Dismounting, she patted her horse and thanked her for the speed at which they'd arrived. She didn't pause to tie Velvet to the post, or to enjoy the beauty of the day, but stepped briskly up onto the porch and into the office.

Paxton sat coolly in front of the jail cell which housed her father's murderer.

He glanced up, and upon seeing her exclaimed, "Elizabeth!" He was evidently quite surprised by her arrival.

"Why did you leave like that Paxton? There was no note, no explanation. I was..."

"I had to speak to Jack myself," he established, cutting her off. "I knew if I told you, you'd demand to come with me or that I not come at all."

Although incensed, Elizabeth knew he certainly spoke the truth and didn't continue her rebuke.

Paxton, glancing at the sheriff, took her aside where they could speak privately. "Jack has pleaded not guilty and..."

"Thanks fer saving me a trip out to yer ranch, Mrs. Reign," the sheriff interrupted.

"You'll have to testify and give evidence in court."

Elizabeth's eyes flashed and her blood felt like it was boiling in her veins. "When?"

"Tomorrow." The sheriff got up from his chair and circled his desk so that he was closer to them. "I need ya to take me out to the ridge." He snapped the toothpick he'd been chewing. "Judge Wheeler says we gotta take a look at the bodies. He wants Doc Manning to come along."

Elizabeth squared her shoulders and declared loudly, "Go ahead and fetch the doctor and Judge Wheeler, Sheriff. I'll take you all to my father's body."

Boldly approaching the cell, and engaging in direct eye contact with Jack Strom, she whispered, "Your plea will not hold, Jack. You're going to face the consequences of killing Eustace Dalton and Wilhelmina Strom. I'm going to see to that."

He chuckled defiantly. "You have no proof, Lizzy, and you know it. A diary entry from some crazy female ain't enough to hang me."

Paxton watched her face pale visibly as she contemplated what Jack said and taking her arm gently, led her outside. "Elizabeth..."

"What did he say to you, Paxton? Do you believe he is innocent? After all I told you?"

"Absolutely not! He's guilty and I know it and he knows I know it!"

Hearing the conviction in his voice should have comforted her, but his sentiments did little to ease her tenseness or sooth her raw emotions. The years of pent-up frustration, guilt and anguish were consuming her and their affect was almost paralyzing.

"Then why wouldn't you talk to me last night?" she managed weakly. "Why did you sneak off this morning without a word?"

"Elizabeth, I was in complete shock." His response was unintentionally irritable. "I've always prided myself on my ability to see through facades, to read people's true characters and I've rarely been wrong. Last night, I discovered that the man I had looked up to -- had revered for so long as an honest and stalwart figure; had even loved like a father, was a criminal himself. I left you in his care; my serious error in judgment could've cost you your life and almost did." He smoothed his fingertips down her cheek. "Elizabeth coming close to losing you once was enough..."

She silenced him, pressing her finger to his lips. "I understand now. I thought you were angry with me for accusing him. I thought you were on his side."

"No!"

The sheriff cleared his throat loudly, and adjusted his eyes toward the sky. "Well, if yer done, can we get going? I don't want to take all day."

The Reigns turned to see the doctor, the sheriff, a man that could only be Judge Wheeler, and a small posse of men watching them impatiently.

"My apologies," Paxton said quickly. "Elizabeth, you lead the way please."

Elizabeth didn't respond, she was intent on what the doctor was saying and heard nothing else.

"You wouldn't remember me, Mrs. Reign," the doctor stated, a small smile on his aged face. "But I remember you, though you were a wee one last time I saw you. I was there when you were born, I assisted your mother." A saddened look took the place of his smile. "I remember her well. She was a brave soul and a lady I was pleased to have known. I was sorry to lose her. I can see plenty of her in you - she'd be proud."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something but the judge cut her off abruptly.

"There'll be time to talk later, Mrs. Reign. We all have things to do today. Let's go."

"He's right. We'll reminisce later," the doctor affirmed, looking at his watch.

A sudden tension seized Elizabeth as she mounted Velvet and led the party toward the ridge. She'd not had the opportunity to speak to Paxton about what Jack had said to her in the jail. Her worst fear was the actual murderer of her father would escape justice, as he had for so many years. Her hope that Strom would accept his guilt and pay for his crime naturally dissolved with his denial. Now, she had doubts that the diary entry, her testimony of his confession, and the bodies were enough to convict him.

"You've more evidence against him than he thinks you do," Paxton whispered, as if he'd read her thoughts. He nudged Castro next to Velvet so he could speak quietly with her. "I wanted to suggest..."

"Say, how long's this here journey?" the sheriff called ahead to them.

"It's about an hour or so from town at a fast pace," Elizabeth answered. The return trip with an unconscious Jack Strom had seemed much shorter, since she'd been so preoccupied.

"Do you mind if we speed up the horses?" the doctor asked.

"Not at all."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

They arrived at the ridge about mid-afternoon and Elizabeth almost needlessly pointed at the burial site. Time and the elements had weathered the two individual graves to almost indistinguishable mounds.

The men instantly went to work uncovering them while she watched with conflicting curiosity and revulsion. With little excitement in his voice, a worker shouted he'd reached bone. The doctor was over to him in two strides, instructing him on how to proceed.

When the digging stopped, Elizabeth walked over to the grave and glanced cautiously down at the skeleton which they'd uncovered. Some of the men tried to prevent her from getting too close, insisting that this was not a sight for a lady. Considering that she didn't feel revolted (at least in the way they were expecting), she shooed them away. Her eyes perused the partially clothed skeleton that had once been Wilhelmina Strom. Her clothes were tattered with age and decomposition, her bonnet still held some strands of hair that had miraculously lasted the years.

"There is nothing on the bones to identify who this was," the doctor's voice sounded beside her. "No jewellery or personal effects."

Sheer pain shot up through Elizabeth's body as her eyes fell upon a distinct hole in the upper portion of the skull. A vision of Wilhelmina begging her husband not to kill her, of Jack pulling the trigger and of the bullet tearing through flesh and bone, viciously ending the woman's life, pierced her mind. Elizabeth nodded resolutely, no doubt in her mind as to whom the skeleton belonged, and looked over at the other grave which could only be her father's. Realizing the digging had stopped there also and that Paxton was watching her carefully, she steeled herself and walked over.

Instantly the frayed clothes of the body inside the grave resurrected the recollection of the last day she'd seen her father alive. The long lost memory was now so vivid and triggered such agonizing sorrow that she fell to her knees and hot tears seared her cheeks.

"Papa, no..." The whispered defiance was heartbreaking to all those within earshot.

Elizabeth's trembling hand reached out to touch the skeleton's shoulder, which broke apart under the slight contact. Quickly, her hand withdrew to cover her mouth as the finality of her father's death impacted her. For years she'd believed Eustace Dalton was dead, that only death would have separated them for so long a duration, but to

witness his remains still with his clothes, clothes she remembered, hanging on raggedly to lifeless limbs, brought on the most intense pain that only a tragic closure could bring.

Blinking tears from her vision she pointed at the skull and remarked, quavering, "There is no bullet hole." Another vision invaded her mind, Jack whacking her father on the head and then shooting him in the chest, aiming straight for the heart.

"I can't be sure..." the doctor noted the path of her interest. "But, I see no indications of trauma."

"That's cause the coward shot 'im in the back o'the 'ead," a digger commented, pointing.

He was standing on the other side of the grave and Elizabeth perceived the tilt of the head would enable a small puncture in the back of the skull to be noticeable from the other side. Having approached the man, the doctor looked at her and nodded his agreement. He examined the skeleton further and indicated the left arm bone.

"Eustace came to me once with his left arm broken above the elbow. He'd tried to mend it on his own and failing, finally decided to come and see me. I did my best, but it had already started to heal poorly and always caused him pain after that. Look at the fissure in the left humerus precisely where Eustace had broken his arm. I'd swear that this is...was Eustace Dalton. I don't think we need to ask Elizabeth for her confirmation," he commented, looking at her obvious anguish.

"Anything 'bout the lady, Doc?" the sheriff inquired.

"I'd guess it was a bullet to the head that killed her, but as to identifying her -- I have nothing. Wilhelmina Strom was a healthy woman with no issues other than a few colds here and there. Sorry, Sheriff..."

John Scythe shrugged, glancing at Judge Wheeler. "I've seen enough. Should we bring the bodies, Doc?"

"I don't think they'd make it through the return journey. Better cover 'em back up. Let them rest."

Elizabeth, upon hearing this, began to recollect her wits. She patted the damp trails the tears had left on her cheeks to little effect. A hanky appeared within her grasp and she recognized Paxton's hand. In all the commotion she'd only been vaguely aware of his presence nearby, of his comforting touch. Murmuring her gratitude, she took the handkerchief and used it.

"I'll be needing to see that diary, Mrs. Reign," the sheriff's voice sounded.

She withdrew from the warmth of being near her husband's side and stared up at Scythe.

He faltered momentarily and cracked a couple knuckles. "Sorry to be so frank, but if yer wanting me to bring Strom down, I'll be needing yer help."

Elizabeth sniffed, took a deep breath and stood up, a little shakily at first. She steadied herself, "Yes...yes, of course. I brought the diary with me. It's in my saddle bag."

The sheriff and Judge Wheeler followed her to Velvet and watched with interest as she searched her saddle bag. Producing the tiny, bound book, she flipped to the last entry made by the deceased woman.

Elizabeth cleared her throat and read the contents of the page.

Everyone listened intently and when she'd finished reading, the sheriff took the book. "I reckon Strom's guilty. Judge?"

"I'll summon you all to the trial and we will see what we will see," Wheeler said stiffly.

The doctor looked at the Reigns. "Why don't you two head home? You've got a ways to go."

"Actually, our ranch is not far. Wilhelmina was investigating the lands of her home when she located this spot." Elizabeth found it extremely difficult to leave for two reasons: one was that her trust in the sheriff was not exactly infallible, and two, she was with her father's remains.

Paxton gently reminded her that since Maxwell wasn't her father's killer, the sheriff hadn't really done anything significant enough to deserve her mistrust. He also assured her that they would return to properly mark the graves. She reluctantly agreed to leave and they headed back to the ranch.

"How are you feeling?" Paxton asked when they arrived home. Concern was apparent in his tone.

"Exhausted, grief-stricken, demoralized..." she shrugged. "I could go on..."

"I'll make you some tea and something to eat. I want you to sit down in front of the fire and relax as much as possible."

She didn't argue with his instructions, grateful for a moment to unwind. Waiting for him to return with the tea, she questioned him about what Jack had said.

"Nothing of consequence," he answered rather too quickly, avoiding eye-contact, which only served to increase her suspicion.

"Don't you dare keep anything back from me, Pax! I want to know."

"He said that he'd never admit to anything."

She waited, growing very impatient, "That's all?"

He nodded, sipping his tea cautiously. "Still too hot!" he remarked, wiping his lip where some of the liquid had accidentally splashed.

"Did he tell you that he stole whatever was in that jar of cocoa?"

"No," his brow furrowed as she reiterated what she'd discovered about the jar. "The..." He stopped short of his expletive. "I promise you, Lizzy, I'll do everything in my power to find out what was in that blasted jar!"

"Good luck! Thanks all the same, though."

"I'd better go and check on dinner. I don't want to burn anything."

Once dinner was prepared and served, they both ate hungrily and afterward Elizabeth helped Paxton clean up.

"I suppose the knowledge that my father is dead makes whatever was in that jar redundant. Any secret message is unnecessary now that I know what happened." Suddenly bereft, she stood up and looked out at the stars shining brightly in velvety black sky. Sighing sadly, she said, "I'm exhausted! I should go to bed."

Paxton gently touched her hand as she passed him. "Elizabeth..."

He'd been uncertain what to say and even as he scanned her

dispirited face the words died on his lips. Instead, he embraced her and as his gesture of comfort enveloped her she relaxed. Paxton expected her to burst into a flood of tears and heartbreaking sobs, but she just let him hold her. Perhaps the last of her tears had already been shed up on that ridge, or she was just too tired to cry.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The cock crowed at daybreak and so loud and earnest was his cry that he effectively awoke everyone on the Reigns' ranch. The workers, grumbling, threw the covers from their bodies and shivered in the chill morning air. Paxton was at the kitchen table enjoying a freshly steeped herbal tea and Elizabeth was preparing breakfast when they reached the house.

"Good morning, boys! Help yourselves to some herbal tea and Lizzy's got eggs and bacon cooking." His voice was determinedly hearty.

Each man greeted Mr. and Mrs. Reign and helped themselves to hot herbal tea, savouring the delicious scent which wafted from their mugs. One of the newer workers circled his fingertip along the rim of his mug attentively. Finally, he looked at Paxton, who had in fact been watching him.

Paxton coaxed, "What's on your mind, Harry?"

"Is it true that Jack Strom is in jail for murder, Sir?"

A tense but curious silence fell over the room, the only sound being the crackling and sizzling of bacon frying.

The men watched as their boss took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. Paxton knew what Jack Strom meant to all of these boys and the news of his being a murderer would no doubt shock them as much as it had him.

A loud knock on the front door sounded and interrupted Paxton's impending reply. Sheriff John Scythe greeted them as soon as he'd entered the room. At Elizabeth's invitation he sat down at the table, removed his hat and placed it on his knee.

"Breakfast, Sheriff?" she offered, showing the contents of her frying pans.

"Just some of that tea, please -- I've already eaten." He looked around at the anxious faces scrutinizing him with intense curiosity.

"Well, guess I'd better get on with the reason I'm here." He thanked one of the men, as he handed him a cup of herbal tea.

"I sent a telegram to Wilhelmina Strom's family in New York yesterday after we found the bodies. I got one back today telling me they haven't heard from Wilhelmina or Jack in years. They're coming here right away with their daughter's letters."

Elizabeth's face brightened slightly. "There must be something important in her correspondence for them to come personally."

The sheriff nodded, salivating as she placed a plate of crisp bacon, grits, hash browns and eggs in front of her husband.

"Are you sure you don't want any, Sheriff?" Paxton asked, observing the way John was eyeing his food.

"Well..."

Elizabeth didn't wait for his reply, placing a plate of appetizing food in front of him. She smiled somewhat awkwardly, as the feelings she'd harboured against him for so long were difficult to forget.

"The telegram weren't full of details," Scythe explained, his mouth full. He chewed slowly, obviously enjoying his morsel, and swallowed. "Reckon we just have to wait till they get here. Strom's got himself a lawyer though. Probably have to let 'im out on bail soon."

Colour drained from Elizabeth's cheeks. "Can't you stop that?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not up to me. Judge Wheeler's coming here too. This town's never had a proper, full-out trial before."

"Do you think Jack Strom is guilty, Sheriff?" Harry questioned timidly, giving the Reigns a sideways glance.

The Sheriff's tongue darted back and forth over his teeth, seeking any leftover food, as he measured Harry. He wiped his rough hands on his pants and nodded. "Reckon so. Mrs. Reign, I'll be keeping Wilhelmina's journal with me; Judge Wheeler wants it as evidence during the trial."

"Of course. If you'll excuse me I have some things to see to." Elizabeth excused herself hesitantly.

"I just can't believe Jack would kill anyone!" Harry intoned, after Elizabeth had gone. He shook his scraggy head. "I trusted him."

John Scythe patted his belly. "All anyone needs, boy, is a motive that means enough to 'em."

"But cold-blooded murder -- Jack? He were always talking 'bout his days as a bounty-hunter. Hunting down criminals -- maybe he were trying to make up for past wrongs."

"Maybe. But no doubt in my mind he murdered Eustace Dalton and his wife. Truths got a way of surfacing sooner or later, and Strom's gonna pay for his crimes."

"Harry?"

Everyone in the room had noticed the colour drain from the boy's face as he stared through the sheriff.

"Did you say Dalton, Sir?"

"That's right, son, Eustace Dalton, Elizabeth's father." John studied him carefully.

Harry's blue eyes widened as he fretfully chewed on his thumb nail and under his breath he repeated the sheriff's last words, "Elizabeth's father -- I didn't know!" He stopped muttering and looked directly at Paxton. "Mr. Reign..."

The sheriff quickly gestured at Paxton, silencing his reply, and glared the boy down. "You got som'thing to hide, boy?"

Harry, for all his sixteen years, could not withstand the sheriff's interrogating glare; he coloured and bowed his head.

"Harry, best come clean now," one of the other men warned gruffly.

The entire room was watching the young man keenly as he contemplated his response to the sheriff's question. Finally, he lifted his gaze to Paxton and began to speak.

"Mr. Reign, Jack was like a father to me -- I never knew my own

Pop..."

John Scythe cut him off sharply. "We don't need your life's story..."

"Yes, Sir -- sorry. Dalton was the code name Jack told me to use at the bank, Sheriff Sir."

"What?"

Harry went on to explain that a few weeks ago Jack had approached him and asked him for a favour. Jack told him now that things were calming down at the ranch he planned to return to New York, but he had some unfinished business in town. He then informed Harry he'd invested a large amount of money in the bank years ago, and since he didn't foresee returning any time soon he wished to withdraw it.

"Jack said Mr. Reign had told 'im to keep an eye on Mrs. Reign so he couldn't risk going to town. He asked me to go and get the money, and I swear I didn't think nothing of it. He gave me a paper with the account number and told me to tell 'em Dalton when they asked for the name. I'd never heard the name before. I got the money and two pieces of paper and gave it all to Jack in a large leather satchel he'd given me."

"What'd the papers say?" John queried eagerly.

"I can't read, Sir. Looked right official though."

Paxton looked at the sheriff who was looking right back, and both of them understood what the other was thinking.

"Harry is there anything else you remember? Anything at all? Think very hard, because any little detail could be crucial," Paxton said.

Harry shook his head emphatically.

Another worker piped up, "He don't, but I do." He placed his mug down on the table. "Weren't nothing strange until now. I saw Jack in the back stall of the barn; you know, the one that ain't used. He was on his knees, but I didn't see what he were up to. I asked what he was about, thought he were fixing som'thing and might need a hand. Well, you'd think I'd caught him murdering the sheriff's daughter the way he yelled at me to mind my own business and scoot on outta there. I just shrugged it off and went 'bout my work."

Paxton grinned at Elizabeth who had returned at the end of Harry's account of his dealings with Jack Strom. "Looks like we might have figured out what was in that jar of cocoa, Lizzy, dear."

The sheriff stood up with a similar grin on his face. "Yeah, I reckon you're right, Reign, but let's check it out before jumping to conclusions."

Harry, in an uncharacteristically bold move, stepped in front of Paxton. "Mr. Reign, I..."

Paxton put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's all right, Harry. You didn't do anything wrong. You had no reason to doubt Jack. He pulled the wool over all of our eyes. Thank you for telling us everything."

Harry's entire body seemed to relax with relief.

Elizabeth saw the admiration in Harry's eyes as he looked at her husband and she realized that his good opinion meant a great deal to his workers, and that meant a lot to her. Her father had been like that too. She waited for her stomach to churn at the memory of her father but it didn't.

She followed the men out to the barn and watched as they investigated the empty stall. Velvet and Castro watched lazily as they munched on their morning meal. Once the straw and spare bales of hay were removed from the stall, they located a secret compartment concealed under a loose brick. The loose brick and the hidden compartment would never have been found had they not known where to look.

Paxton pulled out a large leather satchel and replaced the brick. He unfastened the satchel, glanced inside, and after a wary observation of the onlookers and a moment of deliberation, poured out the contents. Money lay strewn all over the stall floor and no one moved. Eventually, Elizabeth reached down and picked up the only three papers on the floor that were not dollar bills.

"Those are the ones the banker gave me. He said he'd found instructions to give them to the person who came to collect the money," Harry revealed insistently.

"Yes," Elizabeth mused, her hands quivering as she flipped the pages. "It's the last will and testament of Eustace Dalton and the deed to his ranch."

"What's the other piece of paper?" Paxton indicated a small, aged note.

She carefully unfolded the paper, noting its multiple folds and the fact it smelt strongly of cocoa. Her eyes scanned the writing and filled with tears. After a moment of composing herself, she cleared her throat and read aloud:

My Dearest Elizabeth,

I reckon if yer reading this something's happened to me. Best not ta mourn for an old codger like me. Below is the number of my account with the National Bank in town. I've managed to save up enough so's you'll have a good start. My will and the deed to the ranch are there too. All I got goes to ya, of course. Yer my good girl and I love ya. I won't never really leave; I'll be watching out for ya even if it's from beyond this world.

Eustace Dalton

"Strom was reckoning to steal your inheritance." John Scythe began to pick up the cash and return it to the satchel. "I'd better take this as evidence. It'll be returned to you afterwards." He took the documents from Elizabeth's shaking hands and added them to the satchel.

"Sheriff, I don't think you should ride back to town with all that money without an escort."

"Reckon you're right, Reign. Saddle up, I need to get back to town."

Paxton nodded, additionally recommending a handful of his most trusted workers to accompany them.

Elizabeth chose not to return to town with the men. The last person she wanted to see was the man, who not only murdered her father, but attempted to deprive her of her inheritance as well. Although all of the men wanted to ride into town, Paxton insisted two of them stay behind with his wife. She'd felt bad for the boys because their disappointment

had been so obvious, but Paxton wouldn't listen to any arguments on their behalf.

Elizabeth was sitting comfortably on the rocking chair in the bedroom knitting, when she heard the front door open and close. After waiting a few moments for someone to call out, Elizabeth stood up fully cognizant that everyone on the ranch knew you didn't enter the Reign home without calling out a greeting. Her eyebrows arched suspiciously as she went over to the window and investigated the yard. Spread out, half way between the house and the barn, were two bodies. The bodies were lying motionless in the dust and Elizabeth knew instantly what she'd felt from the moment she heard the front door open; she had an unwelcome visitor. She heard a chilling voice behind her.

"Came back to get my things; it was quite a shock to find them gone."

Turning around slowly, she saw Jack Strom silhouetted in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

"Don't move, Lizzy!" He cocked the pistol. "I sure know how tricky you can be."

"How did you get here?" She hoped to get him talking; to stall for time until she could think of a way out of this situation.

He lifted a single finger to his lips and came within two steps of Elizabeth. "Shush! I'll ask the questions. Where's my money?"

"Your money?" Her lip curled in irrepressible revulsion. "It's not your money."

He lifted his gun so it pointed directly at her face. "You've got three seconds to tell me where my money's at!"

Elizabeth studied Jack and by the time he'd reached number two decided she'd better tell him what he wanted to know. "Sheriff Scythe's taken it to town."

Jack walloped the gun across her mouth and she tasted blood as her lip collided with her teeth.

"Dang it! How long ago did he leave?"

Elizabeth glowered resentfully at him as she gingerly felt her lip which was already swelling. "About two hours or so..."

He grabbed her arm and pressed the gun against her temple. "You're not lying to me are you? No. I must've missed him since I came the back way. Can't be helped then," he dragged her toward the doorway. "I need that money and you're gonna help me collect it."

"You know Paxton will come for me."

"I'm counting on it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Both Sheriff Scythe and Paxton Reign knew the instant they saw the office door swinging in the breeze Jack Strom would not be found within. After dismounting John Scythe trotted up the steps and, with his gun ready, held the door back so he could get a glimpse of what had happened. He holstered his gun and eyed the body of his deputy, which was lying on the cot inside the cell.

The sheriff searched for his keys. "Don't think Jack would've taken the time to lock the cell if he were dead."

Paxton, who'd entered behind the sheriff, nodded. "No, I don't think he would've."

"Howard! Howard, wake up, man!"

With a slight shake from his boss the deputy slowly opened his eyes. "Sheriff? Wh...what happened?" He sat up gradually and held his pounding head in his hands.

"Was hoping you'd tell me, Howard," John retorted.

The deputy squirmed under the sheriff's scrutiny. "Suppose I remember giving Strom his meal..."

The sheriff's frustrated gesture and the rolling of his eyes indicated that he fully understood what had occurred. "You got too close again, didn't ya?"

Deputy Howard shamefacedly concurred.

"Reckon you've learned yer lesson this time, you dolt! Reign?" The sheriff was alarmed at how quickly the colour had drained from his companion's face.

"Elizabeth!" Paxton breathed and rushed out the door.

Seconds later and without a word to his posse, Paxton was off at a gallop. His men, confused by the sudden departure, looked to the sheriff who now stood on the porch.

Grumpily the sheriff descended the stairs and began to remove the satchel of money from his saddle. "Deputy Howard," he called and waited for the man to appear in the doorway. "Best do better guarding this bag than you did your prisoner. You men stay with 'im. Wise up the lot of you; it's likely Strom'll be back for his prize."

"Quit dragging your feet, girl!" Strom yanked harder on her arm as they neared the front door of the house. "Paxton probably just got to town, so it'll be at least two hours before he comes back and those two

men left to guard ya are out cold. No use slowing me down in hopes of being rescued."

"You won't get away with this Strom."

"I have so far! Besides, considering I taught Paxton almost everything he knows, I don't think he'll be much competition for me. I'll have no problem dealing with him."

"Are you sure about that?" She squared her shoulders, believing the reverse of his last statement. "If I were you right now, Jack, I'd be more concerned about the problems you'll have dealing with me. You make even one mistake..."

"Come on, girly! All I want is my money. When I get it I'll let you go."

"Yes, off a cliff!"

Jack smiled coldly. "You always were astute, just like your daddy, and fancy that, just as naive too -- what a combination."

As soon as the front door was open, Jack flung Elizabeth out and chuckled as she flew face down into the dirt. "Run, I dare ya! I'd enjoy some target practice."

Rolling over and propping herself halfway up, she spit the dirt from her sore mouth and locked eyes with her assailant. Jack's brow furrowed when he noticed her eyes leave his and widen with surprise. He was too late to react to the man standing in the corner of the door alcove, and only had time to grunt before a stiff, black cane came down on his hand knocking the gun from it. No sooner had he heard the gun clatter to the ground than the cane came soaring at his head. All went black.

As soon as Paxton was in near enough proximity to his house he dismounted and held his horse close, wanting to do nothing more than dart inside and find Elizabeth. It took great effort and control to force himself to slow down and take in his surroundings. It was crucial he evaluate everything and make sure he wasn't walking into an ambush or a trap. Unexpectedly the front door opened, he faltered for a moment and then reached for his gun.

"Paxton!"

Hearing the voice of his wife and seeing her rushing out to him was entirely unanticipated and he didn't know quite how to react. He wondered if this was a trap and glanced around apprehensively, still holding his pistol firmly.

"It's all right, Paxton!" Elizabeth cried, colliding against his chest and wrapping her arms about his neck.

"Elizabeth...?" He was about to ask her what was going on when he noticed another figure standing on the porch.

"It's all right, Pax," she repeated, carefully placing her hand on his gun to lower it. "Much as I hate to admit it, I owe my life to..."

"Maxwell Stanton!" Paxton exclaimed in disbelief.

Maxwell slowly descended the steps of the porch and walked over to them, swinging his cane superciliously. "I was going to visit the sheriff when I saw Strom leaving the office. I was suspicious, especially when I investigated further and found the sheriff gone and the deputy unconscious. I figured I'd better follow Strom and see where he was going. I was afraid that he might try and exact vengeance on

Elizabeth and as it turns out, I was correct."

Paxton removed his hat and looked at his wife as if he wanted reassurance that she was indeed standing beside him alive and well. After he was confident she was all right, he redirected his attention to Stanton, assessing him warily.

"You managed to follow Jack Strom without his notice? I'm sure he would've been looking out for someone following him..."

"I'm not in league with him if that is what you are insinuating! Despite his recent escape, Strom was evidently not concerned about someone trailing him, because I was able to with relative ease. Of course, I did have an inkling of where he was headed -- I'm sure that helped."

Paxton eyed Maxwell closely for a moment and then relaxed. "Well, I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Stanton." He immediately offered his hand for a handshake which seemed to surprise the former mayor.

Maxwell had not predicted this kind of response from Reign. He'd believed Paxton would be irked that he was the one solely responsible for saving Elizabeth, and yet, there was no hint of bitterness or umbrage in Paxton's posture. It was blatantly obvious that he was simply happy to know his Elizabeth was safe, regardless of how that had been accomplished. His proffered hand was a true gesture of gratitude and Stanton, albeit guardedly, accepted it.

The instant he made contact with Reign, the pit of Maxwell's stomach clenched with guilt. Guilt was a sensation Maxwell Stanton experienced rarely, as he'd done his best to rid himself of the pesky emotion. In fact, he basically ignored any reproachful thoughts that popped into his head altogether; it was how he'd gotten ahead in life. Admittedly, the occurrences that had taken place lately had made him more susceptible to guilt, though he'd tried to disregard it. Nevertheless, standing there with compunction, shaking the hand of the very man who'd been his arch rival, who he'd attempted to murder, brought on a feeling of shame so profound that he felt light-headed.

Instantly, it became crystal clear why Reign posed a threat to not only one Stanton but to both -- he was a genuinely good person. Paxton was the type of man Fenton and Maxwell had been raised to abhor, simply because goodness was difficult for a Stanton, and naturally they resented anything they found difficult. Their family characteristics gravitated toward selfishness, conceit, control and even cruelty. Never before did it occur to Maxwell that conquering those personality traits would have been his utmost challenge. Now, staring him in the face was the sort of man he should've been trying to emulate his entire life. Considering the admiration Paxton regularly attained and the fact he'd irrevocably won Elizabeth's heart, Maxwell realized which pursuit yielded the best rewards.

He shook himself, wondering inwardly why these self-critiques were so common and so potent as of late and answered his own query in the very next thought. It was because everything he'd built or attained from his ways of manipulation, greed, selfishness and control had been lost in a matter of hours, while Paxton, who was everything Maxwell was not, still had what mattered most despite the way the wind blew.

With conflicting feelings of distain and admiration, Maxwell conceded, "I'm pleased to have been of some assistance given my past behaviour toward you, Reign. I wouldn't want there to be any remaining resentment between us."

Surprise mingled with skepticism as both Paxton and Elizabeth silently debated whether to trust Maxwell's apology as sincere, or to be wary of another devious scheme. To everyone's relief the sheriff rode up rescuing them from the awkward silence.

"What's happened?" Scythe inquired as irritably as he could, since he was out of breath.

Stanton and Elizabeth took turns explaining what had occurred and after they'd concluded their story, the sheriff asked, "Where's Strom?"

"In the barn, he's tied up and locked in a stall. I don't think he'll be going anywhere no matter what type of an escape artist he thinks he is," Elizabeth informed them.

"Well, I best be taking him back now." John lifted his hand to the top of his cowboy hat and settled it firmly on his head. "Judge won't be too happy to hear of his attacking my deputy and escaping to threaten Mrs. Reign here."

Paxton glanced at Elizabeth and back at the barn.

"Reign, you stay here," Scythe commanded, as if reading his mind.

"I'd prefer to do that, Sheriff, but..."

"Stanton can help me with the prisoner." He addressed the former mayor, "Right, Max?"

Maxwell nodded with alacrity. "Certainly!"

"Should be enough, ya reckon?"

Paxton looked doubtful and bit his lower lip, an obvious dilemma on his face.

"Paxton," Elizabeth's eyes filled with exasperation, "...there is absolutely no reason for me to stay at the house. Why don't I just come to town with you?"

"I see no problem with that," Maxwell said instantly and received glares from his companions. He cleared his throat, "It would be better than leaving her here alone with the two men that failed to protect her before. Especially since they're recovering from their injuries, and I think it's more than documented that Jack Strom is hard to contain..."

"I see your point. It would be better if all four of us went," Paxton grimaced, but nodded his agreement.

"Let's go get 'im then." Sheriff Scythe turned toward the barn.

"I'll go and get ready for the journey. Paxton, would you mind giving me a hand?" Elizabeth went back into the house.

Paxton looked at his companions, struggling with whether he should follow his wife or assist the sheriff in preparing Strom for the ride.

"Go ahead, Reign," the sheriff permitted somewhat gruffly.

"Stanton and I'll wait in the barn till you're ready."

Obviously, all three men were in a persistent rush so Elizabeth hurriedly changed clothes and went into the kitchen to pack some food for the trip. Paxton had anticipated her, however, and was already packing some of her delicious muffins.

"I figure we'll probably be starving before we reach the town."

She nodded her agreement. When preparations were complete, they exited the front door, concerned they'd taken too long. Once on the porch, both concern and haste disappeared and the door thumped closed behind them. They stood inquisitively on the porch as Maxwell Stanton and Sheriff Scythe walked slowly toward them.

Instantly, Elizabeth discerned that something was amiss but her mind would not wrap around what it was. "We're ready. Sorry about the delay."

"No point rushing now," Scythe stated solemnly.

"What's happened?" Elizabeth asked intently, and then something clicked into her brain and her stomach lurched at the thought. "Has Strom escaped?"

"No," Maxwell answered.

"Not the way you're thinkin' anyway." Scythe, who'd been carrying his hat in his hands, now placed it back on his head. "He's dead, Mrs. Reign. Done hung himself in the barn."

"He used the rope I secured him in the cell with," Maxwell added.

Paxton's brow furrowed. "You left the body there as it was?"

"Yes..."

Reign's stomach wrenched; like Elizabeth he'd also had a suspicion that something was wrong. "You didn't happen to relock the cell did you?"

Scythe's expression froze, but Maxwell scoffed, "Why lock a dead body in a cell, Reign?"

Paxton pulled his gun from its holster, swiftly moving toward the barn, replying briefly, "Because it wasn't a dead body."

"Even if he wasn't dead he was still tied to the wall..." Maxwell argued as they approached the barn with utmost caution.

Sure enough, when they'd reached the stall there was only a rope hanging loosely from one of the bars securing the window frame.

Paxton shoved some bundled up hay from the corner of the stall revealing the feed trough.

"That's where his legs were danglin'..." Scythe remarked.

"Or appeared to be..." Maxwell corrected, now fully cognizant that the entire spectacle had been an illusion.

The stall was dimly lit, with lots of straw lying about and Jack Strom had counted on them taking it for granted that he'd want to end his life quietly, rather than be hanged in front of the townspeople who had known and respected him for years. Now that they were confronted with the truth, Maxwell and John felt pretty sheepish for falling for Strom's cleverly executed deception.

"I'm sorry, Paxton," Elizabeth apologized, wishing in hindsight that she hadn't taken Paxton, the man who knew Strom best, away from the situation; even if it was only for a few moments.

Maxwell, falling back into his old habits easily, was now feeling steely regret at ever having followed Jack Strom or at having thwarted his plans to take Elizabeth. At the moment he'd decided to follow Strom, he was thinking only of Elizabeth being indebted to him and of his triumph over Paxton Reign at being the man who'd rescued her. Currently none of that mattered, because the villain was nowhere to be found and

was probably lying in wait for the man who'd foiled his plans. Maxwell certainly didn't want to be involved in a set of circumstances that threatened his own life, especially when they were connected with his nemesis and a woman who'd both ardently and publically refused his affection. He reminded himself of the fact that the Reigns had been partly responsible for his loss of office, community respect and probably a good half of his fortune. Being a self-centered man for most of his life, his own self-critiques hadn't yet brought him to the point of fully acknowledging that it was mostly his own actions that had ultimately led to his disgrace.

"Well, there's nothing for it," Sheriff Scythe flicked at a fly that was annoying him. "Guess we're gonna have to go after him."

"What!" Maxwell blurted in disbelief. "Sheriff, I am a gentleman, I'm not accustomed to any of this, especially not chasing some crazed outlaw across the countryside!"

The sheriff's lips stretched into a thin line that almost resembled a smile. "Naturally, Stanton, you can stay with Mrs. Reign and make sure she's kept safe."

It was Elizabeth's turn to expostulate, "Why can't I come with you? I'd rather do that than stay here and wait for..."

Paxton addressed them all sternly, "Listen, I know this man very well, but that doesn't mean I feel confident pursuing him. Jack Strom is a man full of surprises, as he's demonstrated twice already. When you think you have him he'll find a way to slip through your clutches. He rarely does the same thing twice. Quite frankly, our chances of finding him are close to zero.

The only way you'll see Jack Strom again is if he wants you to, and given his situation, he'll probably be the last sight you see -- unless he has a good reason for keeping you alive."

Stunned silence followed; tides weren't boding well if a man like Paxton Reign was pessimistic.

The sheriff opened his mouth to speak but Elizabeth beat him to it, "What are we to do then, Paxton? I will not live my life in fear of Jack Strom."

"Nor will I, Lizzy, but I don't think tracking him is the best strategy right now."

"Ah, I see, Reign," Maxwell smirked, goading, "You're quite right. Jack Strom is a skilled hunter and a desperate man, the combination of which is quite dangerous. I'm sure if I were you, and had grown accustomed to ranching, home-cooked meals, and nights cuddling by the fire, I certainly wouldn't want to display my dulled senses and insecurities by chasing after the very man who'd taught me."

"Setting a trap would be far more effective," Paxton asserted, ignoring Maxwell's bantering.

The sheriff nodded slowly. "I reckon a trap would work. Drat it all! If I were Jack Strom, I'd be long gone and not planning to come back."

A voice that made Elizabeth's skin prickle and her stomach tighten sounded from the barn opening.

"Well, you aren't me, Sheriff. Word of advice, Stanton, don't leave

the weapons you took on the kitchen table to be found and used again."

A gun shot rang through the air and Elizabeth's face froze in an astonished expression as she toppled forward into Paxton's arms. Blood streamed out onto the fabric of her dress and her breathing rapidly accelerated.

"Strom!" Scythe cried in shock and outrage.

"What have you done to me?!" Elizabeth's agonized whisper was barely audible.

"I've shot you," Strom intoned matter-of-factly. "What was it you were all saying a moment ago? Oh yes, a trap, you were going to lay one for me. How did you fancy mine? Pretty clever, eh?"

The sheriff started toward Elizabeth but Strom quickly redirected his gun.

"Stay put, Sheriff, or I'll put the next bullet in you. Now, listen here! I've shot Elizabeth in the thigh; if you want her to live and keep her leg you'll need the Doc here right quick. You three," he pointed his finger at each of the men, "...are going to go get him and, in the meantime, I want you to fetch my money. I won't let the good 'ol Doc near her without it. Got it?"

"It could take hours..." Maxwell began, wincing at the blood seeping through Elizabeth's gown.

"Then I reckon you'd best be on your way," Strom advised coldly.

"If I don't tend to her wound now...she could bleed to death, Jack. You know that!"

"Do I now? Get me my money, Reign!"

"You're completely insane!" Even as Maxwell said the words Strom rounded, his full attention on him.

Almost simultaneously, Paxton, who'd gently propped his wife against the stall boards, leapt toward Strom who fired the gun. Maxwell squeezed his eyes shut expecting a bullet to lodge in his flesh. There was a loud grunt and a splintering sound from beside his head. When he opened his eyes, he saw the bullet missed his head by inches and wedged itself in the outer wall of the horse stall. Paxton's interference caused Strom's shot to miss its mark.

Paxton and Strom were battling fiercely on the floor, Elizabeth was attempting to rip the hem of her skirt so she could wrap her wound and Sheriff Scythe was watching the battle intently, gun in hand.

Paxton smashed one fist into Strom's shoulder and pushed the gun away with the other. They rolled once and then twice while Reign devoted his attention to Strom's hand, which still clutched the gun tightly determined to use it given the chance. Luckily for all in the vicinity, Jack was not about to waste bullets on an erroneous target. The latter swore as his opponent managed to knee him in the groin, and being temporarily immobilized, was unable to do anything to stop Reign from seizing his wrist. Paxton slammed the accosted wrist on the ground over and over until the fingers went lax and the gun was released. Immediately, Paxton shoved the gun away. The sheriff quickly retrieving it, checked it for bullets and returned his own gun to its holster.

"Give up, Strom! You're sure enough beat," Scythe said jovially, and Maxwell noted, with a roll of his eyes, how much John was enjoying

the battle.

Elizabeth, who'd wrapped her wound successfully, was feeling faint from loss of blood. "Excuse m..." she began weakly, unable to finish before swooning.

Maxwell, always attempting to appear the gentleman, noticed her colour and was on his way to assist her when she fainted, so he caught her head before it struck the floor.

"Well, Sheriff, I'm...not as...spry...as...I...once...was...but...this old...codger...still...has a few...tricks up...his sleeve," Strom replied roughly, wrestling Paxton.

As if Strom's words gave him strength he broke an arm free and punched Paxton solidly in the gut. Paxton coughed but recovered enough to prevent another blow aimed at his head.

The sheriff ascertained Paxton, despite his wife's passing out, was in complete control and he respected a man that didn't lose his wits under pressure. Strom was attempting to lock his opponent's arm but somehow Paxton had reversed it and now had Strom in a complicated and painful wrist lock.

"Yield!" Paxton ordered, dodging Strom's flailing limbs. "I said yield!" he repeated, increasing the pressure and both Maxwell and John thought he fully intended to snap Strom's wrist.

"I won't!" Strom yelled in obvious agony. "I will not go back to jail!"

"Now, I wouldn't worry much about that, Jack, ya won't be there long. You'll hang at dawn I'd wager," Scythe informed him.

Jack Strom let out an outraged curse and in complete desperation flipped himself up and at an extremely odd angle was able to catch Paxton in the back of the head with his knee. It wasn't a very hard blow because of the position, but it was enough to jolt Reign forward and cause him to momentarily loosen his grip. Strom ripped his arm free and gave his adversary a left hook; blood spurted from Paxton's mouth as a result of the forceful collision of fist, cheek and teeth. Strom leapt to his feet and kicked him in the gut where he'd hit him earlier. It was Paxton's turn to be immobilized as he coughed breathlessly, clutching at his stomach in a vain attempt to quell the pain.

Jack Strom's face contorted as he rose to his full height and glared at Scythe. "I'll choose the manner of my own death..." he declared, charging the sheriff.

John Scythe, shocked by the unpredicted change in events, aimed the gun and was about to pull the trigger when Jack Strom knocked him against the wall. Both men were focused determinedly on the weapon, which the sheriff refused to relinquish. Jack pushed the sheriff to the ground with all of his weight and viciously hit him with one hand as the other ripped the gun away. Suddenly, there was a loud bang followed by a cry of extreme pain as Jack Strom arched in an excruciating spasm.

Elizabeth, who was lying on the floor inches away from the two men, held the sheriff's pistol directly against Jack Strom's thigh and everyone could see the tell-tale smoke rising from the barrel.

"Don't think I call this even, Jack," she said hoarsely.

John Scythe couldn't believe what had just happened and despite his

conscious acknowledgement that Elizabeth did indeed use his gun, he still couldn't resist a glance at his holster to see if it really was empty. He'd been so intent on the weapon Strom brought he'd forgotten all about his own, which until Elizabeth had withdrawn it, had remained holstered throughout the struggle.

No doubt Jack Strom was equally surprised Elizabeth had located and withdrawn the gun right under his nose, regardless of the thrashing about, never mind how quickly she'd regained consciousness. However, he was much too busy grasping his bleeding leg and rocking from side to side in agony to express his surprise.

Paxton Reign shambled over to the sheriff and grinned, still pressing his arm hard against his stomach. "Well, Sheriff, I doubt Strom'll give you much trouble now."

John swung his legs away from the injured man and held his hand out for the gun his liberator still clutched firmly. "No, I reckon he won't be..." He smirked reticently at the young lady as she (albeit reluctantly) surrendered his gun.

"Elizabeth Reign, you're unbelievable..." Maxwell Stanton declared without a doubt.

Chapter Thirty

The men didn't wait for the sun to complete its departure beyond the horizon before they prepared to leave. Sheriff Scythe collected both his own horse and Maxwell Stanton's. Paxton fetched Castro and Velvet and harnessed them to a wagon and then, with John's help, hoisted Strom into it. Although Reign doubted Strom would go anywhere with the deep hole in his leg, he firmly bound his wrists and securely fastened his ankles to the wagon -- just to be sure.

With great effort, Elizabeth held her tongue about lying next to her father's killer in the wagon, realizing there was little that could be done to change that. Her leg, in the condition it was, made it impossible for her to ride horse-back or up front with her husband. Going to town later was definitely out of the question, she needed to see the doctor as soon as possible, even with Paxton's exceptional first-aid.

Paxton, seeing her reluctance to be in the same vicinity as Strom, tried to alter her paradigm by placing her personally in charge of the criminal. Fortunately, his plan was successful; Elizabeth took her surveillance seriously and was elated at having a responsibility. Though she soon regretted having taken the trip at all, as each lurching bump the wagon endured was torture and it gave her little comfort that Strom was experiencing the same torment.

They arrived at town to find Paxton's workers crowded impassively on the sheriff's porch looking quite destitute. Not one of them stayed in his seat when the wagon pulled up, and all of them were ready to absolutely devour any news of what had occurred back at the ranch.

Maxwell listened quietly as Paxton, Elizabeth, and the Sheriff avidly related details, with the occasional outburst from the prisoner. On the way into town he'd been informed of the Will, and the fact that Elizabeth was actually the rightful owner of the Dalton ranch, where he was now residing. Since he'd never purchased the ranch and had no legal documentation of his dealings with her father, Maxwell had little choice but to concede to her ownership. His stomach had churned with the realization he had nowhere to go (his mansion had been donated to the town in a gesture of goodwill and in an effort to repair his reputation).

Elizabeth studied Maxwell seriously, and quietly pondered the possibility for some time, before finally offering him the position of ranch care-taker. Astounded by her unwarranted generosity, he'd accepted and thanked her for the opportunity. He supposed that the guilt at having wrongly blamed him for her father's death was far more potent than her anger that he'd surreptitiously taken over the ranch and never paid a

cent for it.

In front of the sheriff's office (while he sat in his saddle listening to them tell how events had unfolded), Maxwell mused to himself with a somewhat sinister grin, that he'd just discovered a way to reclaim his fame and fortune. He moved his horse forward and bid his sudden farewells to the group, and after politely wishing Elizabeth a speedy recovery, hurried his horse off toward the Dalton ranch.

Doctor Manning had been summoned and arrived not long after Maxwell Stanton's departure. He ordered Elizabeth straight to his office, while Scythe insisted he treat Strom in the cell. The doctor agreed, knowing that Mrs. Reign's leg was far better wrapped than Strom's. He waited patiently while Strom was carried into his cell.

"Don't think ya gotta fix him up perfectly, Doc," Scythe interjected. "Just waiting on the death warrant from Judge Wheeler -- he's gonna die at dawn."

"Dawn, eh?" Doctor Manning examined his patient. "Well, I'll try to ensure he makes that appointment."

After the doctor finished with Jack Strom, Sheriff Scythe locked the cell door and hung the key around his neck. As Doctor Manning collected his things and headed for the door, the sheriff, a bit awkwardly, called, "Send me a word on how the little lady's doing, will ya?"

Doctor Manning grinned. "Will do, Sheriff. You plan on being here all night?"

"Yup! Sure ain't taking any more chances on this fella."

Dr. Manning glanced at Strom, marking his pallid colour and the sweat on his brow. "I don't think you've anything to worry about, John."

"Jack's a slippery one. Like I said -- no chances."

Elizabeth smiled at Doctor Manning as he finished rewrapping her leg after a lengthy examination and treatment.

"I'm sure relieved you two know how to wrap a wound, otherwise I mightn't have had such a good diagnosis for you." He washed some blood from his hands. "The bullet missed the bone by inches and went straight through. Very lucky, Mrs. Reign, very lucky indeed! Most people shot have little chance of a recovery like yours."

"Thank you, Doctor." Paxton gently helped Elizabeth from the operating table.

"Strom, if he makes it through the night, is likely hanging at dawn the sheriff says. You two staying around?"

Paxton flinched and Elizabeth instantly empathized with his obvious feelings of compunction. "No, Doctor. We'd best get back to the ranch."

Perplexed, not to mention surprised by her response, Paxton looked up. "But..."

"Paxton, I know the truth. It's not essential I see my father's murderer hang..."

"I thought you'd want to see justice done."

She shook her head, reaching for his hand. "Right now, all I want is to go home with you and thank the good Lord we're alive."

Doctor Manning nodded agreement. "Life should be celebrated, and I do think..." he smiled meaningfully, winking at Elizabeth who smirked conspiratorially, "...you have a lot of celebrating to do."

Chapter Thirty-One

Jack Strom never made it to his appointment with the gallows; he succumbed to a fever during the night. After briefly examining the body, Doctor Manning reported the obvious -- the fever had resulted from his injury. Both sheriff and doctor agreed had he the will to live he'd likely have survived. But supposedly, he figured there was no point in fighting for his life just to hang the next day.

Nonetheless, John Scythe felt the criminal had got off easy compared to what awaited him. He felt Strom should've had the courage to face what he had to face. There was more to it than just the hangman's noose after all. But what did he expect from the likes of Jack Strom, a man who'd lived a lie for most of his life.

The Doctor, after listening to the sheriff's thoughts, handed the death certificate over. "I understand how you're feeling, John, but at least we are secure in our knowledge that justice was done. There's no doubt of his guilt, he was caught and he paid the ultimate price." He closed his medical bag with a loud snap. "I'll let the undertaker know about his passing. He has a box fitted and waiting."

John nodded petulantly. "Mighty kind of you, Doc. Don't want 'im smelling up the place."

"Are you going to bury him in the town cemetery?"

"Yup!"

"All right then, Sheriff. You take care of yourself. No over exertion, you hear!"

With a slight grin, the sheriff herded the doctor from the office, and then glanced at the body. "Coward!" he intoned and spat on the floor.

Wilhelmina's sister, Abigail Pitt, arrived in town a week after Jack Strom died. Abigail sought out the sheriff immediately and introduced herself as Ms. Abigail Pitt. An extremely tall woman, she dwarfed the sheriff by more than five inches. Her silvery hair was tied loosely in a bun, and smile lines accented her firm, tiny mouth. She explained her parents were too frail for the long journey, and so entrusted her with discovering just what had happened to their daughter. The sheriff was instantly reminded of a favourite school mistress, and in a rare display of kindness, patiently described exactly how things transpired, sparing no details. Abigail received the news stalwartly, and with a well-

disguised tremor in her voice made a valiant effort to thank the sheriff for being so straightforward with her.

Elizabeth, upon hearing of Ms. Pitt's arrival, promptly invited her to the ranch; consciously enabling Abigail to see where Wilhelmina had lived and collect any of her remaining belongings. Fully knowledgeable of the Reigns and their involvement in the case, Abigail welcomed the opportunity to visit.

The morning following the invitation, Abigail's carriage pulled up to the house and after disembarking, she was given a full tour of the property that was formerly her sister's home. Once the tour was concluded, she sat (a little sadly) at the kitchen table with her courteous and sympathetic host and hostess.

Abigail fell in love with Elizabeth's herbal tea, remarking that it prompted vague memories of her grandmother. Appreciating the nourishment, she sipped two cups, and helped herself to two more slices of Elizabeth's delicious pound cake.

Feeling relaxed and comfortable, she smoothly lapsed into family reminiscences. She empathized with Paxton's umbrage at having trusted Jack for all those years, only to be entirely deceived by his character. Abigail explained how astounded, furious and grief-stricken she was that Jack had murdered both her sister and Elizabeth's father so calculatedly and cold bloodedly. It was far worse than her family had initially feared; Jack had given the Pitts the impression of being such a decent chap. Apparently they, too, had been susceptible to his charm, but in one thing Abigail was determined she had not been deceived, and that was how much the man had loved her sister.

"Wilhelmina was everything to Jack," she declared. "At least, in the beginning she was."

Abigail went on to clarify why they had never come in search of Wilhelmina. Jack had written to her family and in his letter wove a plausible story, telling them that Wilhelmina and he had decided to move to Africa. He wished to further hone his skills and believed Africa was the place to do it. He'd underlined how excited Wilhelmina was about the adventures they'd have roaming about on safaris and tours. He wrote that it might be difficult to send regular correspondence so not to worry if they were seldom heard from. That was the last they heard from either Jack or Wilhelmina. The final few letters received from her sister mentioned Eustace quite often and the family had begun to wonder if going to Africa was actually a means of saving the Strom marriage.

After several years of hearing nothing, they started to fear the worst, but hadn't a clue where to begin searching. The sheriff's telegram was the first news they'd heard of Wilhelmina in many years.

Abigail decided to stay longer than she'd originally planned, and found, as the Reigns did, that the visit turned out to be unexpectedly consoling. Despite not being able to see her sister's killer hang or even to speak with him, she was pleased and comforted to recognize and collect a few of Wilhelmina's personal treasures, which Elizabeth relinquished without a moment's hesitation.

Bidding farewell and expressing deep gratitude to the Reigns, Abigail reluctantly went back to town, facing the inevitable journey home

to relate to her family the tragic news of her sister's demise. She located the sheriff in his office and extended her sincere appreciation for Wilhelmina's diary (which he'd given her) and finally knowing her sister's appalling and heart-wrenching fate. The sheriff nodded at her, gruffly uttered his condolences to her and her family one last time and wished her a safe trip home.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A year had flown by while Paxton and Elizabeth expanded and cultivated their ranch. With Elizabeth's inheritance they purchased more land, extending their property to include the beautiful mountain valley where they'd first met.

Land was not the only thing in which they expanded; their family had increased by one also. They welcomed a little baby boy about six months after the Jack Strom disaster and named him Eustace for obvious reasons.

Little Eustace reminded Elizabeth of certain features and characteristics of his namesake, which thoroughly delighted her. He was a strong, determined, little fella, with a thirst for knowledge. He would lie in his father's arms, cradling his tiny, golden head against Paxton's chest, and listen with wide, intelligent, blue eyes, to story after story. Eventually, nature would overcome him and his bright, baby blues would reluctantly close.

Paxton spent every available moment with Eustace and before their baby was even sitting up, would enthusiastically tell Elizabeth about his plans to teach the boy how to ride, fish, hunt, track, and run a ranch. He was a wonderful father and, to Elizabeth's joy, shared a special, unique and personal bond with his son.

Just after Eustace turned seven months old, his Aunt Amelia, Uncle Fenton, and Grandpa Reign came to visit. In tow, the Stantons had their own baby, a girl, with thick, black curls on her head and calculating, big, blue eyes. Amelia could not stop talking about the miracle of Delilah's birth and Fenton uncharacteristically glowed with pride.

Delilah and Eustace, to everyone's pleasure, bonded instantly. Delilah, three months older than Eustace, often patted his blond head fondly, and cuddled next to him when they napped. Eustace took an almost protective stance over his older cousin, glaring accusingly at anyone he believed hurt her feelings or made her cry. He didn't even seem to mind when she'd cleverly maneuver his toys away.

Grandpa Reign stayed close to his grandchildren, playing with them often. Both children loved crawling all over him and occasionally fell asleep on his lap.

Paxton took his father for a tour of the ranch and couldn't contain a smile when his father praised him on his resourcefulness and ingenuity. In the evenings, Grandpa Reign, Fenton and Paxton often engaged in a game of chess or horseshoes, which Paxton nearly always won.

Family tensions had eased considerably with the children present,

particularly since Delilah completely adored Eustace and the two were practically inseparable even at such a young age.

Maxwell, having been notified of his brother's arrival at the Reign ranch, paid them all a visit. He brought with him two copies of his new book; a story entitled 'Villain Unveiled.' According to Maxwell, it was loosely -- very loosely, based on the events of the previous year and sold off the shelves faster than they could stock it. Extremely vocal about his book's success, Maxwell annoyed just about everyone, though Elizabeth and Paxton benevolently congratulated him, even if the book and his success were, in their opinion, exceedingly fabricated and overdone.

Elizabeth was too busy with her baby to really care about the inaccuracies of the book, especially the irony of the part where the heroine, named Eliza, proclaims the true hero of her life is Max. Max, the main character, was accused of having murdered Eliza's father, and consequently, Eliza would have nothing further to do with him despite their passion for one another. Eliza, to spite Max, marries Saxon, a brutal, but wealthy rancher, who'd lusted after her from the start.

Eventually, Max proves his innocence and exposes the real killer as Saxon's best friend Jud. Through many twists and turns and outlandish heroic deeds, Max rescues Eliza from Jud's clutches. Eliza then declares her unending gratitude and passion for Max, leaves her husband, and lives out the remainder of her life happily worshipping him and bearing his children.

Paxton, who'd read the story with Elizabeth, had laughed so hard that on more than one occasion he'd dropped the book, losing his place. Paxton wondered how Amelia, who'd read the book while staying with them, had reacted to the character clearly based on her. Anea Crostix was depicted as a desperate, conniving woman trying to win Max's heart and destroy Eliza. After seducing Jud, she plotted to use their intimacy to bribe him into murdering the beautiful Eliza. Unfortunately for her, she was unsuccessful, and ended up being shot to death by the villain. Paxton was preparing to risk his sister's wrath and ask her if she liked the character supposedly based on her, but wisely decided against it. After all, one hardly needed an answer when her copy of the book was found thrown in the fireplace burnt to a crisp -- nearly, just nearly, unrecognizable.

Of course, Maxwell was welcomed and treated as kindly as any other guest, despite his ridiculous (offensive, to use Amelia's word) work of fiction. Even with enduring countless scathing looks from Amelia, he tolerated the visit well. Little Delilah took a unique liking to Uncle Maxwell and never let him out of her sight and when no one was looking he'd kiss the top of her head and call her sweetie.

Expectations aside, everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves during the couple of weeks the Stantons stayed. They departed after a month had passed, graciously thanking their hosts for their extraordinary hospitality and promising to return soon.

Gradually things started to settle down and return to a normal pace. Paxton, Elizabeth, and little Eustace cuddled on the front porch, basking in a beautiful, serene sunset, feeling totally at peace and savouring the quiet solitude of their home. Nevertheless, they knew that peace and

quiet never lasted very long. Inevitably, life would toss some difficulty, challenge, or adventure their way, and together they were ready for it.

Back Cover

A dry desert, vultures circling, a man, half-dead, lashed to an oak tree in nothing but his briefs -- the story begins.

Famous bounty-hunter, Paxton Reign, has been left for dead. It all started because of a woman -- a beautiful woman and a dangerous obsession for her. Determined to have Elizabeth Dalton for his own, Maxwell Stanton is prepared to do anything -- even kill.

Believing he's no stranger to murder, Elizabeth absolutely loathes Maxwell and has branded him responsible for her father's sudden and mysterious disappearance.

Convinced Elizabeth and Maxwell orchestrated his current excruciating predicament; Paxton curses his love for Elizabeth.

Deceit, betrayal, unrequited love, and thirsts for revenge are not uncommon, as unanticipated circumstances dramatically collide to irrevocably alter lives, reveal dark secrets and open old wounds. All of this will come to pass -- because of a woman.

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